

# EUREKA STREET

Vol. 8 No. 10 December 1993

\$5.95



Morris West on Conscience  
Dorothy Lee on Bethlehem  
John Salmond on America

Christmas

Christmas

# PICTORIAL WORLD

CHRISTMAS 1888



*'The admonitory gent from Pictorial World has presided over our walnuts and Christmas cake for at least a quarter century. I thought he looked like Jack the Ripper but my children loved him, so every year he comes out with the motley clutter of symbols that mark our Christmas. He must have the required edge.'*

EET

EUREKA STR

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Vol. 8 No. 10 December 1991



Eureka Street  
wishes all  
our readers  
the peace  
and blessings  
of the  
Christmas  
season.

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# The first Christmas in Australia

**A**RTHUR PHILLIP, the first Governor of New South Wales, did try to involve indigenous people in celebrating the festive season at Port Jackson. On New Year's Day, 1789, he invited all his officers to dine with him. He also invited an Aborigine, Manly. According to Watkin Tench:

Manly dined heartily on fish and roasted pork. He was seated on a chest near a window, out of which, when he had done eating, he would have thrown his plate had he not been prevented. During dinner time, a band of music played in an adjoining apartment and, after the cloth was removed, one of the company sang in a very soft and superior style; but the powers of melody were lost on Manly, which disappointed our expectations, as he had before shown pleasure and readiness in imitating our tunes.

The following year, Phillip shared his Christmas table with Bennelong, whom Tench knew as Baneelon. Tench contrasted Bennelong's behaviour with that of another Aborigine, Arabanoo:

When a turtle was shown to Arabanoo he would not allow it to be a fish and could not be induced to eat of it. Baneelon also denied it to be a fish, but no common councilman in Europe could do more justice than he did to a very fine one that the Supply had brought from Lord Howe Island, and which was served up at the governor's table on Christmas Day.

Tench's wiry style leaves you desperate to know more. Did Christmas make him so homesick that even the memory of a common councilman could become part of a cheerful analogy? Why, in all his fascination with the strange ways of Aboriginal people, did he never consider how strange he must have looked to them? And even, if he'd looked in the mirror, to himself? After all, here was a small group of officers, hardly the pick of the imperial forces, struggling to keep alive, yet clinging to rituals which they had dragged with them to an alien landscape and climate.

Nevertheless, in a way, there were never two more typical Australian celebrations of the silly season than these first two. The reason is, in both cases, that a well-worn ritual didn't quite work. The presence of strangers caused it to unravel. The wise men in Matthew's story of the birth of Jesus had a similar experience. They had brought all the wrong gifts and left feeling far less sure of themselves than when they arrived. Christmas invites us once more to share our table with those by whom we will be unsettled. ■

—Michael McGirr SJ

The winner of the *Eureka Street* and Southern Cross Capital Exchange Ltd Ethics Essay Competition will be notified by mail by 1 December and the essay published in the January/February 1999 edition. Congratulations to all participants on the high standard of their entries.

Congratulations also to *Eureka Street's* consulting editor, **Michael McGirr SJ**—he won second prize in *The Age Short Story Competition* for 1998.

## Jesse 'the Body' and the 'Comeback Kid'

**T**HE MOST EXTRAORDINARY single result in the recent US mid-term elections was the victory of Jesse 'the Body' Ventura in the contest for governor of Minnesota. Once well-known to Australian wrestling aficionados as the worthy opponent of such denizens as Hulk Hogan, Jake the Snake and the Junkyard Dog, Jesse had no platform and little money, but he had a couple of colourless mainstream opponents, he had wide recognition as a flamboyant radio talk-show host, he had an engaging larrikin style—a bit like our own Jeff Kennett—and most important of all, he had a party label. Jesse is the first candidate from Ross Perot's Reform Party to get elected to anything important, and this must be unsettling to the gurus in both the major parties, who thought they had long had Perot safely dead and buried.

There were other surprising winners. In Alabama, a little-known Democrat, Don Siegelman, took the governorship from the incumbent, Fob James. Siegelman only had one issue. If elected, he promised to introduce a state lottery, just like that of neighbouring Georgia, with all the profits going into education. James, with strong ties to the religious right, opposed all gambling as immoral. Having just returned from the University of Georgia, and seen what the money has bought, including a free education for all who want it, I can understand why Alabama's voters made their choice. I wish we could do similarly here. In North Carolina, an unknown young lawyer, John Edwards, who promised to curb the arrogance of the medical insurance companies, knocked off the powerful incumbent, Senator Lauch Faircloth, faithful friend of the tobacco companies, and one of President Clinton's most vocal moral critics.

The Republicans had a few winners of their own, most notably the photogenic Bush Brothers. George Jr easily won re-election as Texas governor; brother Jeb, having once lost Florida as a conservative, remade himself as a moderate, reached out to the Hispanics and black voters of his state and easily won the state-house. George Jr, married as he is to a Mexican-American, and fluent in Spanish, had long since learned the lesson that to be successful in the demographic whirlwind that is fin de siècle USA, you have to be multi-cultural. The extent to which the

mainstream of his party follows the Bush boys' lead will determine whether it remains a relevant political force in the new century.

Already the fight for the Party's future has claimed its first casualty, in the ample shape of its most prominent elected official, Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich. Gingrich, an implacable Clinton-hater, was personally responsible for turning the election into a referendum on the President's values. He could scarcely have expected to survive the backlash against his decision. For Gingrich, arguably the most powerful politician in the land after the November 1994 elections, the swiftness of his fall must be incomprehensible. For the President, it must be joy unalloyed.

The biggest winner, however, was President Clinton, who needs no instruction on the need to go for the minorities. He might have claimed that the election was not a plebiscite on his leadership; American voters knew better. They turned out to vote in greater numbers than at any off-year election since 1970—itsself a plebiscite on

Richard Nixon's policy of 'positive polarisation'.

African-Americans and Hispanics, despite the success of the Bush boys, gave overwhelming support to Democratic candidates, as did women of all colours and creeds, by 55 to 45 per cent. The Monica Lewinsky saga does not seem to have mattered to them. Indeed, American women seem to have drawn inspiration from the example of Mrs Clinton, standing by her philandering man, campaigning tirelessly for him, urging them to focus on the issues that really mattered. Her stocks have never been higher with the American people.

**B**UT THEN, neither have the President's and the key still lies in the campaign slogan of 1992, 'the economy, stupid'. Bill Clinton has presided over an extraordinary period of sustained economic growth in the USA. I've visited the country most years since 1961, and never have I seen it more prosperous, more at ease, than it is now. People are hiring, people are working, crime rates are dropping dramatically, welfare rolls are shrinking as the job market soaks up the slack. Will it last? Probably not. Does Clinton deserve the credit? Only partially. But in the American system, the



President, who is always blamed for the rain, is quick to claim responsibility for the sunshine, and Clinton is presently basking in it. A constant theme in the discussions I've had with ordinary Americans this year has been concern that the prolonged stasis of the projected impeachment hearings would bring this golden weather to an end. The voters, therefore, made their position clear. Had US unemployment rates been running at Australian levels, instead of at less than 4 per cent, it would have been a different story.

Clinton, too, had his usual good luck, or rather, he made it so. The Wye River conference could not have come at a better time for him. Not only did he appear presidential, he was genuinely so. King Hussein paid eloquent testimony to the key role Clinton played in securing a positive outcome after all had seemed lost. There is no reason to doubt him. In asserting America's unique leadership role at such a crucial time, Clinton reminded his people of their global responsibilities, while at the same time effectively burying the memory of those inept 'Wag the Dog' bombings of Afghanistan and the Sudan.

What will happen to the impeachment process now? Already it is obvious that the Republican Congressional leaders,

who had originally planned an elongated procedure with maximum blood-letting, now want to wrap it up as quickly as possible. The only witness scheduled to be called is the increasingly bewildered pornography pedlar Kenneth Starr, and he is more likely to be censured than praised. This will surely please the American people. They have consistently rated him below Saddam Hussein in popularity polls.

Mr Clinton will serve out his term, barring further embarrassing disclosures. Even if the House of Representatives should find him guilty of anything, and vote to impeach, it is the Senate who must then try him. The votes of 67 Senators would be needed to remove him from office; 12 Democrats would have to join the Republican majority for that to happen, a political impossibility.

So, the 'Comeback Kid' lives to fight again, just like Jesse 'the Body' Ventura used to do on World Championship wrestling. Monica may not even get to sell her story, so decisively have the American people spoken. Only in America ... and I mean that positively. ■

**John Salmond** is Professor of History at La Trobe University.

## Absence takes the heart

**S**OUTH EAST ASIA at the end of 1998 is at one of those junctures to which historians of the future will return with more than idle interest. Exactly what they will say about the region and events no-one can predict—radical change is still taking place and will continue. What is certain is that the economic and political turmoil of late 1997 and 1998 will lead to something new.

During this time I have been working with refugees and people forcibly displaced, trying to tell their story for them or make it possible for them to tell it themselves. They have been living in Burmese border camps attacked by soldiers; they have been living and working away from home, and have suffered persecution by inhospitable governments; they have been trafficked into everything from sex work to begging rings in Asia's big cities; and they have been forgotten by countries which claim to be good international citizens and yet still deny them resettlement.

History may not remember what these people have experienced, but the lesson that it is the poor and weak who bear most of the suffering is being well taught. Out of this suffering we might, if we are lucky, occasionally learn what the human spirit is capable of.

Recently, Fr Pierre Cyrac SJ, an elder of the Jesuit Refugee Service, took those of us gathered to hear him speak back a decade or so—to the Cambodian border. He had worked there, in the '80s, in the education programs run for the enormous populations in the refugee camps of that time before the Paris Peace Accord. One camp with 200,000 people ranked as Thailand's second biggest 'city'. He took special interest in the welfare of a mother and her three children, who happened to be

very clever. The father was a Colonel in the resistance fighting Hun Sen's Vietnamese-backed regime, and the family had been separated from him.

At Christmas, when Fr Pierre was preparing to return to France for a holiday, the mother pulled him aside to ask if he would look for her husband in Paris. She had heard rumours he had fled there when she came across the border. Fr Pierre said that he would, but let her know that he thought the chances of finding him were very slim.

In Paris he made inquiries and somebody recognised the man's name as that of a Khmer taxi driver he knew. Fr Pierre tracked the man down—he indeed turned out to be the woman's husband and the children's father. He was overjoyed to know that his family was alive and well. 'But Father, I have a problem,' he said. 'I have remarried now and have two children with my new wife. I thought they were dead, you see.'

When Fr Pierre returned to Thailand he went to see the woman. He gave the children some sweets he'd brought with him from France and told them to go and play. He told her that he had found her husband in Paris. He told her also that the man had married somebody else.

Some days later she went to see Father Pierre. 'Fr Pierre, please, if you can, send me to another country, but send me anywhere except to France,' she asked. 'I do not want to ruin my husband's happiness.'

The woman and her children now live in the United States. ■

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

# Down the drain

**T**HE ACT GOVERNMENT is to put its electricity and water authority on the market. The deal is necessary, they say, because such infrastructure, as run by government in a new competitive market, will actually

decline in value. As importantly, however, the sale and lease arrangements will allow the government to retire debt. In particular, it will enable it to put money aside to pay for the massive unfunded superannuation liability the government faces as baby boomers reach retirement age. The need to make a deal is, of course, also said to be urgent because the public utility is losing value as we speak.

It's the same the whole world over. The debate, too, is much the same as anywhere. But the open linkage of the sale with superannuation has had me musing on a particular part of the way my generation is swindling the generation below.

Forget electricity for a moment. The ACT no longer has any generating capacity. The Commonwealth appropriated Canberra's Snowy Mountains rights to itself and then effectively waived them (at great benefit to NSW and Victoria and to the detriment of citizens of all the other states). An ACT-based electricity utility is probably inevitably in a difficult position as a small retailer in a very competitive market which will see most players go to the wall. But Canberra has a world-class water and sewerage system—perhaps the only one in Australia where water leaves a city more drinkable than it entered it—and its fate ought to be one in which all younger Australians have an interest.

The quality of that system is not only a reflection of the attention lavished on the bush capital by federal taxpayers. Like water infrastructure elsewhere in Australia, it also owes a lot to generations of farsighted planners who used low-interest regimes and built for the future.

When my generation was buying houses, we made almost no capital contribution to this infrastructure. At most the rates we paid embraced a proportion for the repayment of interest and principal. Nor did we ever pay anything like the real cost of the water or services: the pricing regimes of the authorities were cost-plus ones based on interest payments and the annual cost of delivering the services. And, as we have got older, we have made no substantial contribution to the cost of renewing the ageing infrastructure.

By contrast, the generation behind, buying houses in the newer suburbs, has had to make capital contributions to the cost of the infrastructure they enjoy. And they pay, in their annual rates, for a substantial proportion of ours as well.

My generation went into the public service in large numbers. They did so on terms and conditions which included generous superannuation rights. Governments did not set money aside to fund these liabilities as they emerged. Now there is a fear (an unfounded one in my view) that by the year 2010 or so, we will have a society in which a higher proportion of the population is at retiring age and a much smaller workforce is paying taxes to meet retirees' pensions, and that will produce a significant gap between what government has contracted to pay, and what it can afford.

The remedy, if one is ruling in the interests of the baby boomer generation, is obvious: sell off the community capital this generation scarcely paid for now, so that the nest egg is there, come what may.

Of course, generation X will not benefit greatly from the appropriation of money for superannuation, except to the extent that they may think they are being relieved of paying for the

superannuation of their seniors. The public service is contracting and not hiring young people. The remaining jobs are continually reclassified upwards, with the rewards still safely in our hands.

The more cynical among us might then wonder how the general public interest in an ongoing water infrastructure will then be maintained. Will a private contractor have any interest in maintaining and developing the system, or will it be allowed to run down?

There is a way of giving the public a clear interest in doing so—one which serves other socially useful purposes as well: change the pricing regime so that the punters have to pay something like the real cost of getting water through their taps and sewage through their drains.

The disparity between the current price and the real price is obvious when one tries to calculate a value for such a privatised operation. On the one hand there is an extensive infrastructure with a capital cost in the billions. If one worked out a fair annual rate of return on that capital, the price we would be paying for our water and sewerage would be at least three or four times what it is now. On the other hand, one can work out what the current rate of return is, then deduce a value for the infrastructure which is many times lower than its replacement value.

Unless one shifts to a regime based on real cost of replacement, there is no incentive for an operator to maintain and develop the system—a fact which can be disguised for a while by allowing things to deteriorate—but which cannot be hidden forever.

Of course, the price shock of bumping up the water rates to anything like real cost would be enormous. And it would be particularly unfair to insist that the baby boomers pay for it. Promises are made, accordingly, that prices will be strictly regulated, with the consumer price index used as the model. Operators are allowed to buy at a diminished value reflecting the rate of return, but on a regime which allows them to demand full returns on fresh investments made. This means that the cost of renewing infrastructure is socialised for the older generation, while, down the line, the next generation will be paying full value. Neat, isn't it?

**T**HERE'S NOTHING SPECIAL about what the ACT Government is doing: it has merely joined other governments everywhere. The debate, however, is usually about issues of public versus private monopolies, which tends to get ideological, or about questions of what Lord Avon (Anthony Eden) complained of in Margaret Thatcher—that she was selling the household silver to pay the household bills. The intergenerational transfer aspects are too little noted.

One other aspect of such processes is, however, now getting a run. The gas explosion in Victoria and the *cryptosporidium* fiascos in Sydney have underlined a further change. Relations between providers and the public are shifting: citizens are now customers. Customers, of course, operate by legal rather than social contract, and can sue if contracts aren't met. And, now that class actions have arrived, ambulance-chasing lawyers find that there is ample rent to be extracted from articulating our outrage. At the same time, however, public expectations of government do not change. The public might or might not care how services they expect from government are delivered to us. But if they are not delivered, it is government they blame, not the entity that government has subcontracted to perform the function. ■

Jack Waterford is editor of the *Canberra Times*.

## Inventing Christianity

From the Hon. Michael Weldon  
Daniel Madigan (*Eureka Street*, October 1998) reveals a very interesting facet of Catholicism, indeed the whole of Christendom, with his statement concerning Jesus and St Paul, in his article on the Doctrine of the Faith:

But Christianity has never claimed that it is Jesus' teaching which makes him uniquely significant—St Paul seems to have known little or nothing of what Jesus taught. For Christians, Jesus' significance lies in who he is and therefore what he is believed to have accomplished by his dying and rising.

It is clear to me that the Church is at last beginning to realise that the work of scholars like Ray Brown and Barbara Thiering and Anthony de Mello has relevance and authority which can no longer be put aside.

Jesus was a Jew who belonged to a strict sect of Judaism, the Essenes, which was similar to the Nazarenes (hence Jesus of Nazareth—the town of Nazareth did not exist at the time of Jesus). His mother, Mary, was considered a virgin, under Essene rights, until the time of her second formal marriage some years after the first marriage in order that the purity of the husband was maintained within the celibacy dictates of the sect.

Jesus transformed the sect by making it open to gentiles and women and less 'pure' Jews. He was able to achieve the enlightenment of the sect by this method of recruitment because the added numbers of people provided the political power he needed for his reforms.

Therefore the Church of Jesus was one of teaching the new way of inclusion rather than exclusion. Of love and care for all people rather than only the select and making the secrets of prayer and tradition available to all those who wanted to approach their God. He taught the theology of a loving deity.

That Church (still a Jewish faith because Jesus lived and died as a devout Jew) was persecuted and largely erased by the time Paul, a Roman citizen, saw it as a mechanism for him to raise political pressure on both the Jewish community and upon Rome and thus to advance his own power agenda.

Paul invented a religion. It was called Christianity and it had only

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partial reference to the person of its namesake. It was really Pauline Christianity and Paul introduced the theology which came to be regarded by Christians as the word of God.

When the Emperor Constantine called together the bishops of the Church which Paul had founded, he did so for quite clear political reasons. He wanted to harness the idea of a single God, a State religion and a universal Church with which he could manage the religious activity of the Empire.

Some of the Eastern bishops refused to attend and separated themselves from the renewed Pauline Christianity. They held more to the older Pauline teaching and they retained some of the features of the Church of Jesus.

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It might even be that the Church of Jesus survived best in Northern Africa and Egypt where it is believed that disciples managed to impart the original Word and were not influenced by the Pauline movement.

Constantine insisted upon a common theology at Nicæa. He had those books which supported his agenda included in the Bible and those, like the epistle of Thomas which dealt with the teaching of a good man and not a 'risen God', excluded.

And so we come to the Christian Church of Rome, the Roman Catholic Church. But where is the Church of Jesus? It is not in the Protestant tradition because that too relies on the Constantinian Bible and the Roman tradition.

Daniel Madigan has revealed that he understands the fact that Christianity is not based so much on the teaching of Jesus but rather on the theology of Paul, 'who seems to have known little or nothing of what Jesus taught'.

Michael Weldon  
Nabageena, TAS

## Dwelling on words

From Beverley Kingston, *School of History, University of New South Wales*

I've just read and enjoyed John Sendy's charming account of some of Henry Handel Richardson's Victorian homes (*Eureka Street*, September 1998) though my hope for an up-to-date account of the state of the house at Chiltern was unsatisfied.

A few years ago on a trip to Melbourne we made an unscheduled visit to Chiltern and were charmed by the town and the surrounding country. The HHR house there was maintained as a museum, on a casual, probably volunteer basis, with limited hours of opening. Needless to say, it wasn't open when we arrived, though we were able to peer through the windows, walk around the garden which was memorable with early-flowering bulbs, and stroll along the banks of the adjacent waterhole. Even though we missed seeing the inside of the house itself, it was still worth the detour off the Hume Highway. If it is still there, it would be a good thing if it were better known and had a little more by way of resources for upkeep and maintenance.

Beverley Kingston  
Sydney, NSW



## Cambodia: the other side

From Tony Kevin, former Australian Ambassador to Cambodia (1994–1997)

I was sad to read Joan Healy's letter about the recent Cambodian election (*Eureka Street*, November 1998). As initiator and leader of the independent NGO election observer group which Joan joined (VOCE—Volunteer Observers of the Cambodian Election), I greatly valued her participation. But we have seemingly come to different conclusions since.

Joan Healy presents Cambodia's present crisis in terms of a brave struggle by a democratic people's opposition against an authoritarian and brutal state. She is not alone in this: it is the perception that opposition leaders have sedulously fostered, it is what most of the international press projects as the Cambodian reality, and it is what many people (including *Eureka Street's* South East Asia correspondent, Jon Greenaway) have apparently come to believe. But in truth, such a stereotype disregards Cambodia's complex and morally confused history of the past three decades.

Cambodians of goodwill—and there are many, on both sides of politics—are acutely aware of the background to their present crisis and are trying to find a path to national reconciliation through it. Unfortunately, Prince Ranariddh and Sam Rainsy, both blinded by their own ambitions and sense of grievance, are only perpetuating the bitterness and resentments of the past. Let us hope that by the time this letter appears, there will have been a breakthrough of some kind to political compromise. If not, I fear for Cambodia.

Cambodian society, beneath its surface veneer of Asian manners, is fiercely divided by its political history; no less so in its own way than Northern Ireland, Cyprus, former Yugoslavia, or Rwanda. After the US carpet bombings (1972–75) and the subsequent monstrous Khmer Rouge regime (1975–79) together virtually destroyed the old hierarchical-royalist Cambodian civil society, the Vietnamese invasion of January 1979 swept away the Khmer Rouge regime.

January 7, 1979—when Vietnamese forces occupied Phnom Penh—has become a defining anniversary: an

ideological marker. Cambodians who support the Cambodian People's Party celebrate 7 January as a liberation from genocidal tyranny and the beginning of national recovery. Cambodians who support opposition leaders Prince Ranariddh and Sam Rainsy mourn it as the date of Cambodia's loss of sovereignty to the hated Vietnamese under their 'puppet' CPP regime now led by Hun Sen.

In the ensuing 11 years, 1980–1991, royalist émigré groups in military alliance with the Khmer Rouge remnants launched a sustained war of insurrection into Cambodia from bases along the Thai border. These resistance armies were armed and supported by China, the US and ASEAN, as part of a cynical Cold



War endgame against Moscow and Hanoi. Their attacks on the legitimacy of the Vietnam-supported regime in Phnom Penh confused and divided Cambodians setting out on the painful road of recovery from the trauma of the Khmer Rouge.

To their shame, the insurrectionists urged large numbers of Cambodians to leave their homes to fill up resistance camps on the border—promising quick repatriation to a royalist Cambodia. These false promises created huge human misery and refugee dislocation around the world.

The royalists and their Western and Chinese Cold War allies succeeded in persuading the world community to ostracise the CPP-led regime in Phnom Penh—just as Ranariddh and Rainsy are trying again to do now. Incredibly, the Khmer Rouge was allowed to retain Cambodia's UN seat! There was no official aid or diplomatic assistance to Cambodia from the West. The Phnom Penh regime—led after 1986 by Hun Sen—was never given a fair go by the world. Cambodia—a pariah state under siege, a casualty of the Cold War—languished in poverty, international isolation, and a draining low-level civil war, for 11 long years.

The diplomatic solution brokered by outside governments in 1991–93 pushed the opposing parties into an uneasy coalition in 1993, after a close election supervised by the UN. The Ranariddh/Hun Sen coalition

government seemed stable enough until 1996, when it began to come apart. Prince Ranariddh (joined by Sam Rainsy in 1997) then set out to discredit the international reputation of Hun Sen and CPP. At the same time, Ranariddh, in preparation for renewed military conflict with CPP, worked secretly to rebuild royalist military forces and to revive his inner alliance with the Khmer Rouge.

Nothing stays secret in Cambodia. The inevitable build-up of tension led to a brief war in Phnom Penh in July 1997. The fighting was probably initiated by Ranariddh's generals. Ranariddh's soldiers were routed by forces loyal to Hun Sen, and Ranariddh fled into exile.

Hun Sen tried to restore political normality. He condemned Ranariddh's attempted *coup d'état* as a criminal act, but he encouraged the royalist party (Funcinpec) to continue to govern jointly with CPP under a new leader, Ung Huot. He guaranteed free elections in 1998 according to the original 1993 schedule. Had the world accepted those proposals, Cambodia would be a happier and more prosperous country now.

But the international community led by the United States insisted on Ranariddh's protected return to contest the election at the head of Funcinpec; and in the ensuing pre-election period, United States agencies did everything possible to encourage and assist the two opposition leaders Ranariddh and Rainsy. Hun Sen for his part did much to facilitate opposition parties' campaigning. He urged his CPP supporters to run a clean election campaign without intimidation.

Clearly, as Joan Healy's anecdotes illustrate, such appeals were not always heeded in the countryside. But one cannot expect immediate perfection from a country that has been through so much destructive international interference and communal violence.

Ironically, had Ranariddh and Rainsy contested the election as one party, they would have won easily; as their combined vote was 200,000 in excess of CPP's vote. And, significantly, their combined percentage vote was no less than the opposition percentage vote in the 1993 UNTAC election—so much for allegations that CPP intimidation distorted the 1998 vote. But in what became a three-party contest, Ranariddh and Rainsy came second and third. CPP won fair and

square, in a Cambodian-managed election that all reputable international and Cambodian observer groups assessed as well-conducted and a valid expression of the people's choice.

But the losers immediately cried foul. For several weeks, Ranariddh and Rainsy supporters took to the streets in a determined attempt to overturn the election result through mob politics. As the street protest continued, ugly anti-Vietnamese riots and ethnic murders broke out around Phnom Penh. Cambodia's fragile civil society was again threatening to unravel into anarchy. An initially tolerant Hun Sen eventually had to bring the demonstrations under control.

Finally, under pressure from King Sihanouk and the international community, Ranariddh and Rainsy grudgingly agreed to take part in a first formal session of the newly elected Parliament (in which they had 58 seats against CPP's 64) on 24 September. But they then promptly went abroad, where they have remained ever since, claiming that it is not safe for them to return to political activity in Cambodia. Around 40 of their elected MPs dutifully followed them abroad.

Under the constitution, a two-thirds parliamentary majority is needed to form a new government. As in 1993, there is no constitutional alternative to a CPP coalition with an opposition party. But Ranariddh and Rainsy are refusing to co-operate in forming a government coalition. They continue to sit it out in Bangkok nursing their grievances, as Cambodia languishes in political limbo—three months after the election!

The objective of such political intransigence is unclear. Ranariddh's and Rainsy's alliance is fragile. Their demands keep shifting. Whatever CPP has offered so far has been rejected: a deputy prime ministership, ministerial portfolios, and Ranariddh to co-chair the National Assembly, or alternatively to enjoy a special honoured status as Hun Sen's 'supreme adviser'.

The real agenda of Ranariddh and Rainsy appears to be nothing less than the political destruction of CPP leader Hun Sen, which they hope could leave a weakened and demoralised CPP that they could destroy later. To these so-called democrats, the outcome of the July election result is irrelevant. Power and international support is all that matters.

Meanwhile, Cambodia's situation deteriorates daily. With no legally constituted post-election government, aid consultations are in abeyance and aid programs are winding down. The economy and tourism are declining. Ominously, royalist and Khmer Rouge military activity is again being stepped up on the border. In a sad replay of history, about 70,000 Cambodians are again living in refugee camps controlled by the Khmer Rouge

on the Thai border. A distraught King Sihanouk—who has tried repeatedly to urge his obstinate son Ranariddh to agree to a coalition government with Hun Sen's CPP—plans to return to China for prolonged treatment.

The United States sends mixed signals that are confusing and destabilising Cambodians. A group of post-Cold War ideologues—led by Congressman Dana Rohrabacher and Senator Jesse Helms—secured Congress majority approval for a resolution declaring Hun Sen a war criminal subject to arrest. They are now trying to push it through the Senate. There was no serious debate on this resolution. The State Department has weakly protested that the resolution has no force in US law. But the political consensus trend to demonisation of Hun Sen and CPP has not been seriously challenged in Washington. Cambodia's UN seat has again been declared vacant despite the internationally approved July election.

If the Australian Government is doing anything to help resolve the present impasse, we are certainly not hearing much about it publicly.

In short, the people of Cambodia are facing a continuing political, economic and humanitarian disaster. All of CPP's genuine efforts to bring about real peace and national reconciliation over the past 15 months since the July 1997 fighting have been manipulated or rebuffed by Ranariddh, Rainsy and their foreign supporters. Ranariddh and Rainsy are even now calling for aid programs and international bank programs in Cambodia to be suspended. As in the 1980s, they are again doing everything possible to discredit and impoverish Cambodia and its people. Their objective is what it has always been—to do whatever it takes to break Hun Sen's and CPP's power in Cambodia, which to them has no legitimacy. Until at least one of them accepts the necessity of genuine compromise with CPP, there can be no normalisation in Cambodia.

Many people who have personal backgrounds as Australian NGO aid workers in Cambodia understand these sad and complex realities. They understand that, by glorifying the Cambodian opposition and demonising people on the CPP side of politics, we only encourage Cambodian opposition intransigence, confuse Cambodian people, and thereby prolong Cambodia's agony.

I hope that a person with Joan Healy's experience of Cambodia and deep affection for Cambodia's people might reflect further on these complexities. We who love Cambodia should all be working for genuine national reconciliation based on an acceptance by Cambodian political leaders of the reality of the July election results. Such an approach is Cambodia's only hope now.

**Tony Kevin Forrest, ACT**

## Reynolds rules

*From Dr Penny van Toorn, Department of English, University of Sydney*

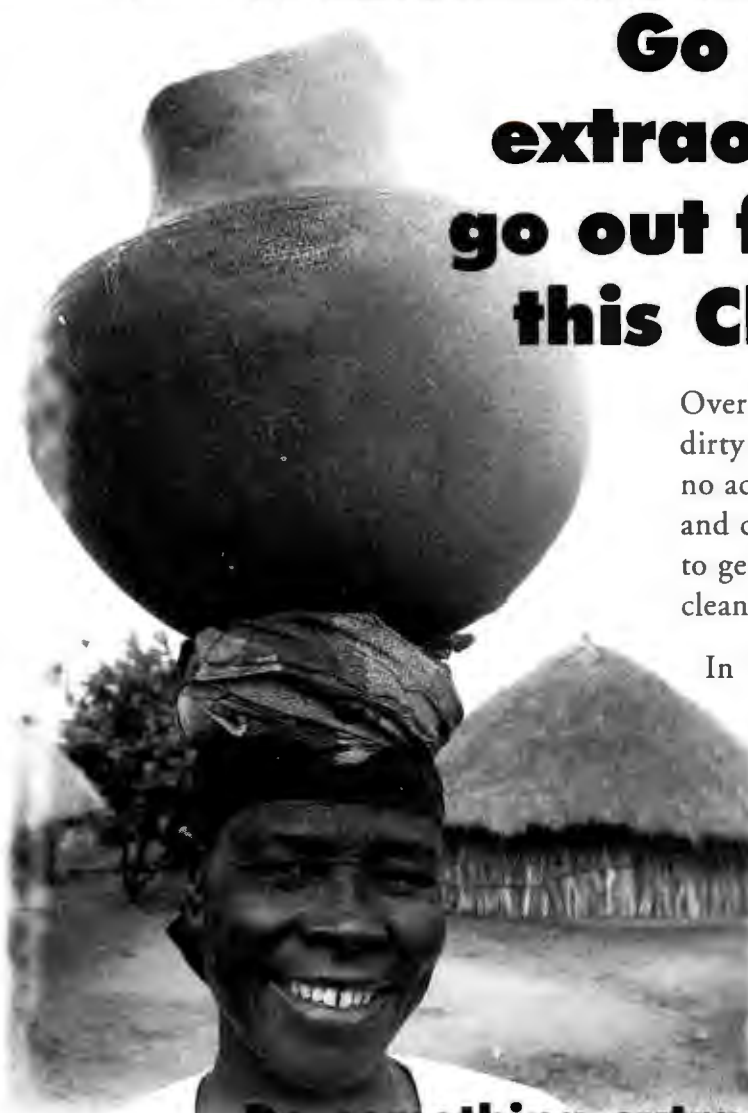
How ironic that Peter Cochrane should accuse Henry Reynolds of 'cultural insensitivity' (*Eureka Street*, October 1998) while evoking a hierarchy of cultural value in which hunters are characterised as primitive, while practitioners of the high European arts represent the pinnacle of cultural evolution. Cochrane's complaints about Reynolds' books are, at bottom, aesthetic ones: poor old Reynolds was so busy revolutionising our understanding of the past that he neglected to refine his plots, failed to vary his character types, and missed glaring opportunities to renovate himself stylistically. He even committed the cardinal sin of repeating his fundamental narrative paradigm.

None of these aspects of Reynolds' work is problematic unless we ourselves want to journey through the pages of historical texts like 'cultured travellers' rather than hunters. Cultured travellers are looking for the new, the unusual, the exotic. They are a market force that keeps academic publishers perpetually on the lookout for what is 'novel', and therefore marketable. This thirst for novel histories can cause us to turn our eyes away, yet again, from the brute fact of racial oppression. The problem is that while the cultured travellers are bored with true stories of bloodshed, injustice, and suffering, many Aboriginal people and their friends feel it is too early to take off the black armband. While the cultural travellers have got the point already and shelved it tidily away, the hunters—black and white—are grappling daily, on all sorts of levels, with legacies from the past. The hunters are, in every sense, hunting for their lives. As a fellow hunter, I salute Henry Reynolds.

**Penny van Toorn**  
Sydney, NSW



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




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# The Month's Traffic



## Hume's high way

**W**HEN THEY WOKE David Trimble at 6 o'clock on an October morning in Denver to tell him he had won the Nobel Peace Prize, his initial reaction was to wonder whether the award might be premature.

It was a reasonable demur; given the way things were going, he realised that he could find himself at the 10 December Award Ceremony in Oslo without progress on the core element of the Good Friday Agreement which had made him First Minister of Northern Ireland: the setting up of a 12-member executive to run the province's affairs.

In John Hume's case, there was no need for hesitation about accepting the award. As almost everybody who knows about his work has pointed out, it would be difficult to find someone more deserving. There were of course the usual begrudgers: Ian Paisley and his Democratic Unionist Party produced the bile to be expected from that quarter, contrasting with the graciousness of Gerry Adams who had congratulated both winners.

Consistently since his entry to public life 30 years ago, Hume has spoken the language of peace and reconciliation and the need to live together. He dared to imagine alternatives which neither side had contemplated and then involved Dublin, London, Europe and Washington in bringing his scheme to its current success.

When he began his dialogue with Adams in 1989, he did so at considerable political (and physical) risk to himself, a point made as forcefully by disgruntled members of his own Social Democratic and Labour Party as by opponents and neutral commentators. The opposition reached a crescendo in 1993, when the high-profile Tory MP, Edwina Currie, accused him of giving comfort and status to terrorism. He had broken the one rule that politicians and media on both sides of the Irish Sea had long accepted as unchallenged writ: you do not negotiate with terrorists.

His courage in holding out against friend and foe, and trusting Adams even after the first ceasefire broke down with the Canary Wharf bomb, was rewarded by the resounding popular endorsement of the Good Friday Agreement. Even if that deal were to fray tomorrow, he would have more

than earned the world acclaim which he received.

For David Trimble, the record is less impressive. As a young man, he was part of Bill Craig's ultra-rightwing Vanguard Party, and when that folded he made a slow return to mainstream Unionism. It is only three years since he danced a triumphalist two-step with Ian Paisley in the first Drumcree confrontation of 1995, an action which earned him the gratitude of hardline Orangeism and the leadership of the Unionist Party. Since then, he has taken risks for peace, daring to move away from the doctrinal certainties of his supporters; he outfaced the redneck element among his party colleagues and stuck with the talks against the mutterings of those who regarded any word bigger than 'no' as betrayal.

He is the first politician to move outside the safety and certainty of birthright Unionism and he has persuaded many on his side to follow him into the unknown territories of diplomacy and compromise. Ulster Unionism is littered with the political carcasses of those who dared to move from hardline to moderate: Terence O'Neill, James Chichester Clark, Brian Faulkner, even Bill Craig. Trimble has shown considerable courage and a welcome pragmatism in his quest for peace. Whether all that adds up to a Nobel Prize is another question.

By any test of effectiveness, of invoiced goods actually delivered, there are others more deserving of joining Hume in Oslo: Gerry Adams certainly, George Mitchell, Mo Mowlam, Bertie Ahern or Albert Reynolds, Tony Blair, even Bill Clinton or the much-maligned John Major. The Nobel committee would be overruled by a video referee with access to records going back 10 years or more, yet they may have done peace a service by giving the prize to a recipient from each side, effectively acknowledging that they are dealing with a job which is only starting.

There is another reason for supporting the decision to include David Trimble. Ever since the Northern Ireland problem entered world consciousness, Ulster Unionists have been portrayed as belonging to the same hard-faced breed as Afrikaners, Israelis and Serbs, people for whom world opinion ranks a trivial second to race survival. Now, the world has told them that it admires one of their own, someone who stands for the

same things they stand for; it will be interesting to observe how they react to suddenly finding themselves sexy.

David Trimble's sleepy response to the news of his instant fame was understandable. The award put immense pressure on him to conclude the snail-paced negotiations towards forming an executive, while he was well aware that if he moved too quickly or appeared to fudge on decommissioning, not even the world acclaim of a Nobel Peace Prize could save him.

*(PS: There cannot be many schools anywhere which can boast two Nobel prize-winners. Hume attended St Columb's College Derry at the same time as Seamus Heaney. Although he is only two years older than the literature laureate, he was three years ahead, having been 'put up a class' because of his prodigious ability.)*

—Frank O'Shea

## Faith and reason

**T**HE LATEST Papal Encyclical, *Faith and Reason*, has been welcomed enthusiastically. Nowhere more so than in Perth, where the Catholic paper gave it the headline: 'The Pope Saves Reason'. One wondered what was left for God to save.

The issue with which the Encyclical deals is simple, but difficult to resolve. On the one hand, Christians claim to find the meaning of their lives and of the world in Jesus Christ. On the other hand, they grapple with the lesser questions of meaning dealt with in economics, science and cultural studies. And like their non-Christian fellows, they also face the larger questions of the meaning of human life and the universe, considered in philosophies. So, they must reconcile the meaning which they find in faith with those given by reason, must reconcile theology with philosophy.

*Fides et Ratio*, a document addressed to the Bishops, is long, discursive and repetitive. It has both a theoretical and a practical goal.

In the first place, it insists on the importance of reason, and so of philosophy, within Catholic thought and life. Precisely because Christ offers answers to the large questions of life, Christians are committed to ask large questions and to seek a universal truth. To give up on truth will mean that Christ will be accepted as central only to

the believer's personal world and not to the given world.

Christian faith thus assumes confidence that the human mind can reach truth and that an enquiring mind is compatible with faith. This confidence underwrites commitment to dialogue between Christians and non-Christians about the meaning of the world and of life. It claims that objective truth is real and accessible. This optimism is not fashionable, for it flies in the face of many currents of thought which take large truths off the agenda. They include the tendency to reduce all questions to technical ones, and human beings to economic animals. To these positions, the Encyclical opposes the view that philosophy is concerned properly with ultimate questions about human life and reality, and is not limited to discussion of knowledge or pragmatic issues.

The Encyclical therefore argues that faith requires a philosophy largely conceived. If we believe that religious belief is purely subjective or lies outside the scope of rational enquiry, we fatally weaken the large Christian claim that the whole world and all of humanity are saved through Jesus Christ.

The practical concern of the Encyclical is to delineate the right of the church, and particularly of Rome, to speak authoritatively about philosophy. It argues first that the church is entrusted with revelation and not with a particular philosophy. This position allows philosophy its autonomy, and does not restrict Christians to any particular philosophical system. Nevertheless, the Encyclical claims for the church a watching brief over philosophy on the grounds that some philosophical positions can corrupt faith. So church authority has the right and duty to warn against their use. The cases of modernism and of liberation theology are cited.

Finally, in discussing the education of priests, the Encyclical reasserts the importance of philosophy and praises the objectivity and balance of the Thomist synthesis, although without making it mandatory.

In general, the Encyclical is most convincing when it makes its theoretical case. Its confident and large understanding of Christian faith is attractive, and its refusal to countenance a private Christian sphere of discourse, protected from question, is also encouraging. Its insistence that philosophy is properly concerned with large questions is welcome, particularly in the face of intellectual fashions that undermine all claims for truth. The Christian defence of human dignity depends on a

## Your health, Mr Scrooge

**T**HE ADMONITORY GENT from *Pictorial World* has presided over our walnuts and Christmas cake for at least a quarter century. He was flyblown when I found him, in a seaside bookshop, tucked between *A History of Coastal Wrecks* and a *PMWU Cookery Book*. Now the silver fish are making inroads. I thought he looked like Jack the Ripper but my children loved him, so every year he comes out with the motley clutter of symbols that mark our Christmas. He must have the required edge.

Henry VIII, another edgy character, has a bracing carol attributed to him. I thought about it as I waited in a queue at Grace Bros last week, under a cascade of Teletubbies.

*Full gold the harvest, / Grain for thy labour; / With God must work for daily bread, / Else, man, thou starvest.*

That's the middle verse. The end is more upbeat:

*The God of life can never die, / Hope! saith the holly.*

Death and hope, nature and regeneration ...

Charles Dickens had his Teletubbie moments but he got his Scrooge right. The greening of Scrooge is the essence of Christmas regeneration. He begins 'secret, and self-contained and solitary as an oyster' but ends as a man who 'knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge'. And 'his own heart laughed'.

Amen to that.



—Morag Fraser

commitment to large and universal truths about humanity. The Encyclical provides a welcome antidote to the intellectual narrowness and administrative brutality of a bookkeepers' age. Luke Skywalker is always welcome in philosophical space—against Darth Vader. Theologians will also welcome the insistence on pluralism in philosophy, and the limited competence claimed in philosophical questions. This space is a condition of creative scholarship.

The limitations of the encyclical come out of the way it argues to a claim to authority in matters of reason. While the limited claim itself is unexceptionable, it needs a more rounded treatment than is offered in the Encyclical. Indeed, the limitations in this respect may also weaken its theoretical persuasiveness. If we are to persuade that we have authority in the large issues of human life, we must demonstrate that we see objectively and judge accurately. The difficulty of doing so lies in our common experience that our desires, prejudices, cultural presuppositions and anxieties affect our perception and judgment, and that reality is far more richly mysterious than our words reach. Our claim to know and teach objective truth is persuasive only if we give a serious account of subjectivity, and exhibit a proper intellectual humility.

In these respects, the Encyclical is a little lacking. It asserts the objectivity of truth without giving weight to subjectivity.

Indeed, the examples it gives of authoritative intervention by the church in respect of Modernism and of Liberation Theology, raise more questions than they answer. The conceptual clarity of the positions adopted in each case depended on a tendentious account of the positions criticised. The documents disclosed the authors' pre-suppositions and illuminated the use of power as much as they clarified objective reality.

The challenge of the Encyclical, then, is one which remains to be met at all levels of the church: to reflect on faith in ways that display a passion for truth. Truth itself demands acknowledging the mystery of reality and the place of human subjectivity in knowledge.

What this means in practice is illustrated by a small and unpretentious book by Rosemary Williams, *Recasting the Stone: Human Suffering and the Business of Blame* (HarperCollinsReligious). Williams argues that the common response to suffering in religious, psychological and administrative circles, assumes a 'theology of trial'. If you suffer, you are told, you have acted wrongly or stupidly. So, the decline of the Roman Empire was due to moral decadence; cancer is caused by avoidable stress or smoking; accidents happen because of neglect or rashness; prolonged inability to work is due to laziness. In each case, the victim is blamed.

Williams traces the mechanism behind these judgments. She claims that they reflect

the fears and projections of the observer, and not the reality of the sufferer. We hope that if we can identify the faults that lead to others' suffering, we may be able to escape it ourselves. So, we project our fears by attributing blame, and turn the passions that energise us into elaborate lists of vices and virtues, to provide a map of dangerous and secure ways of living. She also shows how women, in particular, have

suffered from these mechanisms. Their suffering is blamed on vices which are named from the strong movements of the spirit: anger, desire, independence and ambition.

The interest of Williams' book for discussion of the Encyclical lies in her demonstration that Christian attitudes are shaped by unconscious fears. Therefore, to identify and to criticise fraudulent

imitations of faith, we must recognise the non-intellectual, subjective influences on argument. Furthermore, when we evaluate claims to truth, we correctly take into account the writer's standing point. It is neither coincidental nor irrelevant that Rosemary Williams lives in a community of homeless women.

She, however, would be the first to argue that, while it is necessary, attention to subjectivity does not of itself guarantee truth. The fact that she *argues* her case confirms the position adopted by the Encyclical—that truth is at stake in argument about reality. Her position invites discussion: I would contend that her argument would gain from attention to the place which prudence has among the virtues in Aristotelian philosophy.

But ultimately, not even a philosophy that makes high claims to truth is sufficient. Many of those who proclaim it often demonstrate a passion for certainty and not for truth. The theme of the Encyclical and the challenge it lays upon us all, in Rome or elsewhere, is best summed up by a comment by Raimond Gaita in a recent *Age* review: 'Philosophy is wonderfully exciting, but it can give spiritual nourishment only when it answers to our need of truth and when it shows what a love of it can mean.'

—Andrew Hamilton sj

## An inchoate democracy

**B**EWARE IMBROGLIOS' was allegedly an ominous message sent by a literate intelligence officer to some distant coast-watchers during the war to warn them against entanglements with villagers and their customs. On reading it, one less-literate recipient then admonished his cobbles: 'Gawd, the bloody BROGS! They reckon they're more trouble than the Kukukukus.'

The advice is still useful. And our reactions are still likely to be uncomprehending.

Currently, however, the Brogs are well roosted in Port Moresby. 'We can think of no parallel in any democratic country on earth', moaned the *National* daily—probably without hyperbole.

Put baldly, a former commander of the Defence Force, Brigadier-General Jerry Singirok (promoted by former Prime Minister, Sir Julius Chan), with a charge pending against him of sedition, and under investigation for a breach of the Leadership Code for accepting a kickback from a British arms company, has been reappointed to the supremo's position by Chan's successor, Bill Skate. Singirok replaced an officer who had been recalled from the Bougainville front after admitting atrocities. He, after resigning his post, had still been precipitately appointed commander (by Chan, then on the verge of losing even his parliamentary seat) without being officially recommissioned. As I write, the Acting Chief of Police is compiling charges against Singirok against the wishes of Bill Skate who dismissed even the kickback as 'a lousy \$70,000'. (The real Chief of Police is doing a course in the USA and refuses to come home.) The Prime Minister is alleged to have tried to influence the Acting Chief of Police to drop the charges against Singirok but denies it. Anyway, the Acting Chief of Police says he will do his duty and nothing less.

While what needs to be done seems straightforward, a letter from a resident of Buka Island in the north of Bougainville (*Post Courier*, 5 November) reminded us of another aspect of Singirok's 'sedition'. John Lepus recounted the arrival of 'the Commander ... with his handsome aide-de-camp' at the airport and how he was congratulated on his re-appointment by 'many Bougainvilleans from all walks of life' and even 'hugged'. The reason given was that 'Had it not been for his actions, those Sandline mercenaries would have murdered us and truly there would not have been any

peace which we now enjoy on Bougainville.' In other words, Sandline at least woke some rebel leaders to the devastating fire power they could unleash on themselves.

As Chan's actions in bringing Sandline into Papua New Guinea breached its constitution, and his method of payment broke the laws regulating budgetary disbursements, Singirok's mutiny is seen by many not only as efficacious but necessary. But Chan is not on trial and the court will be obliged to see the question legalistically. And later revelations about Singirok have diminished his standing.

Of course, the issue may not get that far. Remember Commissioner of Police, Paul Tohian, who arbitrarily withdrew his force from Bougainville in March 1991 and then after drinking heartily at a steak-and-sausage sizzle attempted to rouse his men for the BAR-B-COUP arrest of the government? His case lapsed. He was elected to parliament in 1992 and became Minister for Defence. He is now Governor in New Ireland.

Clearly Singirok's resignation the day after his refusal to obey orders should have stuck. He has now kindled suspicions of less altruistic motives than he appeared to have last year. 'It is difficult to believe', says the *National*, 'that ... no possible alternative to this controversial appointment could have been made' when there are outstanding charges against him. Moreover, outside Bougainville there has been 'a massive about-face in the public opinion of the man', and in the volatile Defence Force there are many soldiers opposed to him. Already at Taurama Barracks, First Battalion's headquarters, buildings have been destroyed and all records burnt in what looks suspiciously like arson by the soldiers themselves.

Not surprisingly, and particularly in view of Skate's erratic behaviour, incompetence and loutish self-presentation, the Leader of the Opposition, Bernard Narakobi, is wondering if Skate is seeking military support for what looks like a tottering government.

Sometime before July next year there will almost certainly be a vote of no-confidence in Skate, as is allowed under the constitution. The most likely contender for prime ministership will be Sir Mekere Morauta, the respected and talented former Secretary for Finance and Governor of the Bank of PNG, who is currently Minister for Fisheries (although in the fisheries business himself). Probably only constraints of timing in electing a prime minister prevented him from achieving that post last year. In a system of fluid loyalties he



will probably be acceptable to the Opposition, especially with Skate now regarded not as the hero who saved PNG from Sandline but as a buffoon. In a recent speech on the 25th Anniversary of the Bank of PNG, Morauta positioned himself as a reformer who will free the all-but-destroyed public service from political intimidation.

The Brogs are going to be around for a long time in PNG politics but, just as they ejected Sandline in a most baffling way, they are unlikely to allow a Skate–Singirok liaison to stay. Ultimately they are inchoately democratic.

—James Griffin

## Jubilee 2000— Millennium dawn or yawn?

GIVEN OUR FASCINATION with numbers, the year 2000 will be ushered in with a king-size New Year's Eve party, apocalyptic warnings and gaggles of Nostradamuses.

Curiously, many Christians have found it difficult to get excited about the Jubilee, though it marks roughly 2000 years since the birth of Christ. (The modern Gregorian Calendar, compiled only in 1582, made a few errors: scholars tell us that Christ was probably born about 4BCE.) People of many denominations have been slow to see more in the Jubilee than an important milestone in history. And some Protestants mistook Pope John Paul II's call to celebrate the Jubilee as a traditionally Roman repetition of earlier jubilee years—as times for pilgrimage and spiritual renewal.

However, many soon realised the biblical significance of the Jubilee as a profound theme underlying the most important religious concepts of redemption, justice, forgiveness and covenant.

Pope John Paul in his 1994 encyclical letter, *The Third Millennium*, warned Catholics against an artificial commemoration. He called for a genuine renewal of faith and witness. Indicating that this was no excuse for triumphalism, he instigated investigations to determine where the Catholic church itself needs to ask forgiveness for past failures, especially in relation to anti-semitism, the Inquisition and the scandal of Christian disunity. He intends to lead a penitential service on Ash Wednesday of the year 2000, asking forgiveness for the mistakes and injustices committed by Catholics in the past. He also urged the European nations to 'a serious examination of conscience, and to acknowledge faults

## Weir(d) Cosmology

IF YOU WERE GOD, what sort of world would you create? Film directors have the opportunity to imagine their way into this question every time they set about transcribing a screenplay to celluloid.

In his latest offering, *The Truman Show*, one of Peter Weir's central characters, Christof, exercises a similar 'cosmic authority' as director of America's most popular TV program. Christof quite literally constructs the world of Truman Burbank. It is safe, it is comfortable; but it is contrived to the point of being manipulative. When challenged on this issue in an interview, Christof responds dispassionately: 'we tend to accept the reality of the world we're presented with'. Sad, but true. Perhaps that's why those with whom I watched the film weren't sure whether to laugh at Jim Carrey's portrayal of one person's predicament, or to cry over whole represented civilisations of passive world-consumers, for whom contentment at the cost of delusion is a trade-off too easily justified.

Because *The Truman Show* begs such allegorical treatment, Juliette Hughes, in reviewing the film for *Eureka Street* ('The power of one', October 1998) was right to describe it as 'straight-out fable'. But her suggestion that its setting lies 'sometime in a future America' obscures Evan Williams' keen observation (*The Weekend Australian*, 26–27 September 1998) that the film explores 'a contemporary modern nightmare: the sensation that none of us is truly master of ourselves, that our lives are regulated by endless pressures to conform, and to that extent, we are less than human'. And yet Truman's growing anguish towards the story's end suggests a still greater anxiety is that linked with the ancient fear of falling off (or, in this case, bumping into) the edge of the earth. Which is worse: to live blissfully deceived in a false and meagre world, or to be confronted with the awful truth (and therefore the lie) of that world's limitations?

On this question, the jury seems to be well and truly in. The world created by Christof is a world against which humanity has protested not only in recent 'dystopian fables' (a category into which Williams puts this film, along with *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *The Manchurian Candidate*, *Groundhog Day*, *Logan's Run* and *Capricorn One*), but ever since Adam and Eve effectively chose life outside their 'Seahaven' of Eden in preference to being denied the genuine freedom which comes from having one's eyes fully opened.

Wittingly or otherwise, there does appear to be some mythological reinterpretation at work in Weir's direction. In a Darwinian reversal of perspective, what classical theology lamented as a disastrous *fall* from innocence for the archetypal 'True Man', Adam, becomes for the 'Everyman' of Weir's modern morality play an agonised but liberating *rise* from naiveté. This culminates when Truman symbolically exits Seahaven via a carefully camouflaged stairway (whether inspired by Jacob's ladder or Led Zeppelin's immortal track is a moot point)—an action by which he serves to recapitulate and revise for popular culture the tower of Babel story: climbing in order not to reach but to rival heaven, and getting the final word!

Truman Burbank, after Camus' diagnostic essay *The Rebel* and Dostoevsky's character Ivan Karamazov, demonstrates that for the 'True Man' come-of-age paradise is a place—a life—outside the Garden, somewhere that does not bear the stamp of this particular world's creator. To be fully, authentically human one has to proclaim the death of such a God. Heaven is thus recast in the more historical terms of an ideal State or a global economic and technological golden age—utopian visions which, ironically, soon become as totalitarian as the rejected deity was perceived to be.

But, as Weir's exercise in cosmology reminds us, perception is everything! The capricious cosmic orchestrator—Christof writ large—is an enduring if profoundly unhelpful caricature of the God worshipped by the Judeo-Christian tradition: the great producer in the sky who cues up the sun, or the bushfire, or the nuclear power disaster—each and every event serving some greater but inscrutable purpose. Such a God must indeed be rejected, and I have every sympathy with Truman's vicarious act of defiance. I just want to know what happens to him out in the 'real' world. Is he free there to invent his own story—to make a name for himself? Or is a script which promises such autonomy the cruellest delusion of all? I'd be interested to see a sequel. ■

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and errors, both economic and political', resulting from past imperialist policies.

The Pope's examination of conscience extended to the whole field of social struggle, especially the violation of human rights and 'the responsibility shared by so many Christians for grave forms of injustice and exclusion'. He drew attention to the startling inequality between rich and poor nations, the fragility of world peace, problems in the environment and the ambiguities in technological change: 'a commitment to justice and peace in a world like ours, marked by so many conflicts and intolerable social and economic inequalities, is a necessary condition for the ... celebration of the Jubilee'. He specifically urged that Third World debt be 'substantially' reduced, if not cancelled outright.

As the Jubilee arose from Jewish religious consciousness, the Pope has initiated a conversation with Jewish groups and other churches about how Christians and Jews can appropriately celebrate together, and with Moslems and people of other beliefs.

According to the Hebrew book of Leviticus (ch. 25), every 50 years the ancient Israelites were to commemorate God's redeeming of them from slavery in Egypt and leading them into the Promised Land. In Palestine, each clan and family had held land not just as an economic resource but as a pledge that God was in a vibrant covenant relationship with them. The Jubilee was a time to restore that relationship. Hence land which had been sold had to be restored to its ancestral owners. Israelites who had sold themselves or been sold into bondage to other Israelites were to be set free (redeemed). Debts between Israelites were to be remitted. And the land was to lie fallow. In effect, the Jubilee was a means to restore equality of opportunity among the Jewish people by reallocating every family an equitable share in the means of production.

It is not at all clear that these prescriptions for the Jubilee were followed (see Antony Campbell, 'In a Word: Jubilee', *Eureka Street*, July/August 1998), but the tradition remained for the Israelites a potent metaphor of what a right relationship with God entailed.

In the Gospel of Luke (4:22-30), Jesus interprets his whole mission in terms of a new Jubilee, only his Jubilee is not once every 50 years, but permanent and ongoing; and not just for Jews, but for all peoples. The covenant is indeed embodied in the

person of Jesus (see Isaiah 42:6-7). Luke depicts Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth searching out the passage from Isaiah 61:1-2:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the  
captives  
[and recovery of sight to the blind, (from  
Isaiah 35:5)]  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour'  
(i.e. the Jubilee).

Significantly, Jesus omits the next verse from Isaiah: 'and the day of vengeance of our God'. Jesus' God is not a warrior God, fighting to protect Israel and crush their foes. Jesus lifts the Jubilee metaphor out of the context of a single Hebrew people. For the Israelites, the Jubilee remission of debts or freedom from bondage extended only to other Jews, not to foreigners among them. But Jesus extends to all peoples the values of justice, social equity, freedom, protection for the weak and economic sufficiency encapsulated in the Jubilee.



Jean Genet  
ponders  
his tax,  
and whether  
it was in fact  
Bourgeois  
for him to  
have lied  
about the  
extent of  
his costs in  
writing  
materials.  
perhaps  
scrupulous  
honesty  
would have  
shown a  
more  
fundamental  
contempt for  
society

Moreover, instead of the land being the fundamental symbol of God's fidelity to his people, Jesus inaugurates his 'reign of God', culminating in Pentecost, in which God is immediately and intimately present through the Holy Spirit in the community of believers.

Jesus expands the meaning of liberation and forgiveness into all other areas of human struggle, endeavour and failure. He does not underplay the social significance of the Jubilee, but repeatedly stresses the social obligations of being a disciple in his 'Kingdom'. The parable of the rich man and the beggar Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) remains acutely relevant to the vast gap between rich and poor nations today.

Perhaps the last judgment scene of all the nations from Matthew (25:31ff), drawing strongly from the Hebrew Scriptures (see Psalm 146:7-9), most clearly articulates the social implications of being a disciple:

Come you that are blessed by my Father,  
inherit the kingdom prepared for you  
from the foundation of the world;  
for I was hungry and you gave me food,  
I was thirsty and you gave me something to  
drink,  
I was a stranger and you welcomed me.  
I was naked and you gave me clothing,  
I was sick and you took care of me,  
I was in prison and you visited me ...  
Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one  
of the least of my brethren, you did it to  
me.

The social implications of the Gospel are thus not just optional extras but absolutely central to the Jubilee message of Jesus. Even the 'Our Father' relies on Jubilee references: 'Your kingdom come ... forgive us our trespasses' (literally, 'remit our debts').

It would be a mistake to interpret the ancient Jubilee prescriptions literally, as the Church once took the prohibition against usury, but they can be approached intelligently and creatively. Over the centuries the Christian churches have attempted to highlight the changing social implications of the Gospel, and especially so in the last 100 years with the vigorous expansion of church social action and teaching.

Several areas of concern stand out because of their urgency: for example, Third World debt and the deteriorating conditions in many developing countries. Others have special relevance in Australia, notably



reconciliation with Aboriginal Australians and the improvement of living standards for all Australians.

Of great importance is the international campaign to reduce or remit the debts of the most impoverished countries. Already many have been reduced, but even if all the debts of some countries are remitted, this will not be enough to lift living standards if poor nations cannot attract capital for development. Debt relief is only a start in a complex process.

In the last two decades, the gap between many rich and poor countries has widened, the level of international aid (in terms of percentage of GNP of the wealthy countries) has dropped, and support for even such a critical area as agricultural research has faltered. Millions of people are still struggling desperately for the necessities of life: food, clean water and basic health care.

In light of the economic setbacks in South East Asia and elsewhere, how can we best promote the prosperity of developing countries, especially those which are suffering most, and those groaning under oppressive and impossible foreign debts? Will the children of future generations rise up and condemn the peoples of our day for being blind to our possibilities for action? Will the Western nations in 50 years be holding 'sorry days' for our lack of commitment, for our complacency and self-indulgence?

It would be a grave mistake to paint too negative a picture, because, since 1945, many peoples have experienced a decided rise in living standards. Exaggerated depictions of geopolitical or environmental problems can destroy public support even for exemplary development efforts; concern about the environment and population growth must not destroy hope, or confidence that for the first time in history, humanity has the technology and skills to banish the worst forms of hunger and poverty throughout the entire world. What *is* lacking is the political will to reorganise our economic and social priorities and to concentrate our efforts and resources on this task.

Within Australia, too, the Jubilee issues a fresh invitation to ensure real equality of opportunity and equity in the distribution of wealth and resources. In the near-100 years since Federation, Australian citizens have striven to build a society in which every person and family would find the conditions for a happy and prosperous life—but with mixed results.

As we face a new millennium, how do we recommit our nation to ideals of a vibrant

and enterprising society, founded on social institutions which ensure justice, a 'fair go', and a decent life for all our people?

In recent years we have witnessed major setbacks in the process of reconciliation with Aboriginal Australians. In many ways, the ancient Jubilee practices—a return to ancestral land, remitting debt and freedom from bondage—resonate profoundly with the tragic experience of our indigenous people. No-one can restore to them all that they have lost, but is it not our duty to acknowledge the wrongs done to them, to restore what should rightfully be theirs—particularly land rights where appropriate—and to offer more genuine equality of opportunity with other Australians by far-sighted programs to overcome the enormous disadvantages many suffer?

At stake here are not just the rights of Aborigines, but the moral integrity of our country as we prepare for the Jubilee and our second century as a nation. Without genuine reconciliation with our indigenous peoples, all Australians are diminished in stature.

Then there are the 750,000 unemployed Australians, many of whom feel they have been cast aside like so much rubbish. Unemployment is the single most important factor in entrenching people in poverty, fomenting domestic distress and excluding them from social participation. More than 800,000 children live in homes where no-one is in paid employment. Yet never has our nation been so wealthy.

The Jubilee of the year 2000 is a *Kairos*, a special and sacred time, not just for Australia but for all peoples to recommit themselves to eliminating the worst forms of world hunger and poverty—within our lifetime. We now have the resources and the technology to do so. Therefore for the first time in history, it is morally obligatory.

—Bruce Duncan

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# Art Monthly

AUSTRALIA

IN THE DECEMBER ISSUE

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# Versions of the Birth

*Matthew and Luke tell different stories of the birth of Jesus. Dorothy Lee probes their complex variations, their silences and ambiguities, from the point of view of a modern biblical scholar and of a woman trying to fathom the meaning of Christmas and the role of women in biblical narratives.*

**A**DVENT IS THE TIME when the kids take over, dragging mangy strips of tinsel out of cardboard boxes, draping them over lintels and fireplaces, obliging unwilling parents to stuff huge branches dripping pine needles into small cars and drag them (still bleeding) into empty corners of the lounge room.

For kids, Christmas seems to be a time of unmitigated celebration, though what exactly is being celebrated is another question. Is it secular consumerism or nuclear-family life? Or the biblical story of Christmas and all that it conjures up for children: magical tableaux of shepherds and angels, wise men and stars, innocent motherhood and a newborn baby?

For scholars of the Bible (if not for many parents), the narrative of Christmas is much more ambiguous. The biblical stories that tell of the birth of Jesus are crafted and complex, despite the seeming simplicity of the traditional scene around the crib. There are only two narratives in the New Testament that tell of the miraculous birth of Jesus and they are found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Both evangelists have added these birth stories to their major source, the Gospel of Mark, which begins not with the birth of Jesus but rather his baptism as an adult in the Jordan river by John the Baptist.

Matthew and Luke's birth narratives are generally regarded by scholars as pious tales written decades after the events. Like Hellenistic stories of the remarkable birth and childhood of heroes, these stories claim to detect signs of Jesus' importance already in the incidents surrounding his birth. In many respects, these stories have the characteristics of genuine myths. Most cultures possess a fund of sacred tales—a mythology that articulates and embodies what Manning Clark has called 'the mystery at the heart of things'. Describing Matthew and Luke's tales of Jesus' birth and infancy as 'myths', however, does not—contrary to popular opinion in Western secularised culture—debase them or confine them to the marginalised world of children's fairy tales. On the contrary, the language of myth offers us a lens through

which to view these sacred tales and discover their meaning. The mythology of every culture articulates its values and symbolic universe. It is a way of viewing this-worldly reality from the perspective of the other-worldly: the cosmic divine in interaction, both playful and threatening, with the world.

Nevertheless, we have a problem with the birth narratives of the Gospels: we have taken two separate narratives and artificially spliced them together into one, long, continuous story, smoothing out differences of detail, harmonising contradictions and losing the specific focus of each.

The quest for mythological meaning cannot succeed until the stories are given their own integrity within their own narrative and theological framework. They cannot be appreciated as myth as long as they are unthinkingly harmonised by those who have little appreciation or understanding of the integrity of ancient myth.

Matthew tells a tale of struggle and misunderstanding, danger and murder, the holy family forced into exile as refugees. Luke's story provides a doublet in the birth of John the Baptist which parallels (though in a lesser way) the birth of Jesus. For the most part, Luke's is a joyful and triumphant tale brimming with the dynamic presence of the Holy Spirit who is responsible for all that takes place: fecundity and faith, inspired speech and song.

Each narrative, Luke's and Matthew's, has its own pattern and form, mood and atmosphere. Yet the popular church crib, with its jostling shepherds (Luke) and wise men (Matthew), its confusion of joy (Luke) and brutality (Matthew), cobbles together disparate narratives and does violence to both. Passion Week allows the Synoptic narratives of Jesus' crucifixion to be read in their entirety on a three-year cycle (Matthew, Mark and Luke)—with John's story read every Good Friday—but no such attention is given to the separate narrations of Matthew and Luke when it comes to Jesus' birth. This is not just painful for the trained biblical 'expert'. It also affects those who

struggle to celebrate Christmas, banishing mythology to the nursery and reducing it to something that comes perilously close to kitsch—a sentimental retelling of stories whose appeal is experienced vicariously by adults through (what they imagine to be) the wide-eyed, innocent gaze of small children.

Yet Luke's story needs to be read in its wholeness if we are to appreciate the joyful meaning of the Christ event: not a shallow celebration of 'Jesus' birthday', but a deep and serious joy that transforms the lives of God's poor, signalling the divine visitation which will fulfil the deepest hopes and yearnings of Israel. Luke also knows the other side of the coin too, for the sword of suffering will one day pierce the joyful mother's heart.

The same is true of Matthew when it is read as an uninterrupted whole. The narrative of political intrigue and paranoia reminds us that birth is not always joyful. Mother and child are frighteningly vulnerable, caught up in events not of their making. Like thousands of refugees pouring over the world's borders today, they are forced to flee, Joseph wrapping the mantle of his protection around the nursing mother and dependent child. In Matthew's tale, Joseph is worthy of the charge: a man of integrity and dreaming who lives by his intuition, reading the signs of the times from the heavens and acting quickly to

the Jewishness of Jesus and his environment, a sensitivity encouraged by various church pronouncements (including the Vatican's) condemning anti-semitic readings of the biblical story.

In more recent decades, however, a new voice has been added to the growing medley clamouring for the attention of the biblical reader. Women, effectively excluded from biblical studies since its renaissance in the Enlightenment across Protestant Europe, have, for several decades, been edging into the ranks of biblical scholarship.

Women studying Scripture and theology in Australia and overseas are beginning to give their male counterparts a run for their money. In some places the gender balance is about equal, in other places women students already form a majority. Unsurprisingly, the same cannot be said for those on the other side of the pedagogical lectern: women lecturing and engaging in research in biblical studies are still in a minority. Yet they are learning the craft (often at great personal cost) and becoming members of the guild. Their perspectives are at least as varied as their male counterparts, and they have already made a difference, reading the biblical text in new ways and challenging interpretations that have long been taken for granted.



protect the mother who is wife and not-wife, and the child who is none of his. Yet, like Luke, Matthew also knows the other side: the joy at the coming of the Magi, astrologers from the East, who represent the future influx of the Gentiles into Jewish faith.

THE STUDY OF THE CHRISTMAS narratives has been greatly advanced in recent decades by the collapse of denominational agendas in biblical scholarship. The guild has become largely ecumenical, perhaps more so than any other discipline in theology. Catholic biblical scholar Raymond Brown (who died only in August of this year) wrote a superb study of the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke in 1977 (*The Birth of the Messiah*) where he outlines painstakingly the differences between the two birth stories and discusses each narrative in turn. A weighty tome in more ways than one, this study has become a classic, a *sine qua non* for Protestants and Catholics alike. Another important factor in biblical study of the birth narratives is the much greater degree of sensitivity to

Women's reading of the birth narratives is a case in point. Taking as their starting-point historical reconstruction of the significant roles played by women in the Jesus movement and the early Christian communities, feminist biblical scholars ask two fundamental questions of these myths.

First of all, they ask the literary question of how female characters are portrayed in the stories: where they are present and where absent, whether they are marginalised or diminished by the text, how seriously they are taken as human beings, as disciples, as leaders of early Christian communities.

Secondly, women ask how these biblical myths can be reinterpreted in a woman-friendly (rather than misogynist) way, regardless of how we may define the original author's or community's intentions. This may involve sometimes reading 'against the grain' in order to address directly women's concerns that are ignored or even downplayed by the narrative.

It is worth examining the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke with these questions in mind. One of the purposes of feminist readings is to draw women

from the margins, undoing the 'androcentrism' that subsumes females into the categories of males. Another is to challenge traditional 'malestream' readings that assume female characters conform to feminine stereotype. Both these moves are present in feminist readings of the birth stories. Following the established principles of biblical scholarship, each story is read in its own right, without harmonising the accounts and without using extraneous material to plug historical gaps. Each birth narrative is read as myth, the focus being on the theology and symbolism which pervade these tales.

Matthew's story is, at first reading (and possibly also at second and third readings), a male-oriented narrative. The long genealogy at the head of Matthew's narrative confronts the female reader with a bewildering but highly focused litany of male sexual activity, fervently—if not feverishly—producing generation after generation of male offspring. Joseph, rather than Mary, is quickly established as the central figure of

Matthew's story, his dreamy yet powerful character modelled on that of his patriarchal namesake in the Book of Genesis. In many ways, Joseph is an admirable character, his moral uprightness laced with compassion. All through the story of flight and exile, his dreams guide the narrative, and his goodness protects the mother and child. Although not the biological father of the baby, he becomes Jesus' adopted father through his paternal tenderness and care. The contrast to this admirable portrait is Mary: she is given a passive characterisation almost from the start. Things are done *to* her, whether in the divine or human spheres. She does not speak; she takes no initiative, make no decisions. Her faith is assumed though never made explicit. The complementary roles of active, protective father and needy, helpless mother have probably given rise to later traditions of Mary as a young girl and Joseph an old man. Matthew's Mary seems the passive female in need of male guidance and strength, while Joseph strides forth as the guardian of dependent womanhood.

And yet, from a feminist perspective, that is not all there is to be said about Matthew's account. The genealogy which sets the birth narrative in its mythic frame is unquestionably a patrilineal catalogue, tracing descent only through the father. Yet intriguingly, it contains reference to four women from the Hebrew Scriptures who make an unexpected maternal appearance in male paternal terrain.

First there is Tamar, the wronged widow of Genesis, who attempted to redress her wrongs by seducing her father-in-law, and was vindicated for her courage and daring. Next is Rahab the Canaanite prostitute who courageously helped the Hebrew spies to enter the Promised Land. Then Ruth the stranger

and alien whose faith is commended in the book that bears her name, who supported her shattered mother-in-law with her friendship and hard work, and became the great-grandmother of King David. Finally there is Bathsheba, the abused wife of Uriah who later married David, her abuser, and whose son Solomon came to the throne after his father, thanks (at least in part) to her astute political connivance.

These four women, female ancestors of the Messiah, prepare the reader for the role of Mary and for the altogether unexpected way in which the genealogy concludes. In the end, God bypasses the patrilineage and Jesus is born from the mother, without male assistance of any kind. This is unusual, particularly by the lights of ancient understandings of biology: the father provided the seed, the mother was merely its incubator. Yet, for Matthew (and also, in this respect, for Luke), a woman is the sole guarantor of Jesus' humanity. It is not dependent on male seed or male begetting or male initiative. Mary

becomes the mother of the Messiah through divine intervention, while remaining a virgin, and thus joins the panoply of unusual and spirited Jewish women through whom God chose to work, sometimes in spite of the males in their lives.

When we turn to Luke and his characterisation of Mary, it seems at first that we are on stronger ground. Mary is unquestionably the hero of Luke's tale, closely followed by Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist and Mary's kinswoman. Both are the vessels of miraculous pregnancies and both are women of outstanding faith and insight. Mary's positive response to the angel's terrifying message is a dynamic statement of faith. She is the first person in this Gospel to hear the word of God and respond to it in relation to Jesus: the first to come to Christian faith. Elizabeth, in contrast to her husband Zechariah, also shows remarkable faith. Under divine influence, she recognises Mary's identity as 'the Mother of my Lord' and celebrates, with Mary, the coming of God to redeem Israel.

Under the influence of the ubiquitous Spirit, Mary utters one of the major canticles of Luke's birth story, the Magnificat. On closer inspection, this is not a spontaneous outburst on Mary's part which can be understood in historical terms. It is close to the Song of Hannah in the Hebrew Scriptures (I Samuel), another powerful yet vulnerable mother who showed great faith and received the gift of divine speech. Using Old Testament language and imagery, Mary's Song outlines Luke's understanding of the gospel and the coming of Christ as a radical shift: one which exalts the poor and overthrows the rich and powerful. The shape of this divine gospel, according to Luke, is proclaimed from the beginning by a woman who

*Perhaps Matthew's dreaming,  
sensitive Joseph and Luke's gutsy  
Mary can provide us with  
new role models for ourselves  
and our children.*

represents faithful Israel's response to God's advent in Jesus.

Yet this is not the last word on Luke's Gospel. Despite so powerful a beginning, women in Luke's later story seem to recede further and further. Subsequent female characters, unlike Mary and Elizabeth, are silent and quiescent, without the dynamic power of speech. By the time we reach the Book of Acts (Luke's second volume), women have been almost entirely written out of Luke's vision of church history. Despite the evidence from Paul's letters that the early church included women as apostles, missionaries, teachers and preachers, Luke presents a church run almost exclusively by men. The promise of Mary of Nazareth is not, it would seem, fulfilled. What begins as a positive presentation of women fails to carry its message through. In the end, it would seem, Luke himself loses courage and sells out on women's leadership and gifts for ministry.

☆  
**W**HERE DOES ALL THIS LEAVE US? With ambiguity, at the very least, according to women scholars of the Bible. There is a Yes and a No to women in these biblical myths surrounding the birth of Jesus. On the positive side, the Lukan Mary stands as the first and archetypal Christian in Luke's Gospel, a model of faith for both women and men: a woman of courage and determination, a woman of inspired speech, a woman who perceives the coming of God in her own body, yet faces also the sword of suffering that will wound her. Matthew's genealogy gives credit to the contribution of women in the history of salvation. It reveals the way God often bypasses the expected ways, the powerful institutions, the men of distinction and renown. Here God makes use of the courage and daring of women caught in a patriarchal world, yet capable nevertheless of acting despite it: refusing to be disempowered or disinherited by history's attempt to over-write them.

Yet there is also the negative in both myths: the prominence of Joseph in Matthew's story, overshadowing the characterisation of Mary and throwing her into the role of dependent mother; the ensuing silence of women after Elizabeth and Mary in Luke's ongoing story, despite the early promise of a mutual vision of discipleship and ministry.

Both dimensions of the story, according to women readers of the Bible, need to be heard. Both require speech and acknowledgement. Phyllis Trible, a scholar of the Hebrew Bible in the USA, speaks both of the liberating message and also the 'texts of terror' that stand side-by-side within the pages of the Scriptures. The task of theology is to discern the voice of God behind these varied and conflicting traditions: the voice that will encourage, empower and appropriately challenge women (as well as men); the voice that will give utterance and visibility to women's shadowy existence within the life of the

church. The Bible, like an icon, is a window through which we see the eternal: we see the image of ourselves, made in the divine image, transfigured in the likeness of the universal Christ. Yet the Bible is also a mirror reflecting the tarnished image of our own destructiveness, our tendency to demean one another on the most superficial grounds, for reasons of race or class or gender—and doing so, horrifyingly, in the name of God and religion.

None of this makes Christmas an easy time for women, whether they are mothers, grandmothers, aunts or just good friends of small children. Perhaps we need to retell the stories of the feisty women in Matthew's genealogy, even though their tales may be improper. Perhaps we need to substitute the strong courage of the Lukan Mary for the saccharine Mary of much traditional piety. Perhaps we might recover her inspired conviction that God is on the side of the poor who suffer most from our orgies of Christmas consumerism. Perhaps Matthew's dreaming, sensitive Joseph and Luke's gutsy Mary can provide us with new role models for ourselves and our children. Perhaps, above all, we can celebrate with our children the advent of God within the beauty and squalor of our flesh. ■

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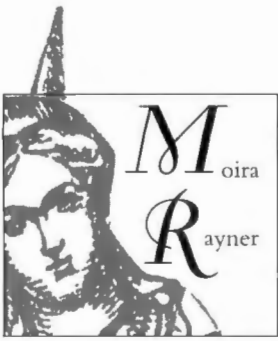
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# Cracking the whip

**T**HE POSSESSORS of strong personalities, with the confidence to hold and express their views, are often the least aware of their intimidating effect upon others and, paradoxically, are most terribly sensitive to, and genuinely hurt about being bulldozed themselves.

The basis for a moral objection to bullies is supposedly their (mis)use of relative strength or power to coerce or intimidate weaker people. Yet the Shorter Oxford records that the original meaning of 'bully' was not pejorative: it meant 'sweetheart', or 'darling'—a term of endearment and familiarity. We still have the remnants of that meaning when we say, a touch enviously, 'Bully for you!' when someone has a win. And there is some reason to agree with the poisonous Auberon Waugh who, a couple of years ago, wrote a wry little piece in the *Spectator* praising the virtues of bullying, especially in schools, toughening up our kids for the hard world out there. Waugh, of course, believes that to survive bullying is to build character. True, if one is resilient. Bashing one's head against a wall may build up a carapace—or it might fracture or weaken an eggshell skull under the repeated insults. Some of us are not resilient.

It's tough out there, in a world of uncertain employment, 'contracts' instead of awards, the relatively powerless negotiating from a position of relative weakness. But beggars who can't be choosers, in this situation, still have a remedy when the extreme cases occur. The courts, bless them, have started to crack down on bosses who bully, or let others bully, their people. They have begun to award real damages, for the real damage done.

We have begun to recognise why employers are responsible for preventing some kinds of bullying—sexual harassment in particular. This is not a feminist construct: sexual harassment is a particularly pernicious form of bullying, one with a sexual element—repeated or gross acts or words of a sexual nature that are neither welcome nor invited, which a reasonable person would expect to have the effect they do, that is, to intimidate, insult or humiliate the person subjected to them. Because it is specifically prohibited under equal

opportunity laws, and the courts have sheeted vicarious liability home for it, managers—especially those with US experience—are starting to count the cost of not preventing bullying.

Damages awarded in Australian courts have never reached, nor will they ever reach, the US courts' multi-million awards, in part because our courts order costs against unsuccessful applicants, and our lawyers are not entitled to act on the promise of sharing in the damages bounty in lieu of ordinary fees. We call that 'champerty' and



would strike off the lawyer who would take such a punt. This has probably kept damages down, as a result. But this policy is, along with other 'competition' policy changes, under review by the State Attorneys-General who would wish to regulate the legal profession in the same way as any other business.

The highest general damages award for sexual bullying was ordered by the Victorian Anti-Discrimination Tribunal in June 1998, an award (and a finding) presently under appeal. The Tribunal awarded Senior Constable Narel McKenna a record \$125,000 in general damages (for hurt feelings, and distress, and psychological illness, nothing else) after finding that her employer, the Victoria Police, and three of its employees had been responsible for sex and marital discrimination as well as three occasions of sexual harassment by one of her supervisors. This had included, the tribunal found, his asking her for a 'head job' and manhandling her into a holding cell.

But the core of the facts found by the tribunal was not the 'sexual harassment' or discrimination, as such, but the bullying that followed her complaining about it. According to the tribunal, senior officers singled her out for negative treatment. McKenna had a breakdown, but did not

leave the job. The Tribunal was highly critical of the Police. It found that these actions, apart from the incidents of harassment, were 'initiated, supported or endorsed at high levels in the district hierarchy', and that the Victoria Police had taken little effective action to implement its own anti-harassment and equal opportunity policy (*McKenna v. State of Victoria*). The damages award is an all-time high. Other awards have been based on lost wages, medical expenses and the like: this is compensation purely for the outrage of being subject to discrimination, bullying, and victimisation.

Employers who have 'embraced' sexual harassment prevention measures still find it hard to deal with non-sexual harassment. This kind of bullying is a far greater problem. Injuries, even death, can be caused by jokes or teasing—classically, someone lights a flammable fluid in a workshop and an apprentice gets scorched, or the 'joke' causes offence and physical confrontation.

**I**N OTHER CASES the harassment or bullying may be perpetrated by the managers themselves. Where is the line drawn between 'firm management' and hounding?

In April this year, the Supreme Court of Queensland heard another case, involving massive damages against the employer for failing to provide a safe system of work or to protect the employee. A Ms Arnold was employed by a newspaper owned by Midwest Radio Ltd. The court found that Ms Arnold was regularly subjected to offensive behaviour by her manager—he did the same to other employees, but targeted her more. His language was 'aggressive, bullying, abusive, belittling and sarcastic', the court said, and 'often expressed in or accompanied by foul language'.

In what the employer later tried to portray as an acceptably vigorous pursuit of productivity, the manager played one employee off against another, once trying to force Arnold and another employee to make a 'Sophie's choice' and sack the other, another time falsely claiming that Arnold had made a sexual harassment complaint against a colleague. He humiliated a gay colleague in Arnold's presence, making homophobic remarks, dumping his belongings on the



floor and making him pick them up.

Finally, the manager refused to allow Arnold to take leave to see her de facto husband's dying father. He said that it was 'out of the question', 'too close to Christmas', and though she was entitled to compassionate leave he was not going to give her any. The father died two days later. So she left, got ill, and sued. Note: she *sued*. She did not complain of sexual harassment or discrimination. She sued, in the ordinary courts, and proved that the employer, in allowing her to be bullied, had failed to provide a safe system of work, and was in breach of its statutory duty under the *Queensland Workplace Health and Safety Act 1989*.

The Supreme Court found that Ms Arnold was not likely to work again. She was entitled to rely on her psychiatric injury, alone, as the basis of her claim that the employer had failed to take reasonable care to avoid injury to an employee, and had unreasonably exposed her to a foreseeable risk of injury. She may have been vulnerable, but employers must take their staff as they find them: there was a causal relationship between the manager's behaviour and her illness.

The Court awarded damages of \$572,512, which included damages for loss of earnings, future economic loss, and past and future carer costs. Fortunately for the employer, the court contemplated but did not award aggravated or exemplary damages, because of a lack of evidence that the company knew enough about the offending conduct to put it under a duty to take remedial action.

The case raises an important issue about corporate responsibility for humane management of staff. It may be that all the emphasis on *sexual* harassment has unintentionally desensitised some to the need to prevent *all* bullying, including bullying under the guise of 'strong management', and especially of young and inexperienced, or ill or vulnerable staff.

When does so-called firm management become harassment and unfair treatment? When anyone not caught up in it would say that the methods used are unjust and also logically unlikely to achieve the stated aims. Humiliation and intimidation is unlikely to result in sustained or increased productivity. And if *you* think otherwise and *they* sue—not in the specialist tribunals, with their statutory limits, but in the real courts, with real damages, and lawyers who are prepared to wait for their fees until you get your award—well bully for them. ■

**Moira Rayner** is a lawyer and freelance journalist. (Moirarayner@compuserve.com)

## T The great pall of China

TECHNOLOGY IS NEVER SO CONFRONTING as in today's China. You are surrounded by it as soon as you set foot outside Capital Airport in Beijing, from the moment you narrowly avoid being run down by the irrepressible traffic. There it all is—cars, tollways, mobile phones, billboards, high-rise buildings, computer stores, communications towers.

And all of it is in-your-face: the pace of development—cranes crowding the skyline atop gargantuan building developments—or the constant juxtaposition of old and new—pedal carts jousting with the latest German cars in the traffic—and the crazy mix of advertising hoardings with those displaying political slogans.

Modern technology is the symbol of the new China—a China prepared to embrace Western technology, trade and business ideas to improve its standard of living, but only on its own terms, without importing Western political ideology, or so it claims.

That's as may be, but one thing is certain. In its rush to modernity, China has managed to introduce 'on a grand scale' many of the problems that go hand in glove with Western technology—traffic jams, smog, noise, nests of cables, AIDS, couch potatoes, and less than edifying information on television and the internet.

During my visit, the number one topic of conversation in Beijing was the air pollution, and the appalling traffic that caused it. Everyone commented on it. No wonder. The sun broke through for the first time after five days, when an overnight breeze finally blew away the accumulation of smog. The traffic moves like molasses around the crowded streets, sometimes faster, sometimes slower, sometimes not at all, but almost never freely. A five-kilometre taxi ride is a major expedition.

Yet, as recently as five years ago there was no traffic to speak of. Only government and army vehicles and taxis cruised the wide boulevards of Beijing. Now, as soon as a new road is built, it rapidly becomes choked with the private cars that have poured on to the thoroughfares of the capital, pushing the once-supreme bicycle into the service roads and back lanes.

It is difficult to know what the Government can do. One suspects any real solutions have to start with better subway systems, and restrictions on car usage. But more than anything else, ownership of a car represents growing affluence in China. Just as in the West, it is the tangible marker of individual economic prosperity and independence, it is something to which to aspire. But if all of Beijing's seven million residents owned cars ...

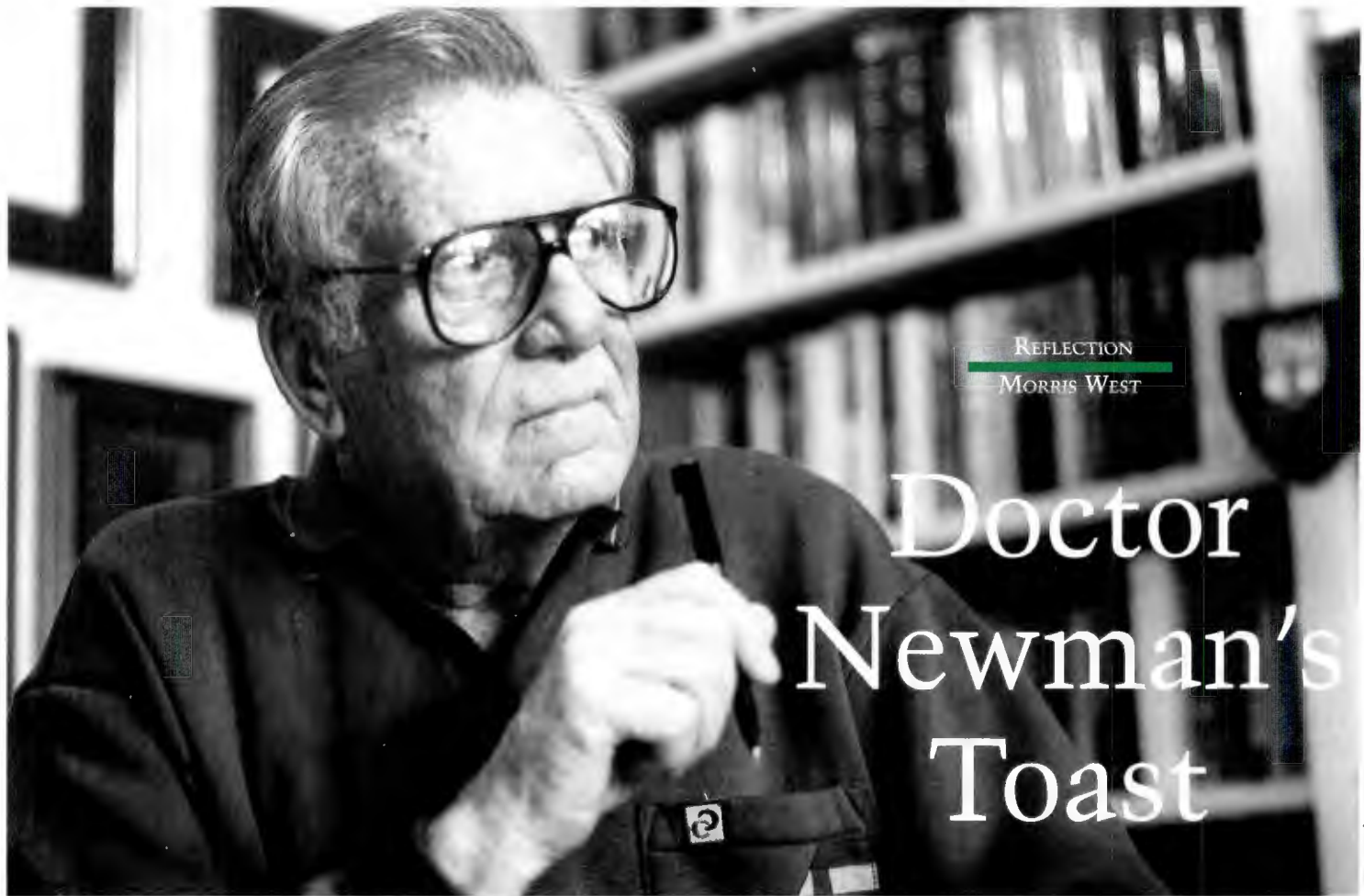
Things are a little better in Shanghai, where they have built a network of elevated freeways to take pressure off the ground-based road system, and the traffic is consequently better organised. A similar scheme has been proposed for Beijing. But these strategies will not solve the problem, they will only buy time—like Melbourne's City Link project.

Then there's the internet and the World Wide Web. China does not have to be convinced of their usefulness and power. Computers stand behind much of the country's speed-of-light development. Shanghai, for instance, is moving rapidly towards a fully functional electronic commerce system.

But, as many editorials, commentaries and articles attest, China is bothered by the quality of information, and the prospect of unfettered access to pornography and formally restricted information. Yet it also recognises that the internet provides it with almost boundless economic opportunities, and a way to take its society from the past into the future while leapfrogging the present.

China's efforts and difficulties in coming to terms with modern technology are so apparent that Westerners often view them with a patronising smugness. But the same problems are simply buried below the surface in the 'sophisticated' West: it hasn't solved them either. At least in China, the fine line between the promise and the perils of modern technology is obvious to all. ■

**Tim Thwaites** is a freelance science writer.



Daniel Leser

*On 15 November, **Morris West** gave the following lecture at the Australian Catholic University, Sydney.*

*The University site was once the administrative headquarters and the training ground for the Congregation of the Christian Brothers of Ireland. Morris West was once a member of that Congregation.*

*This was his first return in 58 years.*

**O**N 20TH DECEMBER 1929, as a boy of 13-and-a-half, I came into this place to begin my training as a Christian Brother. Eleven years later in December 1940, I left this same place where I had been teaching other young aspirants to the Congregation. The records show that I left voluntarily, declining to renew my vows which would then have been final ones.

In the intervening years I had taught at Lewisham, Hobart, Young, Wagga, Goulburn and finally was posted to the school of the juniorate here in Strathfield.

Some interesting news highlights from both periods: In December 1929 the hit song was 'Tiptoe Through the Tulips'. The news headline was 'Wall Street Lays an Egg'. The Nazis were victorious in municipal elections. Thomas Mann received the Nobel Prize for Literature. The last British troops pulled out of the Rhineland. The best-selling books were T.E. Lawrence's *Revolt in the Desert*, Eric Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*.

In December 1940 Europe was at war. Joseph Kennedy resigned as US Ambassador to Britain. In June that year, Churchill had made his famous speech: '... we shall defend our island whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.' Anthony Eden became Foreign Secretary. F. Scott Fitzgerald died. The hit songs were 'A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square' and 'Whispering Grass'. The Germans fire-bombed the city of London. Walt Disney released *Pinocchio*. Hitchcock produced *Rebecca*. Graham Greene published *The Power and the Glory*. Chips Rafferty starred in *40,000 Horsemen*.



In our lives, cabined and confined within the Congregation and our own classrooms, the impact of these events was strangely muted. We lived, profoundly ignorant and curiously uncaring, in a cocoon of untested beliefs. We juniors were sedulously segregated from any ideas that might be deemed subversive. We were forbidden to read secular newspapers or listen to the radio. The shadow of Pius X and his repressive theologies still lay long and dark over the Church. The Oath against modernism was still imposed upon the priesthood. Surveillance and delation in ecclesiastical institutions were established practices, enshrined in the rules and constitutions. All our information about the current war was heavily tinged with the Irishry of the Congregation itself and many of the senior hierarchy in the Australian church.

I had been restless and dubious for a long time. In a very real sense, Strathfield became for me a final battleground where I had to come to terms with myself, with what the system had made of me and what I was going to make of my own future. When I finally decided to decline any further commitment, I knew that, while I was renouncing a few close friendships, I was also the subject of clearly expressed social disapproval. I was the one who had put his hand to the plough and looked back. The farewells were brief and cool. When I walked out the gate, my sole possessions were two changes of clothing and £40 given to me out of the charity of the Congregation.

I HAVE WRITTEN IN MANY PASSAGES and in diverse forms the painful experience of self-discovery—of the solitude of intimate personal decision. I have written of the illusion of dependence and separateness in which, according to the manner of the time, we were educated. I was a man with a past he could not share—like the man in the fairy tale who lost his shadow. I felt—and the memory is very vivid—like one standing alone in the dark with no defender and no understanding.

I survived it, as people survive who cannot read or write, by concealing my ignorance. I was, I realise now, emotionally shattered, yet I could not afford the luxury of regrets. I had to move forward. But first I had to acquire some elementary knowledge about tribal life—about the simplest commerce of men and women, about how to get a job and earn a living, about my own family who, after ten years of separation and sedulous conditioning by my mentors, were virtual strangers to me. I taught briefly in a country school in my home state. Then I enlisted in the army. Very soon after—much too soon—I married. Then, I was promoted and sent to Darwin, en route, I thought, to join an independent company on the island of Ambon. Instead, just after the bombing of Darwin, I was posted there as cipher officer, the beginning of another three years' separation and re-education.

It is no part of my intention to treat you to an autobiography. I have brought you to the point where I can most fittingly introduce the substance of this discourse:

These revisions in my life required a radical recension of the simplistic moral theology which was the currency of our teaching and learning. Try, if you can, to consider how radical and how personal that reconsideration had to be.

{I} Thou shalt not kill. Simple, final, definitive. To use a phrase currently much used in Roman communication: To kill another human being is intrinsically evil.

Suddenly, I was being trained to kill, by bullet and bayonet, and the lethal blows of unarmed combat, and a garotte of cheese-wire. Now the glosses and qualifications on the commandment became apparent.

'Thou shalt not kill except in a just war.' (And how do you define a just war?)

'Thou shalt not kill except in defence of your own life or another.'

'Thou shalt not kill except in defence of personal or national liberty.'

Which raised, of course, the more fundamental question of good and evil in a universe brought into being by an act of loving creation by God.

The biblical narrative of the Fall wasn't nearly enough to explain a tooth and claw creation. Even for the animals predation was the mechanism of survival.

The question of personal responsibility defined itself more sharply. As a junior officer I was instructed in a series of priorities: Keep the fighting force intact, succour the walking wounded if you can. Leave the dying, if to succour them you have to endanger the survivors ... But what if, knowing they may be butchered, they beg you to kill them? There's no one to ask on a battlefield—and God is not in evidence at that moment.

Even if you got them all out, the field surgeon had to play God instead. He had a similar rule called *triage*: Save those who can fight again. Look after the curable next. Help the hopeless to die

*I am in my 83rd year. I am too old to be tempted by ambition. I have lost all taste for polemic. I look out from my study window on sheltered water and a national forest. I have come to a period of strange calm. I have already had some rehearsals for my possible exit. I would rather it were later than sooner, but I am not afraid of it. In this place at this time, I find myself part of a wonderful harmony between the world which I have been privileged to inhabit and the mystery out of which it was born.*

comfortably. Once again, there was little time for debate on the moral issues involved.

In sexual matters one learned first about the stresses of men deprived of their womenfolk—of womenfolk deprived of their men. As a junior officer, one was involved perforce in the marital lives of one's troops—and their sexual misadventures as well. One learned tolerance and understanding. One hoped that God—strangely silent amid the clamour of war—would be tolerant and understanding, too.

**A**LL THIS WAS 50 YEARS AGO! I rehearse it for one reason: to make you think about the exponential rate of change in that half-century—social change, scientific change, the impact of communication technology—all of it impacting on and around those fragile organisms, men and women, who in evolutionary terms have hardly changed at all.

One of the most important effects of that change is a different view of our individual selves, and of the cosmos which we inhabit, but of which we are also an integral part. In the constant miracle of birth, we humans spring from the earth, under which the primal fires still burn. In the inevitable transmutation of death, we return to earth or fire, but the mystery of our soul's 'becoming', the mystery of what the Latins called the *genius* and the Greeks the *daimon*, still remains. This is the mystery of which St Paul speaks; 'Then we shall know, even as we are known.' Today, I think, we are more conscious that the future is in truth the now.

This, curiously enough, is one of my most poignant and revelatory memories of Rome—the meadow-flowers growing out of the dust of the long-departed. As I walked to the tombs of the ancient Etruscans in the north, I had a vivid perception of the young wheat growing out of the mouths of the dead. It was essentially a perception of continuity, of the truth that no-one falls out of the mesh of creation, no-one falls out of the hand of the living God.

In our affluent west, every event in the planet is enacted in our own living rooms on television—the disasters in China and Bangladesh, the killings in Kosovo, acts of terror in Algeria, murders in Kings Cross, the public follies of those who govern us. Comment is made, judgment is passed before we have had time to absorb the first brute impact. Moral judgments are forced upon us—often with tainted or incomplete evidence. Small wonder then, that the cloud of unknowing often envelops us, and our own judgments are skewed by self-interest or prejudice or partisanship.

Still, it is impossible to escape the burden of personal decision, the act of choice of premises presented to us in moments of crisis. So, let us be honest about this. There is no system of moralities so clear, so detailed that it can be fitted like a grid or template over every conceivable human situation.

Our primal interest is to survive. It is only later that we count the cost of survival, and the damage our decisions may have caused to ourselves and others. It is for this reason, I believe, that many good Christian folk find themselves alienated from the visible institution of the Church, which almost inevitably in today's world has evolved into a highly centralised, imperial institution whose edicts emanate from Rome, whose controls are administered by a central bureaucracy and whose language has become more and more juridical and less intelligible to the ears and the understanding of ordinary men and women. The writs of the Vatican run over the frontiers of the Christian world, but with a shortage of leaders and pastors, who is to make them intelligible and relevant to ordinary folk? Who is to infuse them with the love and compassion which they need to become efficacious in our lives? Who is to offer the forgiveness and reconciliation, seventy times seven, which we all need, for sheer survival and the ultimate salvation of the good in us?

There are still too many open questions closed to debate by Roman fiat. There are still too many judgments made from far away. There is still too little understanding that for each individual salvation has to be accomplished in the here and the now—as they say at marine auctions, 'The vessel is for sale as is and where is.' The barque of Peter is no exception.

Now, lest it be thought that I am nursing some private grievance, rehearsing old wrongs in a new age, let me quote the text of a letter which was sent from the National Conference of Priests of England and Wales on 10 September to a Symposium of European Priests meeting in Strasbourg, France, 21–28 September. This text was published in the *National Catholic Reporter* of the United States, 25 September 1998:

We, the National Conference of Priests, representing the priests of England and Wales, send greetings from our 1998 meeting in Birmingham to our brother priests in Europe, and we would like to share with

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you a concern that may find echoes in your own pastoral experience.

As priests committed to pastoral care in dioceses and parishes, we find ourselves naturally in the vanguard of the church's mission. Our ordained ministry is increasingly focused on discovering and developing the gifts of a parish people, many of whom are now sharing a range of formal ministries within the church, as well as exercising their priesthood in the world at large.

We find that there is a growing anxiety among them, which we also share, about the increasingly restrictive and sanction-based directives that come from the Holy See and the Roman curia. Recent attempts to foreclose on some theological discussions, which are at present unresolved, alarm us and are even a cause of scandal. Efforts to silence and even to outlaw discussion are proving grave impediments to people accepting the credibility of the church as institution. We are acutely aware of the way in which the church's teaching, for instance, on the right to religious freedom and on the values of ecumenism have radically developed over the last century. These developments frequently come about after the conscience of many of the people of God had rejected the older view. The church's traditional teachings often need new forms of expression and fresh applications to the varied problems of our time.

In England and Wales we were greatly encouraged by our bishops' recognition (especially as found in their *Meditation on a Jubilee Church* in September 1995) of the actual frailty of our communion. They conceded that in the church 'there are people who feel angry or hurt or excluded. We value their saying that we need to become a church more conscious of our own need for repentance, not least because we find ourselves sometimes excluding people whom Christ may well have invited into his company', and we were especially impressed by the humility with which they recognized the Lord's call to follow him joyfully along a path that is not always clear to us.

In the light of such a reflective leadership by our bishops, many of our lay people are totally puzzled by the attitude of fear that seems to underlie certain statements from Rome. Enlightened by the Holy Spirit in their baptism and confirmation, they realise that they are called directly to the work of the church's mission and would like their insights on problematic issues to be taken into full account.

We have great confidence in the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit among us and the whole church. We are ready to face all kinds of uncertainties and the possibility of mistakes as we move forward in a fast changing and confusing world. People no longer expect simply authoritative decisions from a church leadership that does not appear to take their understanding into account.

It is possible that a more extended voice from the priests of Europe may encourage change wherever this is necessary for the good of the church.

**T**HAT TEXT NEEDS NO comment from me. *Res ipsa loquitur*. However, I have one more comment to add. This time it is very personal.

It is all too easy for clerics in government to invent heresies. You take any adjective—modern, rational, relative—put 'ism' on the end of it and you have a catch-all noun: 'modernism', 'rationalism', 'relativism'. You don't have to define the nouns too rigorously, but they make marvellous epithets for denunciation even of trends, tendencies and shades of opinion.

They are used too often as labels in a dangerous game, a politico-religious game of dividing, far in advance of Judgment Day, the sheep from the goats—the orthodox from the unorthodox. Their intent would appear to be to protect the purity of doctrines; instead they ruin careers, they divide the Church, they erode the foundation upon which the Christian community needs to be built. 'The community of the Spirit in the Bond of faith'—and what is faith but an acceptance to live with mystery?

I believe that we have made, and continue to make, our greatest mistakes when we have insisted on confining the essential mystery to verbal definition and juridical interpretation. If you push this too far, you end by reducing the sacraments to magical ritual and credal affirmations to sterile formulae. We make a cage of words and shove God inside like a cricket in a Chinese cage who sings a captive song to comfort us at night. To live in mystery means sometimes to live in fear and uncertainty, but it means also to live in awe and wonderment and hope for the restoration of all things in Christ.

I am in my 83rd year. I am too old to be tempted by ambition. I have lost all taste for polemic. I look out from my study window on sheltered water and a national forest. I have come to a period

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of strange calm. I have already had some rehearsals for my possible exit. I would rather it were later than sooner, but I am not afraid of it. In this place at this time, I find myself part of a wonderful harmony between the world which I have been privileged to inhabit and the mystery out of which it was born.

I understand now what Teilhard de Chardin was trying to express in his *Phenomenon of Man*. I understand the meaning of sacrament—the outward sign of an invisible gift. I know myself to be an element in the great Sacrament of creation of which the sacraments of the church are symbols and adumbrations: the sacrament of bread and wine and their mysterious transmutation; the sacrament of reconciliation, because without reconciliation between us all we are condemned to destroy each other; the sacrament of water in baptism, which is a symbol of new beginnings, and of a salvific intervention in a feral world. In the light of this intervention every day becomes a newness, every day offers a new hope.

The understanding we have to arrive at is that under the diversity of creation, there is a oneness. Under the diversities by which we represent and interpret the Creator, there is also a oneness. Under the formulae, always incomplete, often confused and contradictory, by which we try vainly to describe the Godhead, there is also a great simplicity. The perception of that simplicity is one of the gifts that age delivers.

Now perhaps you will understand why I chose the title for this lecture. This is the real meaning of private conscience: the judgment which no-one else can deliver but which we make with experience and goodwill. It is the judgment which we make not always with certainty but certainly with peace of heart.

This is the meaning of my text: 'Doctor Newman's Toast'. It comes from a letter which John Henry Newman, later Cardinal Newman, addressed to 'His Grace the Duke of Norfolk on the occasion of Mr Gladstone's Recent Expostulation'. I quote the eminent Doctor Newman:

Certainly, if I am obliged to bring religion into after-dinner toasts, (which indeed does not seem quite the thing) I shall drink,—to the Pope, if you please,—still, to Conscience first, and to the Pope afterwards. ■

**Morris West's** most recent book is *Eminence*.

## AUSTRALIAN BOOK REVIEW

### in December/January:

Geoffrey Bolton reviews the  
*Oxford Companion to Australian History*

Sasha Soldatow on Robert Haupt's  
*Last Boat to Astrakhan*

Sally Morrison reviews  
a biography of Clunies Ross

Peter Steele reviews Jamie Grant's  
*Relativity and Other Poems*

Jenny Pausacker on John Marsden's  
*The Night is for Hunting*

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# Contesting welfare

*As if there weren't enough controversy about competition and privatisation policies and the sense of powerlessness felt by ordinary Australians, market models are now being applied to community and welfare services.*

**T**HE VICTORIAN Government intends to make competitive tendering obligatory for all its youth and family services contracts from mid-1999 on. There is, however, substantial and growing opposition to this reconstruction of community services. It may be designed to strengthen the community, but it has the potential to destroy it.

When the Consumer Law Centre in Victoria recently hosted a forum on the impact of competition policy on human services, an audience of 50 or 60 was anticipated. Over 300 turned up. They were clearly not in favour of what was being planned in Victoria.

Those present in Melbourne were not alone in questioning the application of untested theory to the sensitive area of community services. A month earlier in Canberra, on 29 June 1998, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs tabled *What Price Competition?*, a report on the effects of National Competition Policy on welfare and community services in Australia. The report noted both the absence of any detailed examination of competitive tendering for welfare services and the need for 'empirical

studies' before any firm judgments could be made. While it washed its hands of a decisive judgment, the bipartisan committee recommended that 'a contestability continuum for welfare services' should be introduced—meaning that the measurement of 'outputs' for the 'customers' of the agencies should not always be required either in tendering or reporting—and that 'further development of competitive tendering processes' in welfare should not proceed until such an approach is established. Unfortunately this advice is not likely to be heeded in Victoria.

Why is there a move to competitive tendering? It reflects not only changes in governments' understandings of their role in the community, but also major changes in governments' welfare funding.

In 1995–96, governments in Australia contributed \$5.8 billion to welfare, while clients contributed \$2.2 billion, and the non-government agencies \$0.9 billion, plus \$0.1 billion in unpaid volunteer work and unfunded community infrastructures. The major part of all funding is thus today provided by governments. This was not the case even 20 years ago. Non-government

organisations, however, continue to be the chief providers of welfare services. In 1994–95 some 11,000 organisations delivered \$4.9 billion worth of services to the community, while governments provided around \$3.1 billion worth of services.

Because government spending has increased at a rate of over 7 per cent per year from 1989–90 to 1995–96, and also because traditional community and church groups have declined in numbers and status, the application of national competition policy to welfare has been seen as a way of improving existing services and restraining expanding costs. Competition policy is only a means to an end—the delivery of better services. Most agencies, however, regard the imposition of competitive tendering as, at best, ill-conceived and, at worst, counter-productive. Governments, they argue, set too much of the agenda and focus too much on costs; agencies, on the other hand, have to spend too much on tendering and reporting and must abandon interagency collaboration; and finally, those most in need receive less help.

There is a fear that the Victorian Government will soon do to welfare what it

has done to gas supplies: one day a Royal Commission will investigate an underfunded agency because of some crisis, and the Government will wring its hands and place the blame on the agency. The crisis, however, may well have occurred because of underfunding or the fragmentation of continuity in care. Market and business principles cannot be simplistically applied to non-profit organisations which deal with people rather than with commodities, and which operate in an environment where the usual definitions of customer, purchaser and provider do not apply.

The disenchantment of the rural sector in Australia offers a clear example of the risks inherent in simplistic application of competition policies. Ron Boswell, National Party Senate Leader, thus recently observed that the success of the One Nation Party can be attributed to the gutting of the rural community: 'the Hilmer competition policy acts like a giant vacuum cleaner sucking people out of the bush and putting them on the shores in the seaboard'.

The welfare sector's opposition to competition policy does not mean they are not committed to finding better ways of caring for the community. The sector does not want to go back to the past, nor is it inflexible. All agencies support greater effectiveness and more collaboration, but none can see how competition based on contestability alone, that is, on empirical measurement, can take into account the intangibles of human need and community values. All would want to support accountability—recognising that agencies, like governments, must be responsible in their use of public moneys—but many would question the appeal to contestability.

Why is it that those advocating the application of competition policies to the welfare sector are unable to hear the arguments against their campaign?

I would argue that the clash between advocates and opponents is a clash between two world views, one seeking efficiency and order, the other defending complexity and community. One could be described as atomist, individualistic, analytic, materialist, controlled; the other, by contrast, as organic, holist, spiritual, vulnerable. No wonder that each has difficulty listening to the other: the two speak different languages. To understand

these divergent outlooks, then, it is necessary to examine more closely their origin and nature.

**I**N THE EARLY 1990s the introduction of greater competitiveness was adopted as a key strategy for improving the Australian economy. In 1991, three modern musketeers—Hawke, Keating and Button—produced their blueprint, *Building a Competitive Australia*. In the following year their Government established the Independent Committee of Inquiry on National Competition Policy. This Committee's 1993 publication, known as 'The Hilmer Report', laid the foundations for the National Competition Principles Agreement unanimously accepted at the Council of Australian Governments



meeting in 1995. Federal Parliament then passed the *Competition Policy Reform Act 1995*, which established both the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission and the National Competition Council.

The founders of competition policy had their eye on business and industry, not on welfare. That particular stable door, however, was soon opened. In December 1993, Commonwealth Treasury officials asked the Industry Commission to enquire into the efficiency and funding of charitable organisations and welfare services in Australia, specifically 'with regard to the established economic objectives' of governments. The Commission's final report, *Charitable Organisations in Australia*, was published in June 1995. The Commission held that any government funding in the welfare sector should be based on 'testable defined outputs', on the establishment of 'benchmark standards' of service, and through the 'monitoring of performance'.

The Report recommended that tender processes should be 'open, transparent, and

contestable'. When it came to discuss competitive tendering, however, it noted that in some cases 'it is difficult to make the trade-off between price and quality' and that 'specific safeguards will always need to be taken into account with a price-competitive approach to tendering'. After its own appointed consultants failed to establish benchmarking standards in three different areas of welfare services, the Commission acknowledged the complexity, and perhaps impossibility, of such a task. In this it echoed the Hilmer Report, which had noted that there are situations in which competition either fails to achieve efficiency or conflicts with other social objectives.

The Industry Commission's 1996 *Report on Competitive Tendering and Contracting by Public Sector Agencies* also took care to note that it might be difficult to measure and monitor performance for some services 'particularly where the service provider must exercise discretion on the amount and mix of services to be provided to clients—for example, people with multiple disabilities'. It seems from these reports that allowances were to be made in the application of national competition policies to the welfare sector.

In 1996, however, the Productivity Commission produced its *Stocktake on Progress in Microeconomic Reforms* and recommended that community services could be improved by, among other things, competition in service delivery and the effective monitoring of performance. Despite the Industry Commission's *Charitable Organisations* report, then, the Productivity Commission brushed aside the difficulties entailed in measuring outcomes in human services. In Victoria, the debate became not just one about competition in service delivery, but one about competition in tendering, that is, competition for the right to deliver services.

There is one obvious reason for the enthusiastic support of competition policy. As part of the 1995 agreements, the Commonwealth had agreed to pay the States and Territories some \$16 billion over the period to 2005, provided they make satisfactory progress on implementing National Competition Policy reform. Victoria has been particularly energetic in this area and, as a consequence, well-compensated for its efforts: in March 1998 Victorian Treasury officials reported the State to be gaining rewards of at least \$100 million a week as a consequence of the State's compliance with National Competition Policy.

The money factor should not play a major role. The National Competition Council, in *Considering the Public Interest under the National Competition Policy*, has taken pains to enunciate the fundamental principal that governments have social as well as economic responsibilities. It acknowledged that 'there might be cases, for example, where it is in the public interest to place restrictions on competition to achieve policy objectives relating to ... community service obligations.' Similarly, the Trade Practices Act—the single guide to judgments made by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC)—allowed the possibility of 'public benefit' to outweigh the strict implementation of open competition.

The horse, however, bolted. In December 1996, the recently appointed director of Victoria's Division of Youth and Family Services, Yehudi Blacher, announced a restructuring of his division based on the State Government's key reform concepts of contestability and choice, competitive tendering, outsourcing, funder-provider split, unit costing, and output- and outcome-based funding. He noted that the new structure would do away with all existing funding arrangements and would 'clearly specify what it is we wish to purchase'.

The Division detailed these changes in a 1997 document, *The Redevelopment of Victoria's Youth and Family Services: Strategic Directions*, which imposed both a broad outline and a specific strategy for the future framework of all child, youth, and family services in Victoria. It was written without any formal consultation either with the agencies which actually deliver the services or with the peak industry bodies.

The *Strategic Directions* document announced that the State would 'purchase' services from agencies, who would periodically tender, on the basis of government-specified criteria, for funds to provide such services. Such total control amounted to a guaranteed monopoly, something rarely conducive to performance. The performance of the agencies, nonetheless, was to be 'contestable': their effectiveness, that is, would be measured through specified measurable 'outputs' and 'outcomes' for the 'customers' of the agencies. The intended result of competitive tendering would thus be the efficient reconfiguration of services so as to provide better access to the appropriate service in areas of greatest need for less cost.

Blacher was aware of the opposition the new policy was likely to encounter. When

the *Strategic Directions* document was ready for publication, he delivered a paper entitled 'Nine Misconceptions about Competitive Tendering'. He agreed with his critics that the new policy would result in the closure of smaller agencies; he agreed that in the end the market would be allowed to determine the price it would pay for welfare services, as if human beings have a finite value; he agreed that it remained to be seen whether or not the planning changes would result in an improved matching of



client needs and available funds. And, curiously, he enthusiastically appealed to greater 'collaboration' three times in three consecutive paragraphs, suggesting that he believed that competition and collaboration were commensurate concepts.

The desire for better service to clients is admirable. The appeals for greater partnership and collaboration are to be applauded. Competitive tendering, however, cannot be an essential ingredient of reform. The Division of Youth and Family Services is only one division in Victorian Human Services, and it already goes further than other divisions in its pursuit of the reform agenda. Its sibling Division of Aged, Community and Mental Health, for example, recently issued a more modest reform proposal in a noticeably more consultative manner. True, focus is on purchase of services, accountability, and better outcomes for clients, but the means to this is through collaboration rather than competitive tendering.

**A**CADEMIC RESEARCH units and community-based agencies both oppose the imposition of competitive tendering. This does not mean that these groups are opposed to better co-ordination of services or to better service for those in most need. The practitioners know, however, that the world of welfare is unpredictable, personal, and

not easily constrained into routines.

In 1996, researchers from six Australian universities produced *Contracting for Care*, a review of federal and state programs which indicated flaws in both the philosophy and practice of government policies in the welfare sector. While the review saw contracting out of community services as an appropriate way for governments to act, it judged that the application of a competitive model to such processes produced 'disastrous results'. In the same year, Paul Murfitt, from the Victoria University of Technology, argued that human services are too complex to be contracted out on the basis of competitive tenders, referring to research based on 240 case studies. There is evidence from Great Britain, Canada and New Zealand of the failure of even moderate applications of competitive policies to the welfare sector.

A 1997 report from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, on the impact of compulsory competitive tendering on aged and disability service users, showed that in all cases the quality of service was seen as dependent on the individual worker providing the service, and hence continuity was highly valued. Users saw competitive tendering as affecting the quality of services, and most were afraid, or unable, to give appropriate feedback. Further, families were bearing an increased burden and, in particular, women were forced to leave employment or study to fill gaps when community services were withdrawn.

1998 research from the Victoria University of Technology reported that the emphasis on cost-cutting and outputs produced more problems than benefits: the improvement in professionalism was outweighed by greater pressure and friction; the specification of services produced more gaps in the system; the scramble for money resulted in inappropriate tendering; and uncertainty about the long-term future of programs made planning precarious.

Peak bodies were equally sceptical. In November 1996, the Australian Catholic Social Welfare Commission published *Competitive Care: Understanding the Implications of National Competition Policy and the COAG Agenda for the Community Services Sector*. The Commission welcomed the possibility of developing better services, but it insisted that any notions of effectiveness must first factor in

the imperative to attend to those in greatest need, particularly those least likely to offer 'successful' outputs. It thus highlighted the problem of measuring outputs which have to do with compassion and advocacy.

A year later the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) and the state and territory Councils of Social Service produced a more trenchant critique in *Keeping Sight of the Goal: The Limits of Contracts and Competition in Community Service*. ACOSS argued that, while the contracting out of welfare services was not new, the application of 'market' approaches was both new and worrying, because human services were not just another business. ACOSS cited international experience and considerable research to support its case. Competitive funding would, among other things, eventually lead to underfunded services, tight service specifications would result in the agencies becoming puppets of government, and the planned competitive system would therefore end up with a single-service profile.

Responses from the various agencies involved in youth and family services in Victoria were equally negative. In March 1998, the Victorian People Together Project organised a public hearing into competitive

tendering in human services. Thirty-five agencies presented submissions. While most acknowledged the desirability of reform, there was consensus that, in human services, competitive tendering would undermine rather than improve performance. People in need, moreover, cannot be treated as measurable commodities, nor can patiently developed community support networks survive in a climate of imposed competition.

MacKillop Family Services, the second largest provider of child and family services in Victoria and a not-for-profit organisation, submitted a case in point to the public hearing. Under the new *Strategic Directions* policy, 80 per cent of its services would be put out to tender in an environment in which it is recognised that tender documents are inadequate, that departmental requirements for assessment vary, that there is inadequate post-tender feedback, and in which the complex nature of society and services requires openness and co-operation rather than secrecy and competition. The agencies which joined to form MacKillop arose out of a particular Christian tradition and philosophy and have developed a community of volunteers and supporters well over 100 years old. Whether or not the new policies

could take such factors into account would depend entirely on the shape of the tender documents, and hence on the experience and background of those who authorised them. And the funder, not the agency, has the monopoly on decision-making.

Government representatives admit that there is a long way to go in refining competitive tendering in the welfare sector. If they will not change their minds, then at the very least they should consider splitting tendering into a two-step process, calling for expressions of interest and then establishing short lists. This would save time, money and effort. Second, while the focus on the client rather than on the service is admirable, if all funding were to be made through the client, then the agencies would be destabilised. The formation of larger organisations can provide better integrated services for many clients, but allowances must still be made for the many small organisations which expertly serve those in a community with unusual or particular needs.

Competitive tendering in welfare creates friction among once co-operative organisations. It threatens continuity of services to clients, and it offers already underpaid workers in the sector little relief. In addition to their case-load they must now give time and energy to both tendering and reporting, with less security of employment between contracts. Rarely can a government policy have received such a poor reception. Why, then, is the policy still being pursued?

**P**ERHAPS THE POLICY is still being pursued because the image of the market place operates in economic ideology as a paradigm, that is, as a complex master-metaphor, or belief system. The primary image of 'market place' contains within it a number of implicit ideas—like wealth, order, profit, tax, vendor, consumer—just as in physics the paradigm of the planetary model of the atom contains implicitly the notion of orbits and spin. Key paradigms offer great explanatory power, are easy to understand, and have an engaging symbolic status. So also, the central notion of 'contestability' includes not only notions of measurement and objectivity, but also of the power and progress of empirical science.

But paradigms can be taken too far. There is an irrational element in a person's commitment to a paradigm, which explains why advocates of an existing paradigm rarely shift ground and adopt a new paradigm. Those who are committed to paradigms are

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rarely persuaded by empirical evidence. Conversion occurs at a much deeper level of psyche. In the end the old guard simply dies out and new paradigms win the day because they attract a younger generation with their novelty, because they answer more questions than the older paradigm, because they incorporate all the truths of the outmoded paradigm, and because they offer greater explanatory power.

It could be argued, of course, that the welfare agencies are the ones resisting change and the ones locked into outdated paradigms, and that the market-place model is the way of the future. There is, however, nothing new about either neo-classical theory of market economies nor classical empirical science. There is considerable evidence, on the other hand, that welfare networks provide a collaborative model quite different from, and preferable to, bureaucratic hierarchies.

The present commitment to competition policy can be seen as a commitment to a paradigm, but not to a new paradigm. The world today must be comprehended in more subtle and complex ways. Enthusiasm for competition policy can thus be seen as an attempt to restore 19th-century liberal individualism in the late 20th century, a flourishing of the mechanical and the masculine in a world already moving into a new age. In this scheme of things, abandoning competition policy is, for its supporters, like abandoning ship.

One's whole world is at stake.

**I**T IS CLEAR, HOWEVER, that competition policy is not the whole world. Competition policy must have its limits in the community, or we would end up with the scenario of couples tendering for children—and, indeed, husbands tendering for wives and wives tendering for husbands—according to contestable measurement scales. The Victorian *Strategic Directions* document seems to agree—'Families are recognised as the primary social unit for the growth and well-being of individuals'—but it is even more emphatic that measurement of outputs of youth and family services is central to the new strategy. Agencies are to be 'held accountable for measurable outcomes and results'. 'Integral to the redevelopment of the service system will be the development of assessment instruments which ensure the delivery of targeted services to identified, eligible members of the defined client group.' Related to this belief in measurement is a strategy of servicing targeted groups on the

basis of assessments made by more generalist services, once again raising the difficult problem of calibrating the quality of human lives.

None of these prescriptions shows any consideration of the basic problem with empiricism, that measurements may 'compare', but they cannot 'comprehend'. The focus on measurement is related to an empiricist ideology which discounts non-physical elements of reality. Measurement can tell the height and weight and speed and temperature, but it cannot tell value.

It is impossible to measure non-empirical outcomes or, in other words, to put a value in dollars on a human life. An excellent 'output', for example, might be the 100 per cent occupancy of a certain number of youth accommodation beds for a year. The fact that a less satisfactory 'output' of a 90 per cent occupancy rate might in fact have better 'outcomes' for the youth concerned—by encouraging some to try alternative accommodation as a transition to independence, or by occasionally keeping a bed free for emergency cases—requires a more subtle system of evaluation.

And there is more to consider. If families are recognised as the primary model for the well-being of individuals, then a complex of unmeasurable values—like commitment, love, loyalty, trust, compassion, hope in the future, forgiveness and acceptance—comes into play. How can one measure success in a family? Is a family which never has a crisis successful? Or is a family which endures crisis after crisis but yet which still holds together more successful? Are families that are competitive and efficient better families than those which work through collaboration and compassion?

Evaluation is thus very different from measurement. Evaluation discerns the less tangible. It requires an 'entering into' or 'passing over' into the unfamiliar and the 'other'. It requires sensitivity more than measurement. It respects narrative as much as fact. Its results are never exact in the same way that the exact sciences operate, but ethics is not an exact science.

One of the flaws in the classical notion of measurement, and its associated notion of objectivity, is that we only measure what we choose to measure, and we only see through our existing theoretical frameworks. We cannot measure things we do not know. For example, when DDT was discovered it was regarded as the solution to all agricultural problems and the harbinger of the green revolution. Why? Because the only outcome that was first measured was the

reduction in numbers of pests. The effect of DDT on wildlife, eco-systems and the food chain was not measured until it was almost too late, because mainstream science was yet to become fully aware of the ecological theories which embrace whole systems.

**T**HERE IS LITTLE evidence for, and much against, the application of competitive tendering in the welfare sector. The current situation is grim, but not without hope. Governments are generally wise enough to acknowledge both economic and social responsibilities. On this point it is appropriate to note the emphasis taken by the Victorian Department of Justice's guide called *Safer Cities and Shires* (1997) which, while appending the vocabulary of performance and measurement, insists on a holistic community approach to safety and crime prevention.

Governments and agencies must work as partners, not as providers and purchasers. The decline of 'big' government is a retreat from responsibility and a victory for those individualists who replace the primacy of the common good in our commonwealth with the letting loose of market forces. The eventual outcome of any government's monopolisation of welfare via competitive tender would, on the other hand, be the realisation that the ideology of the market place cannot be applied indiscriminately in human affairs. Competition cannot create community. As Karl Polanyi demonstrated in his study of the political and economic origins of our time, *The Great Transformation*:

To allow the market mechanism to be the sole director of the fate of human beings and their natural environment, indeed, even of the amount and use of purchasing power, would result in the demolition of society. ■

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# Integrity: the long walk

*The idea of a God who loves unconditionally is more of a challenge to human psychology and Christian theology than the familiar God, the 'maker of all things, judge of all men'. In a series of essays, **Antony Campbell** ponders what might follow if such a radical notion were taken seriously.*



## Foreword & Postscript

**I**N FACING CHRISTIAN FAITH'S CHALLENGE to accept an unconditionally loving God, we can end up facing issues akin to those raised by some of Christianity's sharpest critics. For Albert Camus:

Historic Christianity has only replied to this protest against evil by the Annunciation of the Kingdom and then of Eternal Life—accompanied by a demand for faith. But suffering exhausts hope and faith and then is left alone and unexplained. The toiling masses, worn out with suffering and death, are masses without God. Our place is henceforth at their side, far from teachers, old or new. Historic Christianity postpones, to a point beyond the span of history, the cure of evil and murder which are, nevertheless, experienced within the span of history.' (*The Rebel*, 1951)

The compassion and service of practical Christianity dispute Camus. Both the insistence on the 'kingdom' as a challenge for the present rather than a hope for the end of time, and Vatican II's insistence on breadth of outreach, emphasise a shift in the understanding of what Camus is calling 'historic Christianity'. Any theoretical truth in the charge brought by Camus is challenged by the belief that God is with the toiling masses, being with us all as one who loves, rather than presiding over us all as one who judges.

For Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, within Christianity and within the span of history, the challenge to the human spirit is to commit to the camp of Christ's poor—rather than siding with the powerful and proud—and so to see God in all and to seek God in all. The masses are not without God; God is to be found already with the masses, inviting us to join and take 'our place ... at their side'. For Camus, 'now is born that strange joy which helps one live and die, and which we shall never again renounce to a later time'. For me—and surely, however expressed, for many who have taken their place at the side of those 'worn out with suffering and death'—that 'strange joy' is the absurdity of faith that we are loved by the God who is with us in all of our living, our toil, our suffering, and our dying. The cross, what Paul names as the absurdity of Christ crucified (1 Corinthians 1:23–24), is the symbol of God's commitment to the rebel against all that is oppression and injustice—anywhere.

Classical Christianity is challenged by the prospect of faith in a deeply and unconditionally loving God. It is right to say this here, for these lines are not only a foreword but also a postscript. Originally, I believed the acceptance of a loving God involved a significant but relatively minor shift of attitude. After all, it was on so many people's lips. But the more I worked with it, the more I realised that the acceptance in faith of God's unconditional love was not only hugely significant—it entailed major changes of attitude. Finally, it has come home to me that the major changes of

*The reproduction (above) of Vincent Van Gogh's 'The Road with Poplars', 1885, pencil and ink, has been hanging on the author's study wall for many years.*

attitude required by a commitment in faith to God's unconditional love for us add up to a significant revision of the face of Christian faith.

It is a revision that touches our theological attitude to human life in its beginning, its middle, and its end. Its beginning: for a deeply loving God we can hardly be second-best, so a classical understanding of original sin is in trouble. Its end: a deeply loving God is in love with us as we are, not waiting for what we might become, therefore classical understandings of the kingdom are in trouble. Its middle: if we are what God wants and loves, the understanding of Jesus Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection as redemptive and salvific needs a rethink. That is a lot.

For the middle of life there are further implications, involving a rethinking of attitudes to our life, our world, and our destiny. With a deeply loving God, our life is hardly a time of testing but a time of growing and maturing. With a deeply loving God, our world is hardly a valley of tears in which we, poor banished children of Eve, mourn and weep—to borrow the words of that familiar prayer, the Hail Holy Queen; instead, it is God's beloved creation, crying out to be improved and made just. With a deeply loving God, our destiny hardly lies in the choice of heaven and hell, but perhaps in an eternity of knowing that we are loved and of holding on to our memories in their entirety.

If we go a step further, there are implications for our prayers and our expectations. We seldom plead with those who love us. Should we in prayer plead with the God we believe loves us deeply? Acceptance of a loving God and observation of our world combine to suggest limits on aspects of the exercise of God's power. Are there limits to what we may expect of God and therefore what we might ask of God? The most major shift may be in the images we have of God and of ourselves. How radically is our image of God reshaped if we take seriously belief in God as deeply, passionately, and unconditionally loving us? How radically must we rework our own self-image if we accept ourselves as lovable—as deeply, passionately, and unconditionally loved by God?

The energy for this vision comes out of traditional and orthodox Christian faith. I am a Roman Catholic, and I write out of the faith that is mine; across communities, the shifts needed will vary. I believe the claims made are grounded firmly in the basics of Christian faith. The conviction that underlies this vision is simple and it is sound classical theology: anything we can do, God can do better—especially when it comes to loving and forgiving.

The vision sketched here is a belief that is chosen. It is a matter of bringing elements of faith together in brighter light and sharper focus. It does not make and cannot make a total or exclusive claim on Christian faith. It is a belief available to be chosen within Christian faith; it is one position among others. Such chosen belief is commitment to a point of view, while recognising that it might be wrong (with acknowledgements to John Polkinghorne and ultimately Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 1958).

**T**HE OPTIONS OPEN TO CHRISTIAN FAITH and living are many, but I believe they range around two poles: 1. a commitment to moral behaviour and full human living, because it is right and because it is God's will for us, which we accept and respect—we come to fullness of life with God; 2. a commitment to moral behaviour and full human living, because it is right and because of God's deep love for us, which we accept and return—we come to fullness of life with God.

The difference in words is slight; the difference in life can be very great. From another angle, does our basic attitude emphasise appropriate behaviour as a *condition* for being loved by God or as a *consequence* of being loved by God. What seemed at first to be no big deal turns out to have far-reaching implications. And then, in reflecting on our relationship with God, we must always leave room for mystery. God is not God who does not escape us into mystery.

Faith's challenge goes wider than just to Christian faith. It challenges believers—and we are all of us believers.<sup>1</sup> Atheists believe in a world without God. Theists believe in a world with God. Agnostics believe they cannot know enough to commit themselves. And faith's challenge is not just that—it is also invitation.

Faith in a loving God challenges belief in a world without God. Does atheism offer more meaning? Faith in a loving God challenges belief in a world with God. Do we theists really accept a loving God? Faith in a loving God challenges agnosticism. Does lack of certainty justify lack of commitment? How much certainty do we demand in our lives before we commit ourselves? How long must we be invited?

Faith's challenge is wide. Do I accept God's love—for me? for others? for the wicked? for the world? for ever? The invitation is there.

Many people now talk about a loving God. It is one of the changes to the face of faith in recent times. Listening to what such people say and write, I am not sure that most really accept the loving God they talk about. It is time for the challenge to be faced, for the invitation to be accepted.

*Fear can be more effective than love in getting us moving—at least in the short term. Sheer goodness or the prospect of reward can move us to action, but it has often been judged more immediately effective to wield a big stick. When I was young, we were taught about the difference between a sorrow that was motivated by the fear of hell and a sorrow that was motivated by pure love for God. The 'pure love' was our love for God. We were never invited to take seriously the reality of God's love for us. Not then, not now.*



*There is a lack of integrity in a formulation of faith that proclaims a loving God and then talks or behaves in ways that deny a loving God. All language about God reaches into mystery, but does it have to abandon integrity? That is my struggle. That is what these pages are about.*

## I

### *A God abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness (Exodus 34:6)*

I'M UTTERLY CONVINCED that the best understanding of Judeo-Christian faith has to be centred on God's unconditional love for us.

Plenty of people today talk about a loving God. It's in the Bible. It's in the language of modern spirituality. But discovering that we are passionately loved by God is a long way from being the central experience of many Christians. The words are there, but sometimes the reality isn't.

There are plenty of reasons why it shouldn't be. Fear can be more effective than love in getting us moving—at least in the short term. Sheer goodness or the prospect of reward can move us to action, but it has often been judged more immediately effective to wield a big stick. When I was young, we were taught about the difference between a sorrow that was motivated by the fear of hell and a sorrow that was motivated by pure love for God. The 'pure love' was our love for God. We were never invited to take seriously the reality of God's love for us. Not then, not now.

Over my years as a Roman Catholic born between Vatican I and Vatican II, a Jesuit, a student of theology, and a lover of the Older Testament, this has been uncomfortable, an irritant. More and more, our theology seemed to be selling God short. We talked about a loving God, but so much of what we said and did and prayed reflected other images of God, other ideas about God. I wanted an integrity in my faith where, if I accepted a loving God, I was not at the same time holding on to a whole bunch of things that did not fit with a God who loved. As I probed the theology of a loving God, I tried presenting that theology in standard book form. The result fell between the academic and the popular. I tried presenting a loving God in an exchange of letters. That didn't seem to work. So now I am simply putting on paper the struggle in myself for what I would call the integrity of my faith.

From Christian beginnings in the Newer Testament we have the claim: 'In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us ... We love [God] because he first loved us' (1 John 4:10, 19). There is a traditional hymn that says: 'I love thee, O thou Lord most high, because thou first hast loved me.'<sup>2</sup> I want to explore the possible shape of a vision of Christian faith that takes this love of God for us seriously.

John doesn't mince words about the place of love in our faith: 'There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love' (1 John 4:18). But even here this is about our love for God. What about emphasis on God's love for us? If we take God's love for us seriously and accept it, that ought to be the end of fear. But as I listen and look around me, it's not. Fear and a few other things are still there—often an odd anxiety that shows up as confidence that God will take care of us *because we've paid our dues*. Unlovely and unloving; we fear God won't love us freely. So there's a struggle for integrity.

I'm not sure what triggered this struggle in me. It probably goes back to my earliest years, but I don't have access to it there so I have to start later. I have a vivid memory of listening to a talk in the late '70s. It was during a workshop with an Indian Jesuit, Father Tony de Mello, widely known for his work in spirituality.<sup>3</sup> Tony was sitting on the edge of a table, talking to the group, one leg swinging rhythmically as he spoke: 'You know, I pay Almighty God the compliment of believing that God is at least a little better than I am.'

At the back of the group, I felt a surge of indignation. Why did this learned man—who spoke so eloquently of prayer and of God and who made such eminently sound theological sense—voice such stupid egotistic remarks which could undermine his whole credibility? He continued: 'You know, sometimes I hear people talking about God and I think to myself, if people preached about me half the things they preach about God, I would hide under the bed in shame. I mean you hear people talk about earning God's love and what they would need to do to win God's forgiveness. Nobody earns my love; it is gift. Nobody wins my forgiveness; I give it to them. Is God really so different?'

The fire of my indignation was doused. 'Earning God's love' was a phrase I had heard often enough and it only needed a glimmer of light thrown on it to reveal how inadequate it was. We do not earn love. It is a gift that is given us. I'd had more than enough experience watching people try to earn others' love to know how painfully destructive that was. Why then all the talk in liturgy and spirituality of being made worthy of God's love, of becoming acceptable in God's sight, and so on? What sense did that make if God already loved us?

I remember another experience about ten years later. I had given a couple of talks to a group of theological students in the lead-up to Easter, basically on the place of a loving God in the celebration.

One of the students approached afterwards in the carpark.

'I was fascinated by your talks,' she said. 'Can I ask you just one question?'

'Sure. Go ahead.'

'I'm not certain that I got you right, but were you talking about God as one who loves—as a lover and not as a judge? I have always been brought up to think of God as a judge.'

I was rather taken aback. 'I've never really thought of it in those terms. But yes, if you put it that way, I definitely want to say that God is a lover rather than a judge. Once you use those two terms, surely the primacy has to be given to God as one who loves.'

'That opens up a whole new range of thought for me,' she said. 'I'll have to stew on it for a while.'

'Happy Easter!' I said, and we drove off. I went home pondering the idea of God as one who loves or God as one who judges. Surely the primacy had to be given to God as one who loves. I chewed it over for a very long time; I still do. At one level, it is easy; at another level, it goes very deep. The two terms polarise a lot of religious experience and religious language. One or the other lies behind much of the language and ritual we use in relation to God. Humanly speaking, judging and loving are polar opposites. What about with God?

At some point, I read James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In the context of a final school retreat, Joyce has his hero, Stephen Dedalus, use similarly polarised language: at the instant of death, 'God, who had long been merciful, would then be just.' Together in the retreat-giver's images are God the lover ('He loved you as only a God can love') and God the judge ('God would not be God if He did not punish the transgressor'). I thought to myself: 'That's too easy and it's not fair to God.' In human language, so sudden a switch to the judge inevitably means that we are not taking the lover seriously.

**S**OMETIMES, CERTAINLY, we don't take God's love seriously enough. At a recent liturgical celebration, the auditorium was huge and packed with people. The entry procession took forever to squeeze its way through the crowd, but finally it got to the altar and the presider turned to address the congregation. First, a big sign of the cross and a few words of introduction. Then, to get the liturgy under way, the priest called us to prayer with the words, 'Let us beg for God's mercy.' It was worse than the Roman Missal's bald 'Let us call to mind our sins.' Maybe what followed was not in his script and the long procession to the altar had got him flustered. Anyway, he added, 'Let us beg for God's love.' To my ear, that was worse, much worse. The eucharist is about God's love for us, Christ's life given in love for us. And here we were being invited not just to pray for what God had already given us, but to beg for it. The distance between language and faith jarred. I've heard of begging for mercy; begging for love—never! And anyway, we have it; we are loved. God loves us; that is at the core of our faith.

There is a lack of integrity in a formulation of faith that proclaims a loving God and then talks or behaves in ways that deny a loving God. All language about God reaches into mystery, but does it have to abandon integrity? That is my struggle. That is what these pages are about.

With the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* in 1943, the Roman Catholic church opened its way to a new vision of the possibilities for understanding the word of God in scripture. Today, we have a new vision too of our world and our universe that was unthinkable a few decades ago, with developments in so many areas, from communications and travel to computers and mass media—and above all in physics, politics, and psychology. Our world is radically different from the world of our grandparents—radically different! Now is an appropriate time to look afresh at the vision of our faith and to re-emphasise as the central Christian experience the mystery that we are passionately loved by God. ■

*Next month: Parts II & III—language, priorities, love and fear.*

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1. Joseph Ratzinger quotes a story from Martin Buber to make this point (J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 1969, pp20–21). Ratzinger says, 'Both the believer and unbeliever share ... doubt and belief, if they do not hide away from themselves in the depth of their being.' In my language that makes both believers and unbelievers believers.

2. It is from Fr Edward Caswell, CO (1814–78), inspired by the 'Take, Lord, and receive' of Saint Ignatius Loyola. 'Because thou first hast loved me' is not explicit in Ignatius's prayer, but flows from its context.

3. As noted by Dan Madigan (*Eureka Street*, October 1998, p18), de Mello's writings were condemned by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in late August 1998; he was accused of 'an exaggerated apophaticism'. I doubt that this condemnation touches what is quoted here.

*For Camus, 'now is born that strange joy which helps one live and die, and which we shall never again renounce to a later time'.*

*For me ... that 'strange joy' is the absurdity of faith that we are loved by the God who is with us in all of our living, our toil, our suffering, and our dying.*

# Fault lines

*Andrew Riemer and John Wiltshire were both members of the Sydney English Department during the controversial 1960s split. It was a dramatic moment in Australia's cultural history, and its aftershock is still being registered.*

**Sandstone Gothic**, Andrew Riemer, Allen and Unwin, 1998.  
ISBN 1 86448 626 0, RRP \$19.95

TOWARDS THE END of Andrew Riemer's account of his return to Hungary in *The Habsburg Café* (Angus & Robertson, 1993) he finds himself chatting in the interval of the Budapest opera to two elderly ladies. They ask Riemer what it is like being back in Hungary. Before he has time to reply, one of them leans over, and touches his sleeve.

It must be very painful, she says, to have to come face to face with memories, to remember all sorts of things that I had forgotten or hadn't wanted to remember ... The past, she says, with a faint smile of self-consciousness, is another country—she knows it's a banal thing to say, yet it's true.

Riemer's new book, *Sandstone Gothic*, kept me awake at night, revisiting a past I thought I should never have need or occasion to revisit. It is an autobiographical narrative, this time the story of his academic career in Australia, of his 40 years first as a student and then as a teacher in the English Department of the University of Sydney. At its centre is an account of the famous 'split' of the Department in the mid-'60s, when, in the wake of the appointment of Samuel Goldberg from Melbourne to the prestigious Challis Chair of English Literature, furious intellectual and personal animosities led to a divided staff, two rival courses in English Literature, and eventually to Goldberg's resignation from his chair. It is a story that has been told before, for its repercussions are still being felt in Australian intellectual life, but rarely with such a candid and personal inflection. I was there (but on the other side of the eventual divide) during the events Riemer reports with so much anguish and passion. The narrator of *The Habsburg Café* sees with the cold eye of a stranger the self-deceptions

and myths with which his fellow countrymen have plastered over their discomfiting history. But in this new book it is Riemer himself, I fear, who has not yet escaped from that other country of the past.

The first section of *Sandstone Gothic*, called with a nice irony 'Sentimental Education', relates Riemer's academic apprenticeship. The son of Hungarian migrants, with scarcely any formal education before the age of 11, he did well enough at secondary school to embark on a medical degree at the University of Sydney, it being the dream of new migrants, then as now, to see their son in the most respected of the professions. But Riemer failed Medicine twice, and instead transferred to the English Department, where he steadily progressed through to the Honours year. There is no sense in the book that this move from Medicine to English was because he loved any English author, that he had caught fire at any poem, or because he had been inspired by any teacher at school. This is just another job to be undertaken, a move towards a possible career. In fact Riemer makes no bones about calling the lectures he attended in the '50s boring and meretricious, and about ridiculing much of his course.

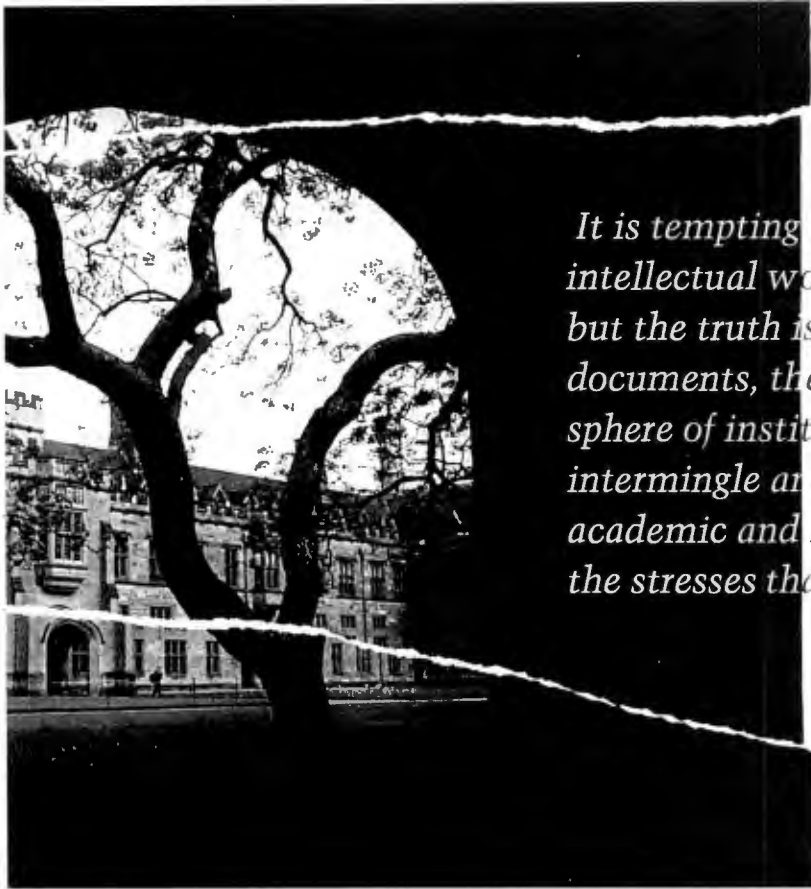
It's clear that he found many of the texts he had to study profoundly alien: they were the documents, after all, of an Anglo-Saxon culture twice removed. But he studied them, he tells us, as part of a project of assimilation, the acquirement of a new identity. He was helped in this by the ethos of the Sydney Department which furthered the idea that literature was an object to be studied, a field for the acquirement of marketable professional competence, just as one might acquire knowledge, say, of law or accounting.



The sandstone pile of the main building of the University of Sydney (to my eyes a squat and ugly slice of Victorian institutional Gothic) comes to symbolise for him the Romantic vision of continuity and tradition that he also associates with his training in this Oxford-inspired version of the English literary heritage.

HEDOLS WELL ENOUGH at Sydney to take up postgraduate research in England. The chapters describing Andrew Riemer's life in London among expatriate Australians and English eccentrics are the best in the book. That acute sensitivity to place, to the aura of sites and buildings, so striking in his earlier work, is present here too, as on his first entry into that vast rotunda, the old British Museum reading room:

My first impression was overwhelming. What I remember most vividly was the sound of the room—not silence, not noise, but something indefinable, haunting and a little menacing too, as befits a holy place. There were strange sounds: odd sighs as books were carefully closed, the soft clang of something coming into contact with wood or metal, the swish of a door, footsteps, indistinct, murmured conversations, a sharp noise here and there as someone dropped something, the rattle of castors sounds of a world where silence was supposed to reign. And yet these sounds were dispersed, floating among their own echoes as they rose to the great dome, falling to the ground again, mingled, otherworldly almost, transformed in their



*It is tempting to pronounce that what should count in the intellectual world is intellectual achievement, nothing else: but the truth is that, as Andrew Riemer's book so thoroughly documents, the intellectual and the academic spheres, the sphere of institutional life, of practical politics ... necessarily intermingle and overlap. This country, with its relatively small academic and intellectual community, is especially prone to the stresses that result.*

resonant voyages around the library. Enveloping them were the curious sounds of spectres, of the unseen but not inaudible workings of the great machine.

This is as evocative as the celebrated accounts of that same reading room in George Gissing's novel of the literary hack's life, *New Grub Street* (1891). Riemer is self-confessedly close to being a hack, as he pursues his laborious, soul-destroying round of research in the library and among the mountains of documents in the Public Record Office. His subject (which he feels more or less tricked into) is the life and work of James Shirley, a Jacobean dramatist known only to posterity for the lines 'the glories of our blood and state / Are shadows, not substantial things.' It's a wonder Riemer doesn't see their relevance to his own predicament: he is pursuing a shadow, working on an author whose derivative plays he despises, part of a culture which he sees both as immensely alluring and as a fraud.

He labours away, knowing that the doctorate he will get at the end of the process is necessary to the career he is building, and in the name of that 'scholarship' he has been taught. At the same time the prime exponents of scholarship, his supervisor, Arthur Brown, whose 'seminars' are held among the beer-stained tables of the Marlborough Arms, and Sam Schoenbaum, the careerist Shakespearean, are depicted, very amusingly, as shiftily, lazy and philistine. They have 'the true scholar's disdain for aesthetic and cultural values'. So Riemer's attitude to the education he has

received and the traditions into which he has been inducted is ambivalent. On one hand he asks, 'Was the world of scholarship all sham?' and fears that what he is doing is 'questionable, or at least trivial and meretricious'. On the other he begins to feel satisfaction in that 'imitation' of a real thesis he is stitching together.

**D**OUBTS AND VELLEITIES, irony and ambiguity soon vanish, though. With the mention of Goldberg a cold wind sweeps through the text, withering away all comic flourishes, shattering all introspection. The second and longer part of the book is called 'Culture and Anarchy' and begins with Riemer's arrival back at Sydney as a newly appointed junior lecturer. Another newcomer is Goldberg, the professor, whose arrival is expected with some anxiety, since he is a foreigner to the traditions of the Department, is believed to be unsympathetic to its Oxford ways and will have great power.

Up to this point *Sandstone Gothic* has been an autobiographical portrait of a literary 'illusionist' ('By the end of the year I had perfected my skills in parody and mimicry sufficiently to walk away with a high distinction ... But I knew in my heart of hearts that my success had been due largely to sleight of hand.') who enters the insulated world of literary scholarship because its very insularity, its conservatism, its conventions, have provided him with some security and coherent identity—a figure for whose psychological needs readers of Riemer's earlier autobiographies can feel sympathy. But the narrative now shifts its ground. Instead of revealing with ironic retrospective insight these facets of the narrator's

personality, it starts to display them. The book now becomes an institutional as well as a personal history.

Riemer has met Goldberg in London. The precursor of several uncomfortable encounters, it is a sticky, unpleasant evening. The situation is awkward, since neither can admit that they know they are to be future colleagues, and Riemer feels that Goldberg is unwarrantably inquisitive about his teachers and peers—even that he is being invited to rat on them. But much more than this is at stake. Riemer has in his coat pocket a copy of the London journal, the *Spectator*, which contains letters attacking the famous literary critic F. R. Leavis, whose Richmond lecture 'Two Cultures' attracted some publicity that year, 1962. He thinks that Goldberg, whose reputation has preceded him, is an acolyte, even a disciple, of Leavis and that this paper, sticking out of his pocket, will be interpreted as a challenge, an unambiguous declaration that he has 'allied himself with the forces of darkness'.

There is some absurdity in this. Leavis' lecture was given on 28 February 1962 (I know: I was there) and was published in the *Spectator* shortly afterwards. Correspondence followed in the next week or so. Riemer and Goldberg can have met at the earliest in November 1962. It is odd to imagine that a copy of the *Spectator*, more than eight months after the event, could possibly have signalled anything to Goldberg, and odder still to imagine that Goldberg might not himself have been critical of Leavis' rhetorical outburst. One witnesses here the first signs of what Riemer himself calls 'paranoia'. Knowing that Goldberg is shortly to arrive, and having time on his hands back in Sydney to prepare for the onslaught, Riemer sets himself to read up about him. He studies Leavis' books as a guide to Goldberg's own attitudes and opinions. (He gives an account of Leavis' views which is reductively *ad hominem*, as

here: 'It all came back, as everything English inevitably did, to class. I was sure that I understood the source of the deep and ugly resentment that disfigured most of Leavis's writings, bubbling up like a noisome eruption in the attack on Snow.' But then many strange readings of Leavis' work were given in the heat of the controversy that was to ensue, and have been since.) The obvious thing to do was to discuss Goldberg's own work, the highly praised study of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, *The Classical Temper*, which he published in 1961, or his shorter book on Joyce which had just come out in 1962. But the awkward truth, of which Riemer was in some way aware, was that Goldberg possessed unimpeachable credentials. In *The English Novel: Select Bibliographical Guides*, published by Oxford, an American authority, A. Walton Litz, was still in 1974, for instance, commending *The Classical Temper* as 'probably the best book yet written on *Ulysses*'.

**I**F GOLDBERG HAD been awarded the Challis Professorship over the local contender, G.A. Wilkes, it was because he was obviously the best literary critic in 00000Australia at the time, and a person of commanding intellectual ability. If Sand-

teaching for the year, a week before term starts. 'Was it proper, someone asked, to make arrangements so late in the piece?'—as well they might.

With Goldberg's arrival, the whole atmosphere darkens. At first deceptively quiet, he soon announces a series of meetings to revise the syllabus. He meets intransigent resistance from the staff, because, in Riemer's own words, its members were preserving their own turf. And, although Riemer says he is sympathetic to the spirit of Goldberg's revisions, he has even more sympathy for his colleagues. He thinks it only natural that the expert on sexual innuendo in Jane Austen 'would resist, of course, any change in emphasis'. What a picture of intellectual life that 'of course' assumes! Little hints like this speak very plainly of the conservatism and sheer anti-intellectuality of the Sydney culture Goldberg had a mandate to reform. Riemer himself admits that teaching a syllabus that the students could actually manage to read might be a good thing.

The old atmosphere of collegiality and 'civilised' values withers in the face of Goldberg's ruthless 'lust for power' (Riemer's phrase). He brings with him a missionary zeal, a passionate belief that the study of literature matters to society and a

whom he depicts with a mixture of gall and fascination.

Maggie was shameless, it seemed to me, in the way she made her contempt for us obvious, or refused to be cowed even when her lack of scholarly attainment was pointed out to her by Thelma's gentle but by no means innocent remark. Nevertheless, the force of her personality made her compelling, even attractive in a peculiar fashion.

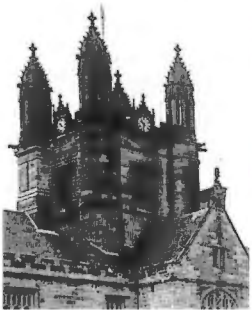
The other staff member is Thelma Herring, presented throughout the narrative as the epitome of unworldly scholarly integrity. Maggie dominates the seminar, employing various arts to demean her colleagues, making Riemer feel not only inadequate but enraged.

The scene is vividly depicted, Maggie curled like an odalisque in her armchair, Andrew condemned like the students to a back seat. Maggie is holding forth about Aeschylus, 'spinning some elaborate theory' about the conflicts of the play being reconciled in the final chorus with which the *Oresteia* concludes. Everything she says depends on that final chorus, which is 'some kind of breakthrough, an indication of the ethical and imaginative greatness Greek civilisation could achieve'. In a brief pause, Herring intervenes for the first and only time. What she says effectively appears to trump Tomlinson's claims and reveal the Leavisite critic as a shameless charlatan. 'She pointed out that, according to the best scholars, the chorus was no part of the original play, but had been added by a Christian redactor ... She read out a few lines of the Greek—which none of us could understand—and commented that the Christian imagery was fully evident there.'

Instead of being ashamed of being caught out, Maggie sails on.

**O**R SO WE ARE ASKED to believe. This passage is a tissue of wishful thinking and retrospective confusions. Maggie Tomlinson was hardly likely to celebrate the final dialogue between Athene and the chorus in the *Eumenides*, for her argument about Greek tragedy turned not upon reconciliation but on conflict. In an article in *The Critical Review* of 1964, the very year Riemer dates his anecdote, she writes that 'The "resolution" reached by the *Eumenides* is then a false resolution and it flaws the tragedy.' This position is the exact opposite of the quite conventional view that Riemer attributes to her. A worse error however is the supposedly clinching point

*The history recounted by Andrew Riemer in the second half of this book then is more than a petty institutional quarrel. It has left deep scars on Australian cultural life.*



stone Gothic is myopic about this, that is quite a different matter from the comic cowardliness of the narrator's earlier persona. Goldberg's accession to the chair is treated as the malicious whim of a faceless university administration. Yet there is no need to mistrust the commonly accepted view that the appointment was made with a mandate for change. The Department of English was widely perceived as moribund and in need of reform. Riemer's own description of its teaching practices in the first part of his book certainly suggests this, and he gives a glimpse of just how slack the organisation of the Department was even just before Goldberg came on the scene. Wilkes, as Professor of Australian Literature, temporarily in charge, allocates the

determination to influence Australian culture at large. Riemer sees this as dangerously akin to religious fervour, with its intolerance of dissenters, its tendency to cast those who failed to share wholeheartedly in its mission as these 'forces of darkness', a notion he repeatedly attributes to Goldberg and his supporters, but more revealing, I think, of his own state of mind.

The horror is intensified, and the humiliation increased, with the arrival of Maggie and Jock Tomlinson, Goldberg's friends from Melbourne. No longer in charge of teaching drama, Andrew Riemer is relegated to being one of three members of staff present at a seminar run by Maggie Tomlinson, a forceful, theatrical figure



made by Herring. There is not even the semblance of a textual crux over this section of Aeschylus' text. Thomas G. Rosenmeyer, for example, in *The Art of Aeschylus* (1982) has a chapter on 'Text and Transmission' in which he concludes that 'with the proper dose of respect for contingencies, Aeschylean tragedy can be discussed with virtually the same optimism that we permit ourselves in talking about Shakespeare's more difficult plays'. Riemer attributes to Herring a notably unscholarly assertion. Nor is quoting passages of classical Greek which none of your listeners can understand an admirable way of making intellectual points.

If Maggie flirted with Andrew Riemer, that may have been because something about him—no doubt his intelligence and wit, but probably more importantly that ambivalence his wit often disguised—suggested he might be an ally. When he calls *Lord Jim*, one of the novels that old Sydney made him teach, 'a suety meditation on personal honour' there is no doubt that Maggie would have agreed with him. In fact one can catch the very accent of her judgments (I remember her speaking of *Great Expectations*) in the comments Riemer makes on so much of the literature he was to undertake to teach for the next 30 years. In other words, there was a side of the young Andrew Riemer that responded to this 'Leavisite' idiom. At one point in the narrative he imagines that Goldberg and his allies would find the work that he had been engaged in a waste of time. 'The trouble was,' he confesses, 'I suspected I more than half agreed with them.'

**T**HIS IS I THINK the hidden narrative of these years: that Andrew Riemer was almost as much drawn to, and impressed by, Tomlinson and Goldberg as he was troubled by them. He could not fail to be struck, I think, by their energy, hard work, devotion and commitment. As the book suggests in its admiring portraits of Germaine Greer and Robert Hughes, a certain dashing personal style and passionate, even febrile intellectual ambition attracted him personally a good deal. But much more was involved than a style, and much more than that idiosyncratic defiance of convention he found admirable in Greer. Goldberg offered a vision of the intellectual life in which the reading and teaching of literature was truly central. Massively confident in his own intelligence, and a powerful teacher, Goldberg presented an incarnation of an intellectual at home with world literature,

and capable of developing a whole school of criticism which would have an important impact on Australian cultural conditions. It was from this that Riemer, throwing in his lot with his old friends and teachers, had perforce to turn his face away.

Is there irony when he compares Sam Goldberg and Maggie Tomlinson to the figures of Jacobean melodrama? Goldberg is a Machiavell, an Iago, Maggie 'Lady Macbeth in a tartan skirt'. Goldberg, manipulative, lacking conscience, probity and principle,

*It was a battle at bottom about what we mean by civilisation. Some people still believe the study of literature has an important social function.*



endlessly waits for the moments when you will reveal yourself and fall into his trap. If Goldberg is the persecutory devil, Wilkes—with his 'mass of golden hair'—is the benign and patient saviour. That scholastic literary culture which the first part of *Sandstone Gothic* had burlesqued has now to become 'truly civilised' and even 'noble'. The world and its inhabitants is split into good and bad, as a defence against intolerable anxiety, the anxiety that would come flooding in if you had to admit that things were not so simple, that maybe those you admired had their weak spots, those you feared had their charms. The famous 'split' that divided the Sydney Department into two has its corollary in Riemer's account.

It is not easy reading a book in which people you knew and admired are so misrepresented, especially when they are now dead, unable to reply. I remember the months that Andrew Riemer describes as filled first with bafflement, then with contempt for the sordid political dealings of 'the other side'. I might match his anecdotes of persecution, of being cornered into making impossible decisions, with tales of my own, though the players would be different. But one must get beyond memory. The case Riemer makes for the party that opposed Sam Goldberg and the Tomlinsons and eventually triumphed is so half-hearted, and his apologia for scholarship so ambiguous that this is hard. If one thinks about the past, though, one must try to get out of the state of mind into which one was plunged by unfolding events, and into which one can so readily descend again. Andrew Riemer recalls these events from his

personal perspective, as I might from mine, but this cannot be the last word. To make a contribution to history, one must try to understand the motives and ideologies of both sides.

**I** AGREE THAT SOME of the ideas Goldberg and the Tomlinsons had in common had a parodic relation to Leavis<sup>1</sup>. Actually, I said as much in a paper I gave in 1964 to that same undergraduate literary society that Riemer compares to the Hitler Youth.

Riemer is right in his suggestion that Goldberg was politically naive and inept, though rather piquing himself on his skill. It is true that he scarcely thought it worthwhile to conceal his contempt for many members of the old Sydney staff. He was partisan, unwise and impatient. It is true also that many of those whom he belittled were men and women of considerable intellectual authority. If they banded together against him, that was not only because they were afraid, rationally or not, for their security, or because they had their eye on the main chance. But dislike of Sam's personal style, even for his person, merged, as it is all too wont to do, into dislike of his intellectual principles, so that one could then take the moral high ground, in defence of civilised liberal education, 'pluralism'—and tolerance.

There was still more to it than this. One night in late 1965 those of us who, with our many reservations, were of Goldberg's party, were called to a meeting at the Tomlinsons' home. There we were suddenly told that Sam would leave for Melbourne before the end of the next year and that the Tomlinsons would follow suit. The rest of us would stay on, but leave too when our contracts expired. In my case, this would mean returning to England, without a job. This came out of the blue. Goldberg was Challis Professor, after all: he had a young, vigorous, and committed staff behind him; he had support from important members of the Faculty. The students were equally committed and enthusiastic, and were likely to flock to our course in preference to our rivals'. I remember this

announcement as a moment of betrayal, inexplicable.

What could be the explanation? In one of the few confidential conversations I had with him—long before the ‘split’ became visible—Sam Goldberg told me he would much have preferred to work, to mount the kind of reformist program he was engaged upon, in Melbourne not Sydney. He was a stranger in Sydney: it was in Melbourne that he had his friends, his intellectual base. So that when he failed to be appointed to the chair of English at Melbourne, he had felt cheated.

When the Melbourne incumbent resigned then after four years, it was likely that the telephone call that came from the Vice-Chancellor (things were done like that in those days) made him an offer that was, in his present circumstances, irresistible. It must have included the promise of jobs for the Tomlinsons, who themselves had never felt comfortable in Sydney. But perhaps pressure, too, was applied from the Sydney side. Could it be that someone, somewhere, hinted that Sam Goldberg’s position as leader of a school of moral criticism might be seriously jeopardised if it were made known how freely he interpreted morality

when it came to relations with female students? Perhaps a combination of the carrot (the Professorship at Melbourne) and the stick (the threat of scandal) worked the trick. At any rate, Goldberg and the Tomlinsons made it known that they would be departing. *Honi Soit*, the student newspaper, ran a cartoon: ‘the sinking ship leaving the rats’.

Giving no explanation of why Goldberg left allows Riemer to represent Wilkes’ victory as a triumph for the forces of light. But the whole history was more complex, and raises more interesting issues than this. We have the professor who proclaims literature’s power to awaken and reshape moral values indulging in relations that even by the standards of the time were inadmissible. But does one’s personal conduct necessarily delegitimize a view of literature that highlights its ethical dimension? And—if pressure was applied—what are we to make of an academy that, while upholding the ideal of civilised tolerance, makes use of innuendo, rumour and scandal to remove an inconveniently powerful intellectual challenge?

**T**HE HISTORY recounted by Andrew Riemer in the second half of this book then is more than a petty institutional quarrel. It has left deep scars on Australian cultural life. One is always meeting people who, as students, felt the chill of Goldberg’s disapproval, and are now in positions of power. They do not forget. Those who were taught by him too, might well have felt angry and disillusioned. They were left to wear the badge of ‘Leavisite’, a term of abuse masquerading as ideological commentary which was deployed frequently in the decades that followed, and which even now—though it is almost emptied of meaning—deforms Australian literary conversation. But it is my impression that those who saw things in this bipolar way, those who ‘won’ (though rewarded, as Riemer notes, with the spoils of speedy academic promotion) found it more difficult to move on intellectually and even psychologically, than those of us, who, ‘losing’, were set free.

I also remember Goldberg saying to me that he had realised early in his career as professor, that if you were to get things done, you had to give up the idea that people should like you. It would be nice if men and women of intellectual power were uniformly charming, but until that day arrives, a true intellectual community would accommodate this fact. It is tempting to pronounce that what should count in the

intellectual world is intellectual achievement, nothing else: but the truth is that, as Andrew Riemer’s book so thoroughly documents, the intellectual and the academic spheres, the sphere of institutional life, of practical politics (and, one might add, of journalism and publishing) necessarily intermingle and overlap. This country, with its relatively small academic and intellectual community, is especially prone to the stresses that result.

These are some of the reasons why the history recounted by Andrew Riemer still matters. It was a battle at bottom about what we mean by civilisation. Some people still believe the study of literature has an important social function. Goldberg, whom Riemer represents as leaving Sydney ‘broken and defeated’, went on to publish several more books, to run an annual interdisciplinary conference, and to co-found the journal *Australian Cultural Studies*. Others take to English as to any other academic pursuit, because they are good at it, and it is an innocent way of making an honest living. In their ideology, notions of ‘scholarship’ and liberalism play an important role. Riemer’s own narrative suggests (at least to people of my persuasion) that that ideal of objectivity and impersonality hides personal passions which would be better if avowed, political positions which would be better openly declared.

At any rate, the subsequent history of English at Sydney rather argues that Goldberg was right. Riemer’s dramatic reincarnation as a writer suggests too that he never really found himself until after his retirement from that complacent institution. Given its commitment to scholarship, and its bias towards Australian literature, it is remarkable that the huge department did nothing to produce scholarly editions of Australian classics. Instead it gave birth to the absurdly superfluous Challis Shakespeare, the achievements of which are boasted of in some of the most unconsciously humorous pages of this book. Little of value or importance to Australian culture was produced by Sydney English over the next 30 years. In the end Andrew Riemer was glad to get out of it. ■

**John Wiltshire** is Reader in the School of English at La Trobe University. The author thanks Terry Collits for his help.

1. For an account of the Australian ‘Leavisites’ which argues that they had little enough in common with F.R. Leavis, see my piece in *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 25, 4, 1996, pp415–420.

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# FAMILY FUN

FAMILIES ARE A MYSTERY, which is a shame because so much about life is a mystery. Families attract in the mind a fine set of related paradoxes: they are profoundly obscure in their deeper workings yet transparently uncomplicated in their diurnal round; they seem universal, yet individual families (even happy ones) are radically different; living in a family involves intimate closeness with people who may yet remain strangers. Parents in particular can be disquieting. For Stringham in *A Dance to the Music of Time*, parents 'are sometimes a bit of a disappointment to their children. They don't fulfil the promise of their early years'. But parents also always have the edge over their children with regard to historical memory: they know about our pasts, but much of theirs is lost in the mists of Timolol. I don't suppose many lugubrious men and women at public bars have ever said 'Families ... can't live with them, can't live without them' but no doubt a few have thought it.

Hence Jennifer Strauss' latest addition to the stable of OUP anthologies of Australian poetry. This series shows how creative editorial decisions can invigorate a seam that might otherwise appear overmined. Strauss, who also edited the popular *The Oxford Book of Australian Love Poems*, has in some ways had the more interesting tasks. Conspectus-style anthologies, no matter how good the editor, tend to look a little similar. Thematic anthologies free the editor up to make new connections, see old poems in new ways, and bring to light lesser-known gems (among those here are excellent poems by Kevin Brophy, John Foulcher, and Warwick Wynne).

Like all good ideas this one seems obvious now it has occurred: almost everyone has first-hand experience of the family, and Australian poetry bursts with poems on the subject. Strauss notes the different poetic attraction of different familial figures. Grandparents are popular, but 'grandchildren are scarce. There are numerous parents, even a few parents-in-law; lots of children but rather fewer spouses and siblings; a sprinkle of uncles and aunts, nieces and nephews; not many cousins' (Strauss has an eye for humour). Her



**Family Ties: Australian Poems of the Family**, Jennifer Strauss (ed.), Oxford University Press Australia, 1998.  
ISBN 0 19 553789 0 (hb), RRP \$29.95

inclusion of David Campbell's classic 'The Australian Dream' (where the Royal Family comes to stay) illustrates a nicely sardonic editorial personality, while hilariously satirising Australian (and English) myths and desires. She includes other poems that are surely classics of the sub-genre, such as Robert Gray's 'Diptych', Ronald McCuaig's 'Au Tombeau de Mon Père' and (inevitably) James McAuley's 'Because'.

But this anthology is strong in its use of lesser-known poems by well-known poets. Among the most impressive here is Judith Wright's brilliant sequence 'For a Pastoral Family'. Part of this sequence's strength lies in the way the mythology of an individual family comments on wider history and mythology. Indeed, a surprising number of poems in this collection (Dorothy Hewett's 'Legend of the Green Country' is another) figure the family's past through the colonial past, with its immensely ambiguous weight. War appears, too, and Mary Gilmore's 'War' should revise our view of how earlier writers treated war. As well as these kinds of connections there are some agreeably quirky ones (like the father-figures Freud and 'père' appearing three times each). And the collection is unabashed about its Australian context, whether through testing Australian moments (Jennifer Harrison's evocation of prawning at night), or sites (John Tranter's ironic take on the backyard). Having said that, though, there is nothing parochial about the collection. Australian families are very much of the world, as painfully seen in Lily

Brett's rendering of last familial moments in Auschwitz ('Children (I)').

Strauss' other great skill is to show us that poems not obviously about the family, are in fact about the family (for example, Kevin Hart's 'The Map'). Indeed, Strauss effortlessly steers between not being too tied to the literal meaning of her theme and not getting too far away from it (of all the poems, only one, Komninos' enjoyable 'It's Great to be Mates with a Koori', seemed to be stretching the theme too much). The new context also gives poems a new resonance. The inclusion of the last part of Slessor's 'Five Visions of Captain Cook' effects something like a feminist revision without altering a word of the text. Amid the variety and the humour strong veins of anger and melancholy pervade the collection. Margaret Bradstock writes that 'The heart's a strange compass, / why do we trust it?' and James McAuley refers to the 'sad geometry of family love'.

Indeed, although Strauss has shown that the colonial poets didn't simply romanticise the family, things do get decidedly bloodier and nastier in the last few decades. This is partly because of the vigorous dramatisation of mytho-historical figures that poets such as Dorothy Porter, Jordie Albiston and John Kinsella have been attracted to. But it's also because of a general frame of mind that is prepared to excavate the myth of family with the sharp tools of personal memory and experience.

Clearly, the collection is a rich one. Much of the richness of the anthology comes through the sometimes painful, sometimes joyous connections that characterise the family: there are poems here by parents for children, children for parents, and so on (with the balance perhaps tipping towards mothers and daughters). *Family Ties* is a fine-looking book, though the small format (presumably for the gift market) means very small margins. And once again the talented Jemal Sharah ends this OUP anthology (she's the Fay Zwicky of chronological selections). And who does she discuss? The not-to-be-forgotten family dog. ■

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# Telling secrets

**The Pines Hold Their Secrets**, Jill Blee, Indra Publishing, 1998.

ISBN 0 9587718 8 X, RRP \$19.95

IT MAY BE STATING the obvious, but all the fiction exploring Australia's convict past has been historical fiction. Marcus Clarke's *His Natural Life* appeared in the 1870s and Price Warung's stories, although based on vivid oral history, were not published until the 1890s. If you read Jill Blee's evocation of Norfolk Island in the late 1830s, *The Pines Hold Their Secrets*, it's clear that the reason for this was more than the low literacy rate among convicts. The experience was so bleak that many people who had been close to it consigned it to inaccessible parts of their memories.

*The Pines Hold Their Secrets* is certainly fiction. To my knowledge, there was never a superintendent on Norfolk Island called Nicholson, the figure who looms over this story. But in the time the book is set, when John Franklin was the governor in Hobart, there was a commandant called Anderson. In *The Fatal Shore*, Robert Hughes remarks that Anderson once gave 1500 lashes before breakfast: 'In his own memoirs, Anderson claimed to have reduced floggings from Morisset's 1,000 sentences a year to a mere 70 or 75. This might have surprised the convicts themselves.'

Hughes is aware that the abuse of power can continue well beyond a term in office: in a world in which the officers were the ones who could write, it could extend into the setting down of the historical record. One of the most striking features of *The Pines Hold Their Secrets* is the way in which it shows other people with access to privilege in the deranged world of Norfolk Island, such as military officers, coping with moral depravity. They find such depravity not so much below them, among the convicts, where it might be expected, but above them, among those who have been supposedly enlightened to lead.

The narrative follows the Cartwright family. Mr Cartwright, the former comptroller in Van Dieman's Land, has been exiled to Norfolk Island after falling from Governor Franklin's favour. His wife is devastated by the loss of social status. One of his daughters, Elise, is more resilient.

On board the ship that takes them to Norfolk Island, she has a brief encounter with a convict called Daniel O'Shaughnessy.

Both Elise and O'Shaughnessy are marginal figures in a world in which everybody wears a uniform of some kind. Yet they come to occupy the moral centre of the narrative. O'Shaughnessy is an Irish political agitator; in a twist reminiscent of



Marcus Clarke, he also happens to be a skilled surgeon. Elise is especially dangerous. She reads. The only worthwhile source of books on the island is the Catholic priest, McCarthy. Through the priest, Elise comes

to appreciate a larger world than one defined by a glory box. For one moment in the story, she crosses the great divide and shares the suffering and indignity of a convict.

Religious leaders play a more significant role in this novel than historians suggest was actually the case. Resident ministers on Norfolk Island were rare, but there are two throughout the period covered by this book. But it would be petty to focus on stray details—*The Pines Hold Their Secrets* is written with energy and conviction. It's compelling stuff.

The book is prefaced by a quotation from William Ullathorne, later an Archbishop, whose outspoken views were one of a number which created pressure for change in the transportation system. Ullathorne got close enough to convicts on Norfolk to catch their argot. He wrote 'in their dialect, evil was literally called good, and good evil—the well-disposed man was branded wicked.' One wonders, of course, about the strange route whereby an argot that Ullathorne found so perverted has now become commonplace in every playground and classroom in the country. But that is another secret. ■

**Michael McGirr** is the consulting editor of *Eureka Street*. Writing as Stan Tony, he is the author of *Unhinged Saints*.

**You'd better not shout, you'd better not cry, you'd better not pout, I'm telling you why. Santa Claus is coming to town.**

SO GOES THE OLD YULETIDE FAVOURITE, a regular feature at *Carols by Candlelight*, happily chirped by lovably overdressed children with precocious smiles. The gist of the song is that, if you're bad, Father Christmas will not bring you any presents. So, you should be good. Similarly, from late October bold children around the world are reminded by their parents to tread carefully because Father Christmas may be watching. Same deal. Good children get presents. Bad children get nothing. The result: a lot of anxious children.

As wise old adults we smile wryly at this seasonal tool of compliance. We are amused that they fall for it, particularly given that the chips with which we are gambling are imaginary ones. What's more, we would never dream of actually delivering on the threat. But the kids don't know that, and anyway, they're too scared to risk it.

Is this a dangerous game? It's easy for me to ask that, I know—I have never had to find a parking spot while armed ice-cream combat breaks out in the back seat, and baby is hanging out the window. But what are we telling children? Don't be good because it's good to be good; be good because you'll get a reward. The more insidious problem is that kids can quickly work out, then exaggerate, the corollary—if I'm bad I get no presents, so I guess that means I'm no longer loveable. And let's face it, kids are never as good as we ask them to be. Kids are just like that, and so are we.

That all stands in marked contrast to the song we should be singing on Christmas Eve. It's not a song about earning rewards, or about making deals or bargaining with Santa; it's not a song about trying to be better than our limited human condition enables us to be. It's a song which reminds us that no matter how good or bad we are, no matter how many times we fight with our sisters, even if we forget to leave out beer and carrots—Jesus will still be born in a stable, and our lives will never be the same.

Doesn't quite have the same ring to it. And besides, the children would never believe us. ■  
**Josh Puls** was once a lawyer and is currently a tutor at Newman College, Melbourne.



# Ted Hughes, 1930–1998

**T**HE DEATH OF TED HUGHES is the death of the beast-master. His poetry made the natural creation contemporary myth. His animals, most famously birds like Crow and Hawk, used human language with the brutal finality of natural religion. He had a shaman's gift for getting close to whatever it is beasts can be. Few of us, even poets, dare go as close as he did. In this Hughes was a gruff Ovid, though he readily kept his life at a distance from the mannered metropolitan centre and close to the wild fields and moors of Yorkshire or Devon. There was his tough centre, and from there he engaged with society, the cultural tradition, whatever happened to him. He will always be famous for his poems and his marriage.

Earlier this year he published *Birthday Letters*, his poetic account of his life with Sylvia Plath. This stirred up the complex energies their story will always thrust at us. His intensely personal poems form a sequence whose impact will take a long time to absorb. Her suicide left Hughes with the burden and advantage of living in the aftermath. Now it is his last testament as well as his 'In Memoriam' for her.

There is a bestiary of animals in this sequence. In 'The 59th Bear'. Hughes gives a lengthy re-enactment of their encounter with a bear in Yellowstone. The touristy homeliness of the previous 58 bears is overthrown by a violent midnight visitor who wrecks their car, until:

The Camp Ranger's car, doing the dawn rounds.  
The bear heard it. And we had the joy—  
Awful incredulity like joy—  
Of hearing his claw-bunches hurry-scuffle  
To the secret side of our tent. He was actually there,  
Hiding beside our tent! His breathing,  
Heavy after the night's gourmandizing,  
Rasped close to the canvas—only inches  
From your face that, big-eyed, stared at me  
Staring at you.

Hughes felt 'a strange pride/ To have been so chosen and ego-raked/ By the deliberations of that beast'. But Plath believed the bear had actually killed a man and, '... last-night's panic double-boosted', she identified with the victim. Years later Hughes realises he 'did not see' what the incident stirred in her: 'I had not understood/ How the death hurtling to and fro/ Inside your head, had to alight somewhere'. Plath was savaged by the bear, the bear.

Indeed, the whole of *Birthday Letters* presents Hughes as the husband who now sees that he unwittingly provoked the bear in her, indeed the bear of beasts, her terrible father, who came out of darkness to fetch her to himself. Plath's payment of the sacrifice of herself is shown in her poems, indeed her

poems are the act of sacrifice. Hughes did not know what to do, though there's a determinism in him that seems to absolve him: if the gods and beasts will come then one can only succumb.

Their first meeting, as 'St Botolph's' suggests, indicated their readiness to cast themselves into the strongest human passions with a readiness to let the patterns of such behaviour play themselves out. He left that encounter with '... the swelling ring-moat of tooth-marks/ That was to brand my face for the next month. / The me beneath it for good.' She bit him; he bit her.

The desire to experience the fullness of life—the forces that impel humans to break boundaries, the consequences that follow—drew Hughes to his translation, *Tales from Ovid*. In 'Callisto and Arcas' Hughes first wins us over to an American Callisto with 'Her ponytail in a white ribbon'. The girl, who soon carries Jupiter's illicit love child, undergoes a terrible transformation at the hands of avenging Juno:

With outstretched arms—those arms the god had  
caressed  
Suddenly bushed thick with black hair,  
Her hands curved into scoops of long talons—

They had become feet. And her mouth  
That Jupiter had kissed in his rapture  
Was fanged jaws, like a torn open wound.

Then to empty her cries of their appeal  
The goddess nipped off her speech. Instead of words  
A shattering snarl burst from her throat, a threat—

Callisto was a bear.

To go with the gods turns humans into beasts. Myths tell the tale, tap the deepest psychic energies, just keep control of their force. Metaphors transform. Life-giving violence in poetry this may be. The myths, like those in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, are warnings too. Beasts and gods are too powerful for mere mortals to meet with. Let alone cast themselves at. If Plath was overwhelmed by the terrible danger that gives her poetry such power, Hughes with his 'strange pride' survived, endured, wrote with reverberating power about it all. His death activates the silence with which the great and terrible stories conclude. It is the beasts that are unforgettable. ■

**Andrew Bullen** sj is rector of Jesuit Theological College, Melbourne.

*Tales from Ovid*, Ted Hughes, Farrar Straus Giroux, New York, 1997.  
*Birthday Letters*, Ted Hughes, Faber and Faber, London, 1998.

# Restive and festive

**T**HE 13TH MELBOURNE International Festival of the Arts began with Artistic Director Sue Natrass ordering darkness and silence to fall on Melbourne's busiest intersection, Flinders and Swanston Streets. On a dry, mild night the citizenry clustered around St Paul's, Young and Jackson's and the bomb site that will soon be Federation Square, waiting to see and hear what would happen.

What they got first was an extraordinary illumination, entitled *Chromolithe*, of that Melbourne icon, the Flinders Street Station—accompanied by the eerie sound of the clapsticks played by an Aborigine high up on the parapet—and then a version of the usual whizz-bangery of an opening display of dance, music and fireworks, but cannily displaced 100 metres north of the usual location.

*Chromolithe* is the work of French visual artist Patrice Warrener. It wraps the façade of the familiar old landmark in an unfamiliar, multi-coloured blanket of laser projections. Viewed vertically, the building resembles a giant stack of liquorice all-sorts; viewed horizontally, via lasers, the different stylistic layers of the building are meticulously isolated. Even the famous clocks are highlighted in pinpoints of indigo. It's kitsch, but it grows on you, forcing you to see the building anew.

The multicultural music and dance show that followed—however familiar the images might have seemed to us—was a carefully contrived preview of the themes of the Festival as a whole. In Natrass' excellent theatre programme, the motifs of displacement, national and personal identity and injustice come together with powerful theatrical force, especially in the unfamiliar surroundings of the high arts precinct south of the Yarra. As with the Flinders Street Station, we are forced to look again and hear these familiar tales afresh.

Andreas Litras' monodrama *Odyssey* (one of two works in the programme dealing with the experience of migration) achieves this superbly. First seen in



Tasmania  
early this year, *Odyssey*

combines two separate journey narratives, each told by a different character but both played by Litras himself. The earthy artisan Karagiosi appears first, preparing the stage and the props for the professional 'Andrea' who is not due on for a moment. Karagiosi is a familiar caricatured figure of fun, seemingly straight out of *Wogs out of Work*; he confides to us that Andrea is going to tell a story about the migration of his parents from Greece and their fish-and-chip shop in Ballarat but dismisses this story as 'no good', launching into a virtuoso one-man retelling of the journey of Odyssea, complete with modern references, mobile phones and the storming of Troy with a horse made of a suitcase, broom and dust-pan brush. Karagiosi's story is told in accented English and the hybrid known as 'Gringlish'.

And what a fine actor he is! With the simplest of staging—three pillars which open out into boxes, some hand props featuring the ubiquitous suitcase of immigration drama, a slide projector and a workman's cap for Karagiosi—Litras transforms effortlessly from character to character and evokes the entire world of his twin journeys. For theatregoers who know the plays of Tes Lyssiotis or Janis Balodis, there is little here that is new. But the simple power of his storytelling—and above all the rich complexity of his narratives—rightly earned him a standing ovation on his opening night.

**B**Y COMPARISON, the IRAA/Canto Coro co-production of *Teatro* (directed by Renato Cuocolo with music and lyrics by Irine Vela) proved a disappointment. Many of the ingredients are there: a multicultural choir is

Above:  
Box the Pony,  
Leah Purcell.  
Photograph by  
Tracey Schramm

rehearsing a new cantata based on Dorothea McKellar's 'I Love a Sunburnt Country' under a testy and patronising Anglo director, but their questioning of the relevance of the material to contemporary Australia soon leads to open revolt among the choir. There are some excellent moments in the conflict that develops and there is some excitement to be had from such a huge number of people on the stage of the Playhouse of the Victorian Arts Centre.

But at the end of the night, the text (for which there is no writer's credit) is thin and confused in its rather tendentious PC thrust. I suspect, too, that it lost something in the venue. A previous collaboration between Cuocolo, Vela and Canto Coro (*Little City*, co-produced in 1996 and 1997 with the Melbourne Workers' Theatre) was vastly more effective than this at least partly because it was in the community venue of the Brunswick Town Hall. *Teatro* thus ends IRAA's otherwise very interesting Exile Trilogy on a flat note.

**N**ATTRASS' ABORIGINAL theatre program, on the whole, had few such problems. It consisted of a new work and two pick-ups from last year's Festival of the Dreaming in Sydney, all three powerful in their ways.

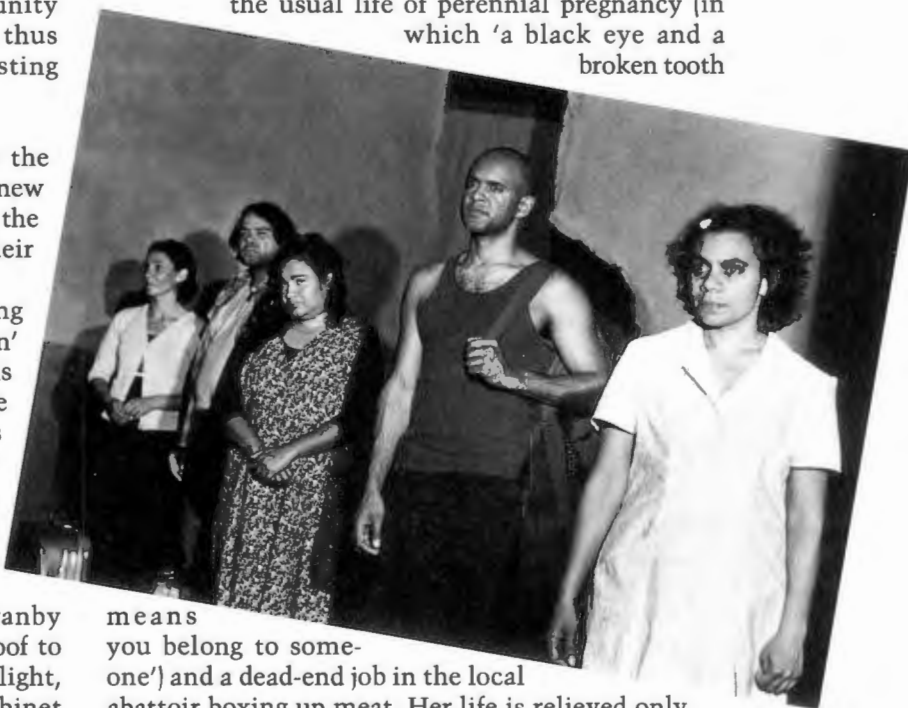
The première is Jane Harrison's harrowing account of five members of the 'stolen generation' of Aboriginal children; called simply *Stolen*, this is a co-production from Playbox Theatre Company and Ilbijerri Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Theatre Co-operative. Five interwoven stories pack enormous punch in a production by Wesley Enoch that has some great *coups de théâtre*, bitter ironies and fine visual images. Richard Roberts' set features five hostel beds in a plain beige room (the Cranby Children's Home) which is rent in two from roof to floor—like a torn photograph. Beyond it we see light, open space and freedom. Centrestage is a cabinet containing the files of the five characters and undelivered correspondence they never got to read.

These are immensely powerful and moving stories and their telling is a damning indictment of injustice done. Nonetheless, I was left with reservations about a script that (despite years of workshopping) comes close to the tub-thumping of old-fashioned Theatre in Education. Of course, as the discourse runs, these stories do need to be told to make us stop and listen again; it's just that I've heard them told better.

Deborah Cheetham's artful solo show *White Baptist Abba Fan* is one which tells it better. This is the story of a baby allegedly abandoned by her mother in a cardboard box; she is brought up by a white Baptist family as 'Debbie Joy Cheetham: adopted Aboriginal' to become a luminary in her local church and devout ABBA fan—before becoming a lesbian opera singer.

Cheetham is a singer of more than useful technique and voice, and the songs and arias with which her narrative is punctuated add poignancy, irony and sometimes comic undertone to it; they make us stop and hear the songs *and* the story anew. None works more effectively than 'The Songs my Mother Taught Me'. This was a production which repaid my second viewing in spades.

But the best show of all was the inimitable Leah Purcell's *Box the Pony*, with a brilliantly structured script by Scott Rankin. The story of Purcell's past is displaced into that of an alter ego, Stephanie, who grew up in Murgon in rural Queensland in a family of boys whose upbringing consisted of learning to box, and with an alcoholic mother. Somehow, Steph becomes Miss Teenage Beauty Queen and drifts into the usual life of perennial pregnancy (in which 'a black eye and a broken tooth



means you belong to someone') and a dead-end job in the local abattoir boxing up meat. Her life is relieved only by dreams of an uncle's beautiful pony—to which something unspeakably horrific is done.

Purcell is a gifted monodrama actor whose characterisations of all her family (including a Gran dying of cancer, elderly Uncle Leonard who turns up on the family verandah, eerily on the eve of Gran's death, with his 'superior bottle of port' and, of course, Steph) are outstanding. She is also a deadly comic, as she demonstrates when she periodically steps out of character to engage the suits in the audience and when she tackles the tough political issues of being too black or too white. Sean Mee's production is deceptively simple, using just a punching bag, a clothes rack and a collection of garbage bags full of clothes to evoke whole worlds. *Box the Pony* was not only my festival highlight; it is one of the hits of the year. ■

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

Above:  
*Stolen*.  
Left to right:  
Tammy Anderson,  
Stan Yarramunua,  
Pauline Whyman,  
Tony Briggs,  
Kylie Belling.  
Photograph by  
Jeff Busby.

# FLASH IN THE PAN



## Marching to Old Glory

*Saving Private Ryan*, dir. Steven Spielberg. At various points during the movie, one could hear muffled sobbing, and at the end there was strong applause. D-Day veterans have praised the verisimilitude of *Saving Private Ryan*'s battle scenes and the acting, and there was much to commend. The story is of a squad of eight GIs sent by the top brass on a public relations exercise to retrieve the eponymous private, whose three older brothers have all been killed. The first half-hour or so of the film covers the D-Day landing at Omaha Beach, and is a brilliantly sustained assault on sense and susceptibility. Spielberg does big scenes very well, and this was the best thing he has done since *Schindler's List* and its grey, significant multitudes. Some scenes were very moving: the mother of the Ryan boys sinking ponderously to the floor at the arrival of the bad news; a little French girl slapping her father for trying to hand her to the GIs for her safety.

But when battle is over, the film shows its flaws. The problem is in Spielberg's appalling, vulgar patriotism, something which devalues the right and proper things one feels about those young lives given to save

the world from Nazism. No-one who has read *The Battle of Maldon* can ever forget the crunch that comes when glorious valour and futile waste meet like the irresistible and the immovable. I was in a minority who loathed the false naivety of *Forrest Gump*, so Tom Hanks' 'human drama' elements were never going to be my cup of tea. You know the routine: a group of guys, including a bookish twerp, a witty Jewish boy from New York, a rebel, a sweet-natured medico, a redneck sharpshooter—the Clean Eight rather than the Dirty Dozen. The German soldiers are all cardboard villains. With *SPR* Americans can start feeling good about war again, after the failures in Vietnam and the somewhat equivocal result in the Gulf War. World War II was the Clean War—the Just War, even—ripe to be mined for feel-good possibilities. The film will certainly get more Oscars than any other next year.

It was ironic to see Spielberg's take on things the day after the *Four Corners* program that traced the sacrifices of Australian troops. To see *SPR* as a definitive account of WWII warfare is to forget that anyone else had been fighting the Nazis. Spielberg's D-Day omits the Allies, who learned from the US the concept of 'friendly fire' as well as how to chew gum while killing people.

—Juliette Hughes

## Confidant

*Antz*, dir. Eric Darnell and Tim Johnson. In Hollywood, the word ants has usually referred to your father's sisters. Aunts, on the other hand, have always been situations that don't exist. And 'aren'ts' has been short for 'are nots', the biscuit company that Australia sold offshore without even retaining the rights to the Iced Vo-Vo.

Now at least part of this is set to change. *Antz* is a wonderful animated feature about those millions of unsung insects who live in colonies where hard work and industry are the norm and individuality is given a low priority. The hero is a restless neurotic, Z-4195, known as 'Z' ('zee' not 'zed'). Z's voice is done by Woody Allen. Z even looks a bit like Woody Allen, although it may just be that so much of Allen's typical performance is conveyed by the level of anxiety in his voice that he is entirely present even in this animated film. The same is true of Sylvester Stallone, who plays the voice of Weaver, a soldier-ant who befriends Z. It is less true of Sharon Stone, the voice of Princess Bala, with whom Z falls in love and escapes the colony.

The film is delightfully witty. But its most endearing quality is that, although the only glimpses of human beings in the film are a hand, a foot and a leg, *Antz* is a satire of contemporary living. The worker ants are supervised by the familiar figure of a personnel manager whose unreasonable demands always conclude with 'thanks for your time'. Z and Bala go off in search of Insectopia, which happens to be a rubbish dump. Sure, there's a big emphasis on asserting yourself as an individual, which, these days, is actually another kind of conformity. And sure you wonder if all this new-found individuality is really going to create a better community effort as we are shown it will. But forget the ain'ts. It's a fairytale. A parable of liberation. We need it.

—Michael McGirr SJ

## The Avengers' tragedy

*The Avengers*, dir. Jeremiah Chechik. There can only be one explanation for this singularly dreadful, miss-and-miss film: it was master-minded by a clutch of double-agent leftovers from the Great Age of British Spying. In other words, a spooks' spoof, got up by disillusioned octogenarian haters determined to do England down.



This clutch of lesser Philbys, still revving on animus and the vodka stashed in their adjacent dachas, must have pooled their blurring memories of the Old Dart and British television circa 1964, suborned a few Russian technoids superannuated from Star Wars, and then cobbled together a farce designed to traduce all that '60s' style and circumstance they had, perforce, to leave behind when they caught the train from Victoria to Red Square via Finland.

They have certainly succeeded. In this movie only the bears are great and they lose their heads half a reel in. The film's stars are big names, but what's in a name? Unless of course it is Jeremiah Chechik, the director of the catastrophe. He was born in Montreal. Well that would figure—so it's a miserable Franco-Soviet conspiracy, all the better to make the Brits look like boofheads.

Which they do.

Ralph Fiennes, masquerading as the modish agent John Steed, comes trailing intrigue and sexual mystique from an earlier role in the intelligently adapted and directed *The English Patient*. In Chechik's *Avengers* he doesn't survive having his outsize bowler do battle with the tops of his ears. Uma Thurman, attempting that apotheosis of '60s English cool-with-a-kick, Mrs Emma Peel, plays her as Bambi and compensates with an oversize belt-buckle. The villain, Sir August de Wynter (note the allusion to the peaks and plains of English literature—these spy chappies read more than Greats) is James Bond retired, gone politically raving, and into weather management, accomplice by a deadbeat squad of soccer-hooligans. At one point (driving the nails into the coffin of anglo-empire?) Jeremiah indulges Sean Connery/de Wynter with what amounts to an apocalyptic Scots secession-or-else rant in front of the assembled heads of Britain-declined-into-Europe. Maggie Thatcher would weep. And who would blame her?

But there is one great moment amid the travesty. You can read it, I think, as the Moscow-via-Eton conspirators' tribute to tradecraft. Patrick Macnee, Steed of the original and inimitable *Avengers*, gets a cameo role as a Ministry basement character called Invisible Jones. For one brief moment, even though he is indeed invisible, the screen crackles with wit and style. This brief, unguarded concession to quality nostalgia comes about three-quarters of the

way through. Maybe you can sneak in half-way for half-price. But don't go under any other circumstances.

—Morag Fraser

## Fool's gold

*Henry Fool*, dir. Hal Hartley. Hal Hartley's new film, *Henry Fool*, is fundamentally about words and their adequacy (or otherwise) as a response to the world and its violence. Fool (Thomas Jay Ryan) is a convicted sex-offender, egomaniacal parasite and self-styled prophet with pretensions to literary greatness after the fashion of the Marquis de Sade.

He befriends Simon Grim (James Urbaniak), a garbage collector so pathologically silent most people think he's retarded. Fool spends his money, seduces Grim's chronically depressed mother, impregnates his sister (Parker Posey), and in exchange appoints himself as Grim's mentor, encouraging him to write. Surrounded literally and metaphorically by refuse, Grim spews forth scatological poetry on an epic scale, words that make the mute sing (literally), the local school board denounce him, and turn him into a celebrity. Grim, it seems, is the real thing. Fool, it turns out, is not; when Simon finally convinces Henry to let him read his 'Confessions', he finally discovers what a spectacularly bad writer Fool really is. Grim goes on to literary success, Fool takes over as garbage collector, at least until the film's final, beautifully ambivalent reversal.

As the names Grim and Fool suggest, Hartley is aspiring here to something like a parable—asking us to consider what place art has in the world

and in a life, and what the consequences might be of assuming that those things are the same, or even compatible. At the same time the film is also about the ethical demands of friendship, politics, the media, modern life ... Perhaps because it offers no answers, it is surprisingly satisfying in its simplicity and in the complexity of the links between its many parts. For all the gem-like precision of his earlier work, *Henry Fool* is far and away the most satisfying of Hartley's films, and certainly the one most likely to stay with you after you leave the cinema.

—Allan Thomas



## The strife of art

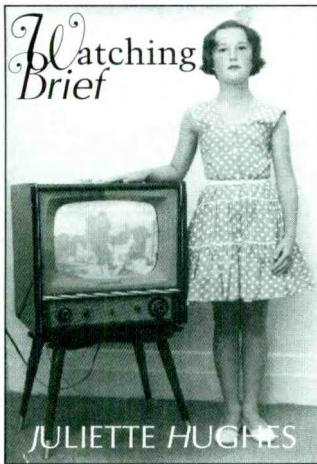
*Love is the Devil: Study for a Portrait of Francis Bacon*, dir. John Maybury. There is a particularly English type of horror that settles itself in the dark crevasses of the everyday. As children we rely on Roald Dahl to deliver exactly this type of grimy horror in characters like Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker. The life of Britain's most famous 20th-century artist, Francis Bacon, played out a little like a Dahl tale for grown ups—black as pitch but rich and reflective, and spotted with characters every bit as mad and grotty as Spiker and Sponge. Take Muriel Belcher (played ferociously by Tilda Swinton)—the swollen-bellied, foul-mouthed doyenne of the Colony Room, a Soho bar frequented by Bacon and his party: she is pure Dahl.

While this film wastes no time flattering its subject, you are never left feeling Maybury has done a job on Bacon. In part this is due to the extraordinary performance of Derek Jacobi in the title role. It would be easy to destroy Bacon's character by turning his notoriously cruel wit into meaningless, sharp-tongued caricature, but Jacobi looks deeper. He makes every murmur and shuffle count. You watch him execute Bacon's extended toilette, brushing his teeth with vim, colouring his hair with boot polish and applying face pancake—it's at once grotesque and exquisite.

*Love is the Devil* is a story of love and a study of the life of art. Both themes are explored through the relationship between Bacon and his long-time lover/muse George Dyer (Daniel Craig), but this is not a standard modernist vision of the artist and his muse: Maybury shows us both the creative and destructive distortions of a love and inspiration—as raw as the unprimed linen upon which Bacon painted his portraits of Dyer.

Beautifully scripted and filmed with a keen understanding of Bacon's art (conversations seen through the distorting bulge of wine glass, faces cropped by the cut of a mirror), *Love is the Devil* is no standard artist's bio-pic. It may lack the commercial heartiness of *The Agony and the Ecstasy* or *Lust for Life* (Hollywood classics chronicling the lives of Michelangelo and Van Gogh) but it travels deeper into the dark heart of the artist than most would dare to go. Unflinching in its vision, this film deserves a larger audience than it will get.

—Siobhan Jackson



# The Christmas box

**L**ATE ON CHRISTMAS DAY, when mince pies, cake and port had filled everyone brimful, my mother would sit with her family and they would sing carols round the fire in the December-dark afternoon in Lancashire. Sixty, seventy years ago she would gaze into

the coals and see orange-red caves and shapes that leapt and twisted and vanished. The visions went up the chimneys all through the dark Christmas towns; each house its own cell in the honeycomb of shared belief.

Thirty, forty years ago when she had her own family, there were other pictures at Christmas: grey-lavender monochrome sat there competing with the fire as the overload of dried fruit, nuts and pastry made its way through the internal economies of the children.

The Queen, of course, at three sharp. *A Christmas Carol* over and over again, film or live-to-air. Pantomimes, *Mother Goose*, *Cinderella*—the latter notable for the Principal Boy's tights sporting a large and scandalous ladder in those live-to-air days. God, how innocent we all were! A Junoesque young woman in a doublet and hose with high heels wooing the ingenue: something for the Sydney Mardi Gras these days. (There was no irony in these trouser parts, as there still is none now among the opera roles that require cross-dressing by the alto—Octavian, Cherubino.) But the smoke still went up the chimneys in the pre-Clean Air Act days—we all burned the same fuel, physically and spiritually. The agnostics and atheists had a thin time at Christmas in the '50s.

The *Radio Times* (the TV programs were advertised in it too) would be emblazoned with Christmas heraldry, the day itself like an army with banners, and the programs unreconstructed Christianity at play and prayer. There were performances of *Amal and the Night Visitors*, and *The Messiah*, conducted by Malcolm Sargent, naturally. (Hogwood & Pinnock would spit on the ground at the thought of the luscious romantic orchestrations. But they could never match the hot zizzing of Sargent's strings in 'For He is Like a Refiner's Fire'.) There were even religious editions of *The Brains Trust* hosted by the media Franciscan, Fr Agnellus Andrew, the Vatican's Richard Dimbleby. There were also quite serious dramatic retellings of the Nativity story, without the didactic element that such endeavours would inevitably have today. With no need to address the sensitivities of other creeds, the writers navigated freely within the frame of shared reference. Tight form gives its own kind of creative possibility without the difficulty of too many universes to choose from. And if you later wept for the lack of new worlds to conquer, that was the risk of such hermetic security.

Later still there were the American shows imported by the commercial channels. Movies came to TV: *Miracle on 34th Street* began its long stint. *Father Knows Best*, *I Love Lucy*, *Leave it to Beaver*, all had Christmas versions, which even involved the actors looking out of the screen at us hypnotees to

wish all the joys of the season on the audience. As programmers began to run series with an eye to efficiency and ratings we would get curious time-warps with American programs. You'd be watching the Christmas Episode of *Lucy* from the year or three before. In October. Ratings had never bothered the BBC, lone player for so long: programs were geared to the perceptions of the upper-to-middle-class tertiary-educated BBC employees. Driven by a desire to bring culture to the masses, they brought it *pro bono* in spades—their only competitors were the wireless and the pub. If you didn't like a program you switched off the damn thing and did something else. Before ITV, a lot of people got educated despite themselves just because they were couch potatoes. After ITV, TV was selling, not giving. And now the season of goodwill also happens not to be the ratings season, so the kind of program you're shown is likely to be either some movie you've hired out long before, or else strangely enough something really interesting that the marketing droids thought wouldn't rate.

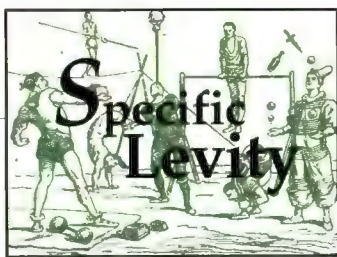
**W**HEN I CAME TO AUSTRALIA IN 1963, the changes were happening fast: the transatlantic thing was translated to a transpacific thing. The only fire you'd stare into on Christmas Day here was the barbecue, and you wouldn't do that for long if you didn't want hot fat in your eye. Programs were still geared to the season, but the most Christmas cheer came through the astonishingly frequent commercials. Christmas was all very well, but there was business to be done.

The variety programs did their bit, of course, but Bobby Limb and all the others died the death before the Baby Boomers got married. Variety programs may be starting to make their way back, gingerly, despite the axing of Nine's IMT, and with Roy and H.G. and suchlike there will be comics and singers mixed in with the talking heads. But I doubt whether there'll be anything like the old style: *Delo & Daly* and *The Carol Burnett Show* went the way of the Australian variety shows, so it seems the phenomenon is worldwide, akin to the death of vaudeville.

So what can we look forward to this Christmas? Starting on Christmas Day at 2pm, SBS will be offering Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*, divided into six 35-minute slabs to be shown on 27 and 28 December, and the 1, 3 and 6 January. The ABC will show *Carols from King's*, on the Sunday before Christmas Day at 8pm. December 7 will see the finish of the four-part series *Absolute Truth*, a look at the Catholic church since Vatican II. Should be a cheery little item.

On Christmas Day I'll probably take a break from watching the coloured screen in the corner. If I want to watch anything I think it'll be the light scattering in the little frost caves in the baubles on our Christmas tree, and the slightly dog-eared angels made by the kids years ago. The shapes turn and twist as I remember them, and vanish like a loved face from the past. ■

**Juliette Hughes** is a freelance muser.



## Eureka Street Cryptic Crossword no. 69, December 1998

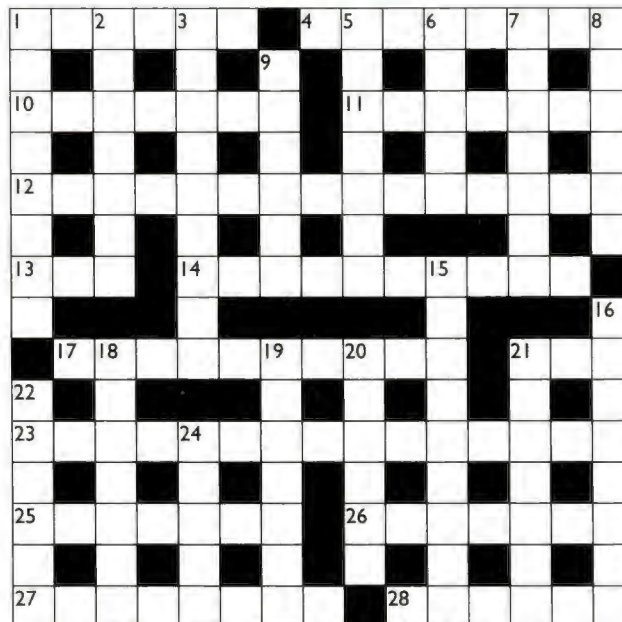
Devised by Joan Nowotny IBVM

### ACROSS

1. Professorial seating arrangements. (6)
4. What about Greek letter with Latin meaning? Could refer to a salad vegetable. (8)
10. Unfortunately, hung cat to get foreign attention. (7)
11. Sycophantic swimmer? (7)
12. Take it to Mt Isa, perhaps, following Matthew's mountain route. (8,7)
13. Send to Coventry, possibly. (3)
14. Stock taker culls, somehow, all the stuff that looks uninteresting. (10)
17. The situation of 7-down remained the same, i.e. was like 26-across. (6,4)
21. Con's counterpart in debate. (3)
23. Major archives named for David Scott, perhaps, or Dame Nellie Melba originally? (8,7)
25. What a one-horned beast might wear—with a change of heart! (7)
26. You would hardly call a G.I. frigid! (7)
27. Run-of-the-mill newspaper? (8)
28. Commercial green to be used for notice. (6)

### DOWN

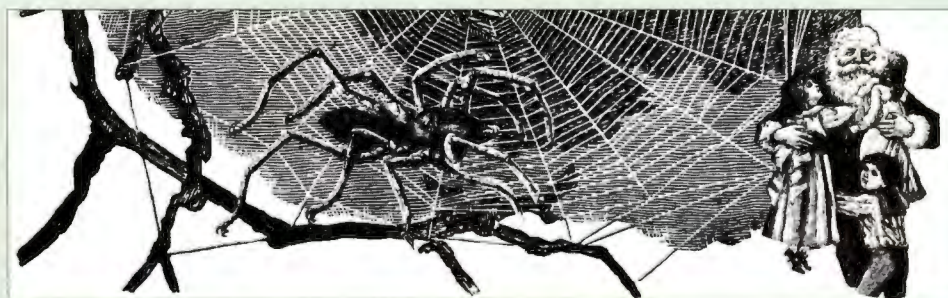
1. Where the real work is shown on the fuel dial. (8)
2. One in the presence of the robbery, but not of God. (7)
3. Surprise a nude at Paris Airport? Celebrate with song or dance in a circle. (9)
5. Grog makes Hal cool. (7)
6. Blew the whistle on fifty inside—expressed in the popular jargon. (5)
7. Chilly stand-off between power blocs. (4,3)
8. To marry Theban could make one like St Sebastian. (6)
9. Mushroom I found on a crag resort. (6)
15. Team directors decide on choice of furniture. (9)
16. Golly, top prize goes for being multi-lingual! (8)
18. Rodents follow bird—or birds. (7)
19. Meal I'd miss at the start, as an unhappy alternative to being impaled on its horns. (7)
20. Compel former student to lie about beginning Greek. (6)
21. Some copra linen composite produced this confection. (7)
22. To be protected against disease, take one millimetre with a French measure as ordered. (6)
24. Play this and miss the lessons. (5)



### Solution to Crossword no. 68, November 1998



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