

EUREKA STREET

A MAGAZINE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS,
THE ARTS AND THEOLOGY
Vol. 12 no. 10 December 2002 \$7.50 (inc. GST)



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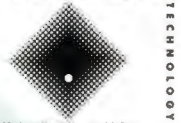
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The MELBOURNE Anglican-

Human existence "is a continuum which begins at the embryonic stage – it seems arbitrary to draw a line at any point and say we can do research."

Ismo Rama, speaking in a debate on stem cell research at the Melbourne Anglican Synod.

"None of us would doubt that it is true to claim that we should decide who comes here and under what circumstances. What is in clear doubt... is whether our compassionate heart and our commitment to a fair go has shrivelled up beyond all recognition or has all but died."

The Revd Stuart Soley, speaking in a debate on the detention of asylum seekers.

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Cartoon p12 by Peter Fraser

Lyre and wheel

THINKING OF CHRISTMAS, and riffling through some postcards, I found two of them claiming attention. The first, improbably perhaps, was of a silver ten-stringed lyre from Ur, in Babylonia—or, as we say nowadays, southern Iraq. It dates from about 2500BC, and it comes from the Great Death Pit, excavated in the twentieth century. It has an inlaid front, and a bull's head adorns one edge. The second card shows a painting, from about 1531, by Maarten Van Heemsberck, of a woman spinning. Her left hand trains the raw fibre towards the spinning wheel,



which she turns with her right hand: the wheel, balanced on her knees, is supported by an ornamented dolphin.

Versions of the Bible which are arranged according to an historical logic begin with Abraham's departure from Ur, and on that exodus all that follows is supposed to turn—the bitter and the sweet alike have their roots in that ancient culture. After much investigation, a great deal about those Sumerian people is still opaque, but the Pit has given us things we can certainly understand, things like the

lyre, for instance. Perhaps music is always in some degree mysterious, but if it is so it is our mystery too; whenever it is more than formulaic, it is a way of searching as well as a way of saying. The figure of David playing the harp, whether to solace a tortured Saul or to celebrate things found good, is an emblem of the mind about its work as well as of the fingers in their dexterity.

And of more than the mind. Music from the death-pit cannot but challenge sentiment and attitude—all that we call 'the heart'. At the end of the



Second World War, among ruins, ad hoc orchestras began their work in devastated cities, as indeed they had tried to keep going while the bombs were falling. And before and after that cataclysm, at countless funerals, music and song have attended both the dead and the grieving. It is a way of saying that our mortality is not only insult, and it is at least a foreshadowing of something beyond mortality.

In the Gospel story, Christ's birth is greeted with song, and thousands of portrayals of the event have been rich in musicians, some of them fledged and

some not: 'Gloria' is their watchword. But the context of the singing also embraces those socially marginal figures, the shepherds, and its sequel includes massacre and refugeedom; the child in the straw is already a figure of confrontation. The dying John Donne, envisaging heaven, believed that he would become part of a divine music, but was still learning the hard way how onerous the attuning could be in our present orchestral pit. He would, I think, have contemplated the silver, inlaid lyre, smothered so long and then disclosed, with instinctive understanding.

And Van Heemsberck's spinner? Inescapably she is shadowed by the motif of life as thread, a notion kept modern by the gauging line to be seen, oscillating or stilled, on life-support systems. But I see her too as a meeting point of the practical and the ornamental—'the useful and the beautiful', as was said in the past of certain of the arts, including the arts of the mind. She gazes with a direct seriousness out of the picture, handsomely but not extravagantly clad, patently geared to work for a long time, her wheel turning at the snout of the stylish dolphin.

The wheel, the fibre, the trappings of other

exertions hung behind her, the textiles of her cap and her costume—all of these speak of the work of generations, indeed of millennia, all the way back to the needles of reindeer bone found in archaic caves, long before the lyre was made in Ur. But their colours, and the band of tapestry enclosing the fibre, and above all the swish dolphin, an ornament to its ocean, applaud the human taste for the abundant and the beautiful.

John Dryden said of Chaucer's work, 'Here is God's plenty', which is as accurate as it is generous. In the same vein, it is essential to Christian belief that Jesus embodies God's plenty—that he both is, and lives out, a divine lavishness on behalf of humanity. Represented often enough in the past and the present under the sign of a fish, he might be seen here in the token of the dolphin, who is locked to a task, but who displays a plenitude which makes for joy. Perhaps the two pictures before me could be encompassed with a music for dolphins: if so, and in spite of the labours and the pit, it would not be standing only for Christ. ■

Peter Steele sj has a personal chair at the University of Melbourne.

COMMENT:2

MORAG FRASER

Portents

'THE CHILD IN THE STRAW is already a figure of confrontation', writes Peter Steele sj in the Christmas editorial above. His words bring you up sharp as you make your way through the festoons and gilt stars that are already (in November) tizzying up our streets and shopping malls. Christmas is a paradoxical season: joy fraught with anticipation. What will come next? After the birth, how soon the death?

It's a time when you look for reassurance, for the comfort of friends and family. Listening over the past month to so much reductive and warlike rhetoric, from all sides, I've turned often, as though to a friend, to hear something wiser, more measured. The friend in mind has been Graham Little, Melbourne writer and academic whose psychological acuity and broad grasp of political moods were such a gift to anyone wanting to understand where we are, how we got here and where we might be going, politically and morally.

Graham Little (who died in 2000) counted the cost of political manoeuvring. He would delve where others would pronounce, look for patterns, influences,

reasons, and in so doing help you understand the complex weave of actor and event. He would have had something to say about the photographs (by Daniel Loughlin) on this month's cover and on pages 14–15, of children whose apprenticeship is war.

The Palestinian child on the cover, in cadet camouflage gear, is being led towards a demonstration in the West Bank city of Ramallah. The protest is against the sale of US weapons to Israel. The youths in the photographs inside carry with them the eloquent symbols of might and reckless determination—gun and slingshot. The echoes of the David and Goliath story are strong but they are not sufficient to elucidate this particular confrontation. Both of these young men may well spend their lives in a struggle marked more by the intransigence of old men than by the pursuit of justice.

Eureka Street wishes for all our readers that the blessings of the Christmas season will turn our minds to peace, and to one another—wherever we live. ■

—Morag Fraser

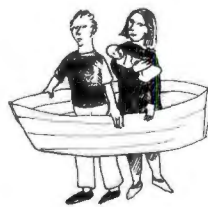
Wily words



Here's a Christmas gift idea, much more fun than a tie or stockings, and particularly apposite if your uncle/father/mother/sister is a politician. It's the new Oxford dictionary of euphemisms, with a one-legged (lame) duck on the yolk-coloured cover, and well titled *How Not To Say What You Mean*. Some of the explanatory contents, predictably, are not fit for a family magazine (euphemisms are euphemisms for a reason). But there's plenty here to delight the connoisseur of evasion.

'Terminological inexactitude' is an oldie-but-goodie. It might take Winston Churchill (who coined the phrase) to carry it off these days, but the practice is thriving. 'Population transfer' is useful again, as is 'downward adjustment'. There is a nifty thematic index from which you can discover that politics requires more circumlocution even than war—by a clear half page. But modern warfare does provide some of the more diverting entries. Try 'pre-dawn vertical insertion'—parachuting with the larks, in other words. 'Regime change' hasn't made it into the lists yet. But it will. And Hirohito's term for military defeat—'coming of peace'—could prove handy for dictators here and there any day soon.

Still seeking asylum



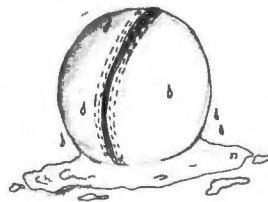
Beyond the rhetoric of legal and illegal asylum seekers and border protection is the reality of life for some asylum seekers in Australia. Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA) bureaucracy has given birth to a new underclass of poor in Australia—those whom DIMIA recognises as having a likely claim to asylum, but who are not

yet permitted to work and are ineligible for social security or assistance through Medicare. A number of GPs around town already provide *pro bono* services but there is little they can do when medication, tests or specialist opinions are required.

The Sisters of Charity Foundation, together with North Yarra Community Health, has opened a clinic for asylum seekers in Melbourne. Under the leadership of physician Dr Tim Lightfoot, the clinic will provide (at no cost to the patient) access to pathology and pharmacy services, interpreters and referrals to other *pro bono* specialists.

To support the clinic contact Dr Lightfoot. Tel. 03 9419 2477 or email lightft@svhm.org.au

Rules of the game



Cricket offers a variety of metaphors for life, and commentators reflect their own national metaphors. In Australia, cricket is work, and wide balls and loose shots are treated as lax work practices. In England, where cricket is play, idiosyncracies offer opportunity for boyish conversation. In Sri Lanka, cricket displays manners. Players receive praise for neatly buckled pads and are chided for any display of feeling. All commentators, however, worry about the effect of senior cricketers' behaviour on the junior competitions where metaphors are learned.

In fact, junior cricket has its own robust metaphors, often to do with the kind of trickery associated mythically with Odysseus—that Homeric admixture of wiliness and endurance. Our club's saga celebrated a premiership won against the odds. On the first day we were dismissed cheaply on a good pitch. After a long session at the pub, the team devised a wily way to change the odds. They bought a block of ice, laid it down on a good length, leaving plenty of time for it to melt. The night was cold. When the home team arrived next day to practice for its innings, the ice had done its work, but had not quite melted. Our heroes exploited the wet pitch to bowl them out for a losing

score. But then they had to endure. In their second innings, both bowlers and fielders of the opposing team took consistent aim at their heads. This team had nothing to learn, and much to teach its seniors.

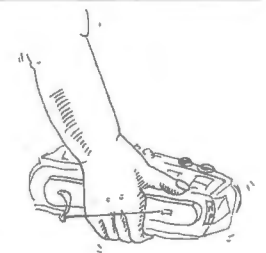
Water levels



You know things are getting desperate when the mouth of the great Murray River closes over. Seen from the air it looked like nature saying an emphatic 'no'.

With salt sitting like malign manna on the surface of the land, you might, on a better-late-than-never policy, like to keep an eye on the government inquiry into future water supplies, headed by 2001 Environmentalist of the Year, Professor Peter Cullen. Website: www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/primind/index.htm

Private tracks

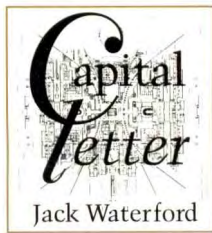


Mid-morning—the time of young children, elderly couples and drifters. A four-year-old stomps up the steps, stands in the middle of the half-empty tram and looks around in wild surmise. Then tips his head back and howls, 'I don't like this tram. I want *our* tram!'

As we lurch forward he stumbles and falls to his knees, banging the floor with clenched fists. Tears and snot drip onto the floor. His mother, with furtive glances at the rest of us, tries comfort, reason, bribes. He won't be distracted.

I get off at one of the new 'superstops' that is evidence that Steve Bracks is indeed 'Growing Victoria'. A bright green notice informs me that this is now the 'Melbourne Transport System'—the 'public' gone the way of the conductors and their soft pouchy leather bags.

And as the tram trundles past the screams drift back: 'Where's our tram?'



The Whitlam way

ONLY TWO IN EVERY five Australians have any memory at all of the tumultuous Whitlam years, and even fewer of the decade before Labor came to government in which Whitlam made the party electable and brought it to power. Those who wonder and care where the hell Labor is going—and where in heaven it could go to—might find the 1960s worth a look again.

In the early '60s, Labor was in an even more parlous situation than now. The 1950s' split had driven moderates out of the party in many of the States; the rumps may have got the numbers (and lasting sectarian animosities) but few seemed focused on achieving power. Labor held office, intermittently, in a number of States, but in Victoria, South Australia and Queensland, State election seemed as remote as federal victory—and only partly because of gerrymanders. The factions and figures who controlled the numbers in the party's councils were union heavies more concerned with maintaining their industrial power bases than with winning federal office.

The Liberals nearly lost, federally, in 1961, not because Labor programs were attractive but because they had themselves mismanaged the economy. But within two years, Menzies had outflanked Labor on defence and on state aid, with the Labor Party seeming almost to revel in its impotence. In 1966, in an election over Vietnam, Labor had its worst ever defeat.

Gough Whitlam took over a party that had been out of office for 17 years and out of touch for at least 12. Within three years he brought it to the brink of success, and three years later, took it into office. Opinions may differ about what he made of power once he achieved it, but no one could suggest that, in 1969 or in 1972, any of the voters were in any doubt about what he intended to do.

Whitlam had taken on the federal executive and power structures of his own party. When this brought him under attack, he appealed beyond them to the wider party. He took on party branches that had become completely corrupted and dysfunctional. He formed key alliances with politicians who distrusted him, but who came to believe that, with him, they could win. He went outside the party to woo young people and the middle classes, with the idea that Labor was not only about union advancement but also about progressive ideas, not least the idea that government could do more for disadvantaged groups. But it was not all about bringing Aborigines and immigrants, students and feminists into the fold; there was as powerful a message for the aspirational classes in the outer suburbs—about education for their kids, sewerage for their suburbs and proper planning and growth.

There were big messages and little messages, but they melded together, and with only about a tenth of the current

number of staff workers and resources to make it happen. Even then Whitlam could bore one witless with an enormous grasp of the detail, yet inspire by the way in which policies here complemented policies there, and all merged into the big picture.

In the House of Representatives, meanwhile, Whitlam successively mastered Holt, Gorton and McMahon. Such parliamentary victories may not have been directly reflected in votes, but they created a mood among insiders and sapped the morale of the other side.

Whitlam enjoyed a good run in the media, even if he faced implacable hostility from the three most significant media corporations and had the support of only a (then) minor player, Rupert Murdoch. His media success came because he made news, and because he had earned the respect of the journalists (just as McMahon, in particular, had earned their contempt). No-one could have doubted that he could be arrogant as well as self-deprecating, coarse as well as classical, feline as well as grand. Yet he had a vision that was on the wavelength; he was an articulate promoter of ideals as well as ideas, and he was not afraid of taking the electorate into his confidence.

BEHIND WHITLAM, of course, some clever operators were working to script things for him, and to make luck turn his way. Some of it—arranging a helpful intervention by Archbishop James Carroll on the State aid issue, for instance—was at the time made to seem quite machiavellian. It seems pretty tame compared with the modern scripted campaign in which the leader is not allowed to meet members of the public, and even journalists are scarcely permitted to know before which confected group he or she will appear on the morn.

Opinions differ, of course, about the success of Whitlam's government, and about the ultimate causes of its failure. But 30 years from the time of his becoming prime minister, he has had a more lasting impression on government, and its ideas and ideals, than any of his successors. And while, at times, each of those successors has made political mileage by claiming to have learnt the lesson of Whitlam, or by laughing about his mistakes, not one of them looks to command either the place in the history books, or in the national affections, of Gough.

Perhaps it is asking too much of a Labor leader, or a Labor Caucus, to be up to Whitlam quality. Indeed it is not necessary—the leader was *sui generis*. But even one who did not want to walk his particular path to Calvary might think that the Whitlam manner of preparing a party for victory had something going for it. ■

Jack Waterford is editor-in-chief of *The Canberra Times*.

Go, NGOs

Congratulations on a very stimulating and balanced special on the non-government and not-for-profit sector (*Eureka Street*, November 2002). As a one-time worker in the sector I found the coverage particularly satisfying because it acknowledged the joys (considerable) of working with and for others, but also gave a realistic overview of the frustrations that have come as part and parcel of structural and funding changes in the sector over the last decade. Ann Nevile was clear and correct in her analysis of the strains to which the sector is subjected.

David Scott's forthright analysis was particularly welcome. Many NGO stalwarts have asked themselves the same question: 'Will NGOs provide leadership for the social justice movement or have they become franchisees of government?'

But it was also gratifying to read of the initiative of people in rural and regional communities. Peter Mares provided a very encouraging counter-story to the one we so often hear about country people. Rural Australians for Refugees should make many city dwellers think twice before they talk about rednecks again. And the Gunning volunteers were a marvellous model for community anywhere. Every street or suburb in Australia should have its designated snake catcher! Particularly now in drought time. But Michael McGirr is right: volunteer culture does work best when there is a fit between community needs and personal needs.

Cassandra Oliver
Queanbeyan, NSW



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Small is equitable

Your welcome article on overseas aid organisations ('Caught in the middle', *Eureka Street*, November 2002) made a passing reference to micro-finance as a development fashion.

It's one form of foreign aid that takes up concerns about accountability and local control. In 1998, you gave us an example of this with rural pig farmers in China ('Even Eden goes to market', *Eureka Street*, July/August 1998). Australia's aid was enabling the rural poor to devise their own ways out of poverty.

The Federal Government has shown a welcome commitment to increase our aid funding for microcredit programs, with \$13 million spent in 2001–02. It recently commenced funding the expansion of established, successful and locally run programs in Vietnam, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

Yet more is possible. The Microcredit Summit +5 recently held in New York on 10–13 November marked five years since the 1997 Microcredit Summit. That 1997 Summit set a goal of reaching 100 million poorest families by 2005, which would benefit some 500 million family members.

This would also benefit nearly half of the 1.2 billion people living in absolute poverty. One of the UN's Millennium Development Goals is to cut absolute world poverty in half by 2015.

Our foreign aid shines a light on world poverty. This is especially relevant in Bali, where microcredit enterprise development is helping with replacement jobs after the bombing.

Microcredit development is one light of hope for a better world.

Peter Graves
Campbell, ACT

Swat team

How intriguing to have the humble mozzie become a challenge to creationists, indeed to all believers. Thank you Terry Lane. Before reading your highly entertaining review of *Mosquito: The Story of Man's Deadliest Foe* (*Eureka Street*, November 2002) I had been a member of the tribe of the merely persecuted, able to counter the dreaded buzzer only by slapping, spraying and anointing with foul-smelling unguents. Now, I shall sally forth into the summer fight with renewed vigour and a deepened sense of purpose.

Katrin Lee
Casuarina Sands, ACT

PS: Do you have views on the theological significance of nits?

October 2002 Book Offer Winners

Br. Bruce-Paul, Stroud, NSW; M. Doherty, Woorim, QLD; J.S. Gregory, Balwyn, VIC; T. Mautner, Manuka, ACT; L. Wright, Eastwood, NSW; T. Bekema, Hughes, ACT; G. Day, Heathpool, SA; P. Gates, Bayview Heights, QLD; J. Liddle, Collinswood, SA; P. O'Brien, Toowong, QLD.



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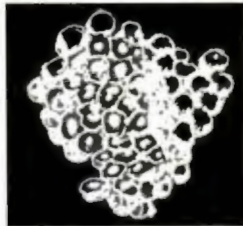
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The ethics of stem cell research

Five arguments and a critique



ON FRIDAY, 5 APRIL 2002, the Prime Minister, John Howard, gave the green light for federal legislation to be drafted authorising, with parental consent, destructive experimentation on some of the 70,000 human embryos presently stored in Australian vaults and deemed surplus to IVF needs.

It has been suggested that a Liberal Prime Minister, embattled at that time by the Hollingworth and 'children overboard' affairs, had little choice but to capitulate to the assembled might of the Labor State premiers at the Council of Australian Government (COAG) meeting. However that may be, the legislation has been drafted—a strict regulatory regime—and has been passed in the House of Representatives by a substantial majority. At the time of writing it is anticipated that the vote of the Lower House will be endorsed in the Senate, albeit by a narrower majority.

There are five main arguments supporting the COAG decision that have enjoyed currency over the past seven months.

First is the 'small' argument. How could anything so small as an embryo be accorded the special status that would exempt it from destructive experimentation for therapeutic purposes? I will call this the 'Mini Minor' argument (its major exponent is NSW Premier Bob Carr).

The second argument is also out of the Bob Carr garage. It too is cast in quantitative terms, and focuses on the extensive powers to cure human trauma and disease that human embryonic stem cells are reputed to have. I will call this the 'Rolls Royce' argument—acknowledging the 'horsepower' that embryonic stem cells are reputed to generate.

The third argument is one apparently espoused by all the State premiers. Very soon after 5 April, Bob Carr announced that, come what may, whatever the

Federal Government and other State Governments might decide, New South Wales would welcome scientists engaged in destructive experimentation on human embryos. Once he did this, all the other State premiers abandoned whatever hesitations they might previously have had, and shuffled obediently into the line that the State premier of the premier State had drawn. Basically, they were afraid they might miss out on their share of the financial and prestige rewards which, they believed, would be associated with embryonic stem cell research. Continuing the car/garage analogy, we might call this the 'Showroom' argument.

The fourth argument is the one, I suspect, that carried most weight with John Howard. Whatever status we accord the 70,000 embryos in storage, some of them are going to die anyway. Should we not 'redeem their dying' or 'make a virtue out of necessity' by using them, albeit to their destruction, in embryonic stem cell therapeutic research? I am tempted to call this the 'Hannibal Lecter' or 'Concentration Camp' argument: 'You are going to die anyway; may I not sup on your brains?' or 'You are going to die anyway; may we not use you as a human guinea pig for the benefit of the master race?' But lest that may seem prejudicial, let us continue the car analogy and call this the 'Wreckers' argument: 'These cars/embryos are destined for the scrap heap in any event. Let's just cannibalise their useful parts!'

The final argument is one that has emerged only in the course of the debate, and after the COAG decision. Since 5 April there has been increasing evidence of the pluripotency of adult stem cells both in animal models and in some clinical applications. At the same time the immunological problems associated with embryonic stem cells have been highlighted. So has their teratogenic expression in clinical contexts, and there has emerged a growing consensus about the risks associated with therapeutic cloning. The bets (and the pharmaceutical money) seem to be moving from embryonic to adult stem cell research. 'But,' so the argument goes, 'we need to study both to get the best results. Once we understand how the embryo works, we will be able to complement and advance the work being done with adult stem cells.'

This is obviously a fallback position from the hype that surrounded embryonic stem cells at the time of the COAG decision. But it is advanced even by those whose focus of research is on adult stem cells, all in the name of scientific solidarity: 'If I support your research, you promise not to inhibit mine.' Hence we have the 'Salesmen's Solidarity' argument.

The first and third arguments—'Mini Minor' and 'Showroom'—need not delay us long if ethics and morality are what we have in view. Since when has

If curing disease at all costs is the end in view, we are only a short step certainly from therapeutic cloning and then, inevitably from reproductive cloning.

'small' been a moral category? And were we not all small embryos once? The earth is a very small planet compared to the size of the universe. Mini Minor owners have as much right to the road as those who drive Toorak tractors. The mere fact that something is small should not disqualify it from moral consideration.

The 'Showroom' argument—focusing on the financial and prestige rewards that may be associated with the commercialisation of embryonic stem cell research—is no more ethically sophisticated. One might well hope that financial and other emoluments might follow upon ethically acceptable research, but they are hardly a substitute for it. Scientific integrity has, at least traditionally, put commitment to ethical standards ahead of prestige, power and profit. Either the 'Showroom' argument admits this precedence and becomes recognised at best as a supplementary, rather than an ethical, consideration, or we have a totally new standard of what constitutes ethics. 'Greed is good, and the devil take the hindmost in research competition.'

The second argument—'Rolls Royce'—focusing on the 'horsepower' embryonic stem cells have to cure disease, is a genuinely ethical argument. It is certainly a morally good thing to try to cure disease, and there are at least some in principle reasons to believe that embryonic stem cells may have this potential. I have said 'in principle' advisedly. Some distinguished scientists have cast doubt on whether there really is as much 'horsepower' as has been claimed. They would then ask a further question: even if there is any likelihood of a cure for any of the suggested diseases, then surely a prerequisite for working with human embryonic stem cells is that such a safe cure, with prolonged effect, should be demonstrably achieved in the appropriate animal model of at least one of those diseases? Such preliminary evidence is required both on scientific and ethical grounds in other human research. Why not in this research?

But even presuming this likelihood can be established with an appropriate animal model, two further questions immediately arise. If it is a good thing to cure disease even at the expense of destroying embryos, why isn't it also a good thing to cure disease by cloning embryos? Why not both therapeutic cloning and reproductive cloning? It does not require much imagination to contemplate scenarios where therapeutic or reproductive cloning would seem to offer the best chance to cure disease, particularly in the case of children. Admittedly, at present there are considerable safety issues in clinical practice. But cloning seems to have been repudiated not just in practice but also in principle by our politicians as totally morally repugnant. I have some problems adjusting to the mentality of those who would quite blithely destroy embryos but react

with horror to the possibility of cloning. If the basic principle of utilitarianism holds—the end justifies the means—then, I suggest, despite the solemn asseverations of scientists and politicians, if curing disease at all costs is the end in view, we are only a short step certainly from therapeutic cloning and then, inevitably, from reproductive cloning.

The slippery slope is already greased!

THE SECOND QUESTION relevant to the 'Rolls Royce' argument concerns the notion of potential. Supporters of this argument emphasise the potential of embryonic stem cells to cure disease. They admit, however, that it may be five to 15 years before this potential can be realised in clinical applications. But presently we value embryonic stem cells precisely because of their potential. How, then, can we be dismissive of one of the strongest arguments against the destructive experimentation of human embryos, namely their inherent potential, despite their smallness ('Mini Minor' again), to become human beings like ourselves? If potential is sauce for the goose, why isn't it sauce for the gander? To be sure, for the potential of a human embryo to become a human person requires a considerable 'work up' in the human reproductive system. But even the most enthusiastic proponents of embryonic stem cell research will hardly deny that before the potential of these cells to cure disease is realised, an extensive laboratory 'work up' is also required. Why, then, is potential ('Rolls Royce' horsepower!) so esteemed in one case, and so dismissed in the other?

'I'll tell you why,' you will reply. 'It is because, short of supplying surrogate wombs, the only real potential which some of these embryos in storage have is death.' This leads us to the fourth argument, the 'Wreckers' argument: 'Some of these embryos, irrespective of their moral status, are destined to succumb in any event. Isn't it better to "redeem" their dying by using them in stem cell research?' Before answering this question (and laying aside the 'Hannibal Lecter' and 'Concentration Camp' implications of answering in the affirmative), perhaps we should reflect for a moment on the initially agreed moral status of these embryos. When they were put into storage they were presumably regarded by all who participated in the IVF process—parents, technicians, specialists—as potential human beings. They were stored precisely in such a way as to maintain that potential against the possibility that they might be required, and be suitable, for a second or further embryo transfer by the parents. What transforms them overnight, then, into mere 'laboratory material'? A decision of the parents that they are no longer required? A decision of COAG? Hardly!

Of course, we do this sort of thing with cars. A model becomes obsolete, and we cannibalise it or consign it to the wrecker's yard. What motivates this? The market. It's not that the car no longer functions,

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or that there aren't examples of the same model out on the roads. But it's all part of the way in which we treat 'products' in a market economy—that is, commodities designed by us for our use, and obsolete when a better model comes along. But we do not treat human beings in this way—not life-term prisoners, not even the criminally insane, not the demented, not those affected by Alzheimer's, not the dying. Even though organ transplants might be more effective if the organs were harvested from living donors, we would not contemplate visiting this indignity on the dying, even on prisoners on death row. How then can we contemplate doing this to embryos? Embryos are the resources that modern reproductive science has formed, cultivated and so carefully frozen and stored with the view to their being required—and remaining suitable—to be transferred to the maternal uterus and develop their full potential as mature human beings? Have we so commodified human life that we can treat it merely as a product in the market? Rather than 'making a virtue out of necessity' by using these embryos in destructive experimentation or 'redeeming their dying', aren't we visiting on them the final indignity? The 'they are going to die anyway' argument only obtains purchase if we treat embryos as commodities in the market rather than as potential human beings. For those involved in IVE, in particular, this seems, at the very least, paradoxical.

The final argument that has emerged in the course of the last seven months is the 'Salesmen's Solidarity' argument. As I have suggested, this is a fallback position from the pre-eminence originally claimed for the therapeutic applications of embryonic, as opposed to adult, stem cell research. However, while in theory embryonic stem cells may have wider clinical application, in practice it would seem there are significant complications and difficulties. There are, of course, also difficulties in adult stem cell clinical applications, and unequivocal clinical trial results—even in animal models—are yet to be established. The argument, then, is that both lines of research should be pursued until more definitive results are forthcoming.

NOW, IF IT COULD be established by independent moral argument—for example, by 'Rolls Royce' and 'Wreckers' discussed above—that there was nothing to choose from a moral point of view between embryonic and adult stem cell research, then it could be argued that both forms of research should proceed apace. But while there has never been any moral objection to adult stem cell research, the moral force of the arguments for embryonic stem cell research are at best tendentious. The argument from smallness ('Mini Minor') is not only specious in itself, but is at odds with the second argument ('Rolls Royce'), which stresses the great potential that embryo-derived stem cells have for curing disease. Arguing from potential, however, is not an unmixed blessing. On the one

hand, the utilitarian principle underlying this version leads logically to therapeutic and reproductive cloning, conclusions apparently to be repudiated by scientists and politicians alike. On the other hand, it gives more than a little further colour and substance to the argument of those who oppose destructive research on embryos because they are viewed not just as a potential resource for curing disease but as potential human beings in their own right. Finally, as I have indicated, the 'Wreckers' argument ('irrespective of the moral status of the embryo, some of them are going to die anyway') leads to the commodification of human life. It also leads to the acceptance of a very questionable and arbitrary overnight change in the moral status of embryos in storage—from potential human beings to mere 'laboratory material'.

Once again, in this 'Salesmen's Solidarity' argument, we have an example of the classic utilitarian argument that a good end—in this case, assisting adult stem cell research—justifies a morally tendentious means: destructive research on embryos. It would, I believe, be a matter of considerable regret should this be enshrined as a principle of scientific research.

An eminent member of the scientific community has spoken out strongly against what he claims are the absolutist attitudes of the 'Catholic Taliban'. I believe that what we are seeing in the context of the current debate is the emergence of a 'Scientific Taliban' no less absolutist in its dogmas than its Catholic counterpart. Its cardinal axiom is the utilitarian principle enunciated above: 'The end justifies the means.' And associated with it, virtually as a corollary, is the following creed: 'The ends to be pursued at all costs are scientific power and prestige and the commercial rewards consequent upon them. It follows, then, that if anything can be done to realise these ends, it must be done. If this quest requires that human life be treated no differently from other animate or inanimate existents, then so be it. And finally, in this particular context, whatever the consequences, Australian research in the area of stem cells must not fall behind overseas research in exploring all possible avenues of scientific and commercial success.'

Like all absolutist dogmas, this combination of axiom and corollaries appeals in its simplicity and directness. But also like most dogmas, as I have indicated, it is both flawed and paradoxical. Rather than subscribing to this creed and visiting the final indignity of destructive experimentation on these embryos which we have abstracted from their proper environment, proliferated, frozen and generally commodified, may we not redeem our own humanity by allowing them to succumb with dignity? ■

Bill Uren is Hospital Ethicist at Mater Health Services in Brisbane.



THE MONTH'S TRAFFIC

The long road home

LETTER FROM AFGHANISTAN

IN A MAKESHIFT classroom at the peak of the day, the children are laughing. The teacher, Jamila, is mimicking the actions of an elderly gentleman and the students scream out in their best English, 'Old man, old man.' Enthralled by these games of words and meaning, the children watch attentively until a broken fan brings the class to a premature halt. Clutching their tattered books, they scurry off into the dusty afternoon, punching the air with phrases and sounds.

For Jamila, the classes form part of a schedule that often encroaches on nights and weekends. As well as the conversational English lessons, she conducts advanced literary classes and offers vocational training in tailoring and embroidery. Constrained by a lack of resources and the uncertainties of life inside a refugee camp, Jamila nonetheless believes implicitly in 'the self-dependency of Afghans through the light of education'. The bleak realities of the sprawling Kacha Ghari camp do not puncture her optimism and hope.

The prospects for peace under the newly formed Karzai government have greatly accelerated the process of repatriation to Afghanistan. From Peshawar, in the fabled North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) of Pakistan, families board overburdened trucks on the passage across tribal lands and onwards through the Khyber Pass. Many have not set foot on their native soil since fleeing the brutal Russian invasion of 1979. Instead, they have lived in proximate exile, within sight of their cherished homeland.

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has actively encouraged refugee returns, arguing improved security and better prospects of a sustainable livelihood inside Afghanistan. The repatriation process has also been hastened by the more forceful policy of the Pakistani

government, which has begun to exhibit symptoms of compassion fatigue. Aid packages and travel grants have proven a powerful incentive for many families currently living below subsistence level. In addition to primary assistance, returnees have been offered information and counselling from refugee assistance agencies. Many now make the cross-border journey. The UNHCR has declared the repatriation process a 'durable solution'.

In past years, when repatriation levels were substantially lower, the UNHCR facilitated group repatriations. Families were organised according to their preferred area of resettlement. In this way, rehabilitative services could be better targeted, making sustainable economic growth in communities more likely. In the current environment, however, emphasis has been on the process of repatriation. There has been scant attention paid to reintegration, rehabilitation and 'durable' outcomes.

The UNHCR has rightly identified the most vulnerable groups for assistance. But their prospects for gainful employment remain grim. Half of the returnees possess no vocational skills. Often they have grown dependent on favourable conditions for business—circumstances they had to some extent enjoyed through their interaction with the Pakistani economy. Sporadic outbursts of violence and lingering ethnic tensions have also made conditions for resettlement less than ideal. In response to ongoing ethnic-based violence in parts of Afghanistan, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch recently called on the UNHCR to cease its promotion of voluntary repatriation. Their concerns are particularly relevant to refugees in the NWFP, most of whom are ethnic Pashtuns—a group still

persecuted for their involvement in the fallen Taliban regime.

Years of devastating drought have undermined Afghanistan's agricultural capacity. As a consequence, there are major food-security issues for returning refugees. With much of the country's farming infrastructure rendered useless by conflict or neglect, the need for widespread



well there's a turn up for the books!!

rehabilitation is particularly critical, given Afghanistan's dependence on the agricultural sector.

These uncertainties have led the majority of refugees to settle just over the border from Afghanistan, in the provinces of Nangahar and Kabul. Many refugees are travelling simply to collect food provisions and cash handouts, distributed at various checkpoints inside Afghanistan. Consequently, thousands are massed near the

capital, attempting to eke out an existence until conditions improve. These communities are placing an enormous strain on food services: the World Food Program recently announced a huge funding shortfall. Even with the glut of humanitarian agencies currently inside Afghanistan, the risk of famine is frighteningly real.

While the UNHCR has underscored the 1.4 million refugee returnees since March, there has been little analysis of the numbers coming back to Pakistan, often under the protection of people smugglers. These 'recyclers' (a term coined by the UNHCR to identify returnees illegally seeking secondary assistance) are believed to number more than one third of all refugees processed under the repatriation scheme. The UNHCR has recently introduced stricter criteria for eligibility, which has done little to ease the burden on the vulnerable refugee population. Prospective returnees must now give an assurance that they will not return to their country of exile. To ensure compliance, families have to destroy their mudbrick homes within the refugee camp as a final, compelling test of their commitment to a new life in Afghanistan. Women must remove their veils to be photographed, in order to satisfy new standards of verification. This causes significant distress in a country with strong (and often pragmatic) cultural traditions. The initiatives are apparently designed to strengthen the will of 'genuine' refugees. They also have the potential to jeopardise the legitimate rights of individuals to claim asylum in cases of 'genuine' persecution and deprivation.

In logistical terms, the repatriation process has been carried out swiftly and effectively, with no serious disruptions to the operation. However, in humanitarian terms the benefits are harder to judge and quantify. You could say that the refugee problem has been shifted rather than solved, and there is now little scope for long-term, integrated development.

Last week, the Kacha Ghari school was demolished. The newspapers carried pictures of young children pounding the remnants of their homes with sledgehammers, obliterating all signs of their meagre existence. The fate of the children, many of whom are orphans, is as yet unknown. As winter approaches, Jamila's optimism is beginning to wane. A cold wind blows hard against the light of education.

—Ben Fraser



Carbon queries

ANYONE WHO THOUGHT that tackling global warming would be a straightforward matter of tree-planting and energy-efficient technology is in for a rude shock. *New Scientist* recently reported three detailed studies of the activity of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. If the substance of these is confirmed, some of the scientific pillars of the Kyoto Protocol are looking decidedly wobbly.

The first results from CarboEurope—a continent-wide program pioneering research into where carbon ends up—show that new forests actually release more carbon into the atmosphere than they absorb for at least the first 10 years, and sometimes forever, depending on the environment. The problem is that clearing land for planting stimulates the soil to release a surge of carbon dioxide (CO₂) from rotting vegetation into the atmosphere. And contrary to conventional wisdom, old forests accumulate more carbon than young plantations. So it makes sense to conserve natural forests, rather than chop them down and replace them.

But the Kyoto Protocol is based on countries offsetting increased CO₂ emissions by planting trees. It even makes it profitable in some cases to tear down old growth and replace it with new. While there are other benefits of planting trees, such as decreased erosion and long-term carbon absorption, the terms of the Kyoto Protocol might have to be adjusted.

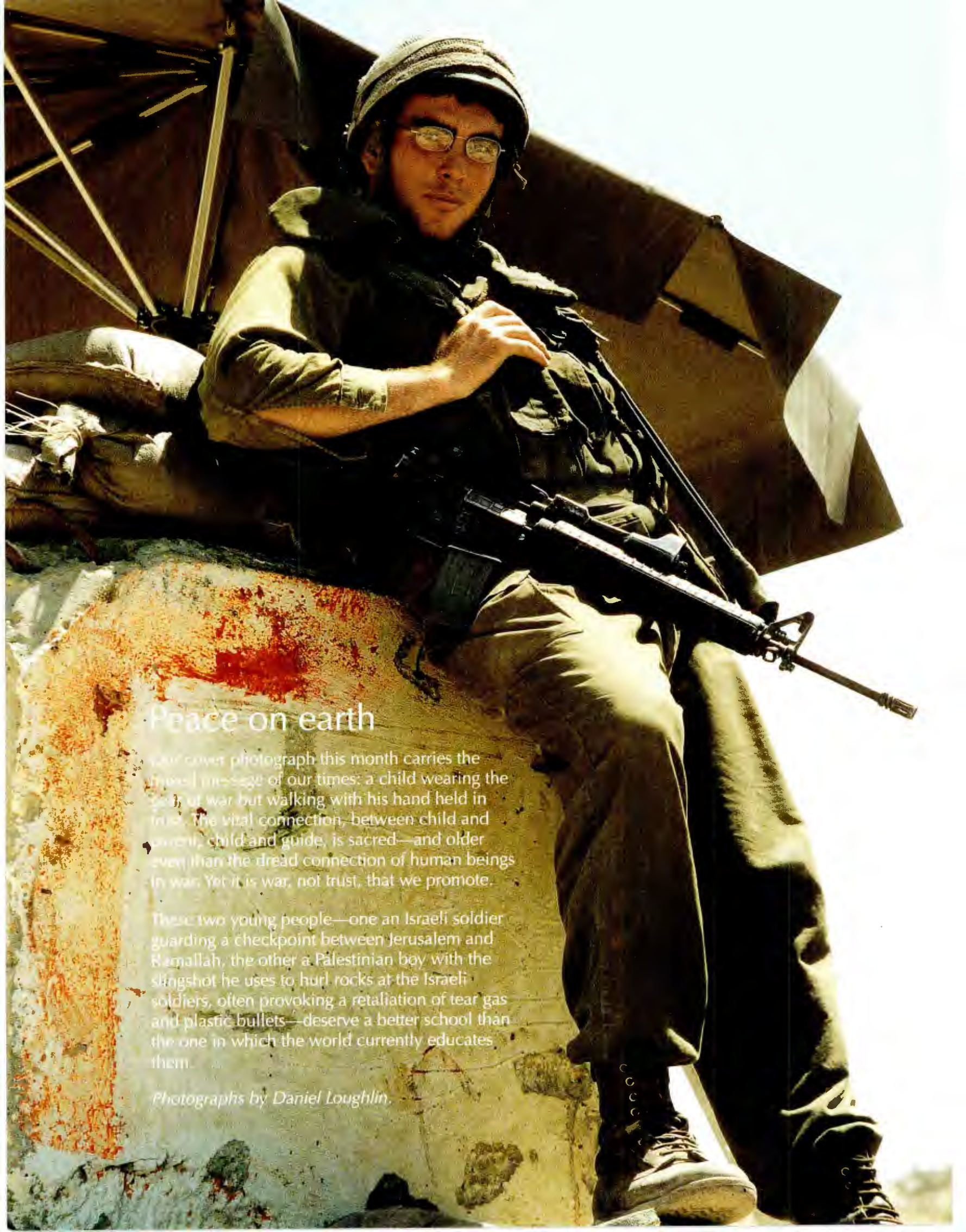
Meanwhile, the relative worth of petrol and diesel engines is being rethought. European countries (except Britain) have been encouraging the more efficient diesel. But diesel engines pump out soot, which recent research shows may be vastly more greenhouse-active than CO₂, because it absorbs heat. A recent American model shows that in the short term it might be better to stick with petrol engines—until we switch to a genuinely clean alternative, such as hydrogen.

And again, long-haul aircraft fly through the thinner atmosphere at high altitudes because less fuel is used, pumping out less CO₂. But high-level flight causes planes to form contrails of water vapour and ice in their wake. These are greenhouse-active, trapping heat and reflecting radiation. We are now at the point where the CO₂ saved by flying high is more than balanced by the increase in contrails—it may soon be better for the environment to fly at a lower altitude and emit more CO₂.

Does this mean that Kyoto is all wrong and founded on a fallacy? Well, yes and no. Things are a little more complex in the atmosphere than we thought. But global warming is a reality, and the aims of Kyoto and the strategy of getting countries to work together on climate change are still the best ways of alleviating the problem.

This experience is typical of the way science works. The initial research wasn't wrong—just preliminary. The goal of scientific investigation is not really to provide right or wrong answers, but a model of how the world works, so we can predict what's likely to happen. Every new piece of research, successful or unsuccessful, refines our working model. The atmosphere works differently from the way we thought, but that doesn't mean that a dramatic decrease in greenhouse gases is unnecessary. We just have to update our approach. ■

Tim Thwaites is a freelance science writer.



Peace on earth

Your cover photograph this month carries the mixed message of our times: a child wearing the gear of war but walking with his hand held in trust. The vital connection, between child and parent, child and guide, is sacred—and older even than the dread connection of human beings in war. Yet it is war, not trust, that we promote.

These two young people—one an Israeli soldier guarding a checkpoint between Jerusalem and Ramallah, the other a Palestinian boy with the slingshot he uses to hurl rocks at the Israeli soldiers, often provoking a retaliation of tear gas and plastic bullets—deserve a better school than the one in which the world currently educates them.

Photographs by Daniel Loughlin.





Down to the bone

RELIGIOUS ARTEFACTS ARE always newsworthy. We have heard of the discovery of Noah's Ark (unlikely), the Shroud of Turin (debated), and most recently we have an ossuary with an Aramaic inscription referring to James, son of Joseph and brother of Jesus.

The ossuary and its inscription pose fascinating questions of dating and provenance. But the more interesting question is cultural: why are discoveries of this kind newsworthy? Today, they are of interest for the historical evidence they may provide about Jesus' life. The journalists ask the scholars whether the ossuary proves that Jesus existed; whether the shroud proves that Jesus rose from the dead.

The passions that engender this kind of interest are desiccated. To cling to relics as conclusive evidence for Jesus' existence reflects a desire for certainty that is only a breath away from doubt. No matter how spectacular, the relic provides at best a momentary suspension of disbelief.

Earlier interest in relics was much richer. The bones of martyrs and saints formed a small channel into heaven, a privileged point of connection between God's world and our world, a market place of prayer and grace. People then also asked whether the relics were genuine. Martin of Tours (he who gave his cloak to a beggar), for example, was suspicious of a martyr's shrine, and discovered through prayer that the bones buried there belonged to bandits. It mattered to him, not because he was interested in historical proof, but because robbers' bones would offer no privileged point of connection.

In many parts of the world, the memory and remains of the martyrs still offer privileged evidence that the heavens are open. At the Jesuit University in San Salvador, the rose garden that commemorates the place where two women and six Jesuits died is a holy place. So is the library door, still bullet-marked. They provide paradoxical evidence that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is still alive in the face of doubts that neither church nor world are privileged places of God's presence.

But to return to the ossuary. Its discovery may speak powerfully to us for another reason. In the cultural shift of our day, people tend to be made into stories, and stories to be fragmented into a thousand possible interpretations. This is true particularly of those who have lived before us. The ossuary, genuine or not, reminds us in down-to-earth ways that the James of the Gospel and the James of the ossuary, one person or two, had bones that would fit into an urn and, with their contemporaries, had individual lives and fates. Behind the stories are men and women whose feet touched the world, marked and were marked by it, and who lived lives that were no more malleable than our own. Lives and fates make a claim on interpretation, whether they be the lives of the saints or the lives of asylum seekers languishing on Manus Island.

The bones of modern martyrs, of course, make the same point. The question about interpretation ultimately is not about what you make of these irreducible stories, but what they make of those to whom they are told. ■

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Aria for Azaria

LINDY THE OPERA

MANY OF US who lived through the 1980s in Australia still experience twinges of guilt for the relish with which we all followed the case of the disappearance of baby Azaria at Uluru and the subsequent trial—and trials—of her mother, Lindy Chamberlain. It was such a tantalising, enjoyable mystery which, as composer Moya Henderson acknowledges, provoked many a dinner-table argument.

For some, the idea of Lindy as an opera might seem improbable; even, as one commentator put it, tacky. But surely the unfolding of the Azaria case is exactly the kind of epic story that conjures up the possibility of music drama, while Lindy Chamberlain herself, enigmatically, even tragically self-possessed, suggests a heroine of operatic proportions. The problem, however, for composer and librettist is our proximity to the events, and the fact that the major players in the drama are still very much with us.

Lindy has had a long genesis. Originally Henderson's idea, the opera was commissioned by Moffat Oxenbould for the Australian Opera (as it then was) more than a decade ago. Judith Rodriguez was engaged to write the libretto, and she and Henderson began work on the project in 1991. Some scenes were workshopped in 1994, and the first version of the opera completed by 1997. At this point Opera Australia—surprise, surprise—lost interest and, according to Janet Healey, writing in the program, it was Simone Young who 'rescued it finally from the filing cabinet'.

The production is on a modest scale. No designer is credited, and the acknowledgment of a 'Costume Co-ordinator' almost creates the impression that cast members were encouraged to bring their own. The sparseness of the production is no disadvantage, though perhaps there might have been a greater and more imaginative use of projections.

Although *Lindy* is described as an opera in two acts, it runs for little more than an hour and a half, and director Stuart Maunder has wisely decided to present it without an interval. The brevity of the piece points to its density as musical narrative. It comes as a surprise, though, that there is such a documentary feel,

particularly as slabs of evidence given at the trial and the final inquiry are sung. Although the rock painting of Kurppangu, the devil dingo, contributes to a mythic framework, the opera remains firmly anchored in the world of courtroom drama. There is no exploration of the relationship between Lindy and husband Michael—indeed, there is minimal dialogue between them—and, while one appreciates the reason for this, it points to the essential limitations of *Lindy* as a piece of operatic storytelling. The sacred presence of Uluru is important at the beginning of the opera, but we lose sight of it as the courtroom drama takes over.

An essential element in the drama is the role of the 'Media Mongrels', represented by a chorus of up to eight singers who jeer from the sidelines. The almost jokey nature of this commentary is suggested by the program notes that describe the beginning of the trial: 'The Media Mongrels are all lined up in the courtroom. They give Lindy heaps.' At another point they cavort around the stage, obscenely imitating the now-pregnant Lindy. These grotesque interventions may be designed to unsettle the audience (according to Henderson, 'there's a little bit of dingo in all of us') but, for me at least, they lack any sense of sustained menace; and the libretto as a whole is so busy that Moya Henderson's music never quite breaks free of its constraints.

Yet Henderson has provided her characters with very singable vocal lines, and Joanna Cole as Lindy rises to the occasion with a developing performance that did the work proud. Her clear, authoritative soprano seems absolutely right for the part, and her characterisation is assured. The opera concludes with Lindy on stage alone, vindicated at last, as she 'walks out of the stifling darkness into the light'.

It may seem appropriate that David Hobson's much lighter tenor voice is overshadowed by Lindy's soprano: while Michael is an essential part of the Azaria story, the opera gives him little scope for character development. Barry Ryan is suitably hostile as the prosecuting counsel, and Elizabeth Campbell as the defence counsel (a bit of gender reallocation here in the

interests of vocal balance) is warm-voiced and sympathetic. The cast of sixteen (including two children as Aidan and Reagan) work hard to bring the piece alive.

The first-night audience gave it an enthusiastic reception (particularly for Cole and Henderson) and, before the performance, that other key player in the history of the opera, Simone Young, was given a standing ovation when she entered the theatre. Four performances were scheduled, at least putting it ahead of Richard Mills' *Batavia* which last year had to make do with two.

Speaking of Lindy Chamberlain-Creighton, Henderson concludes her program note with the words 'LINDY LIVES!' But what of the opera? Will it live to see another day? Is there any chance of it trav-



elling to Melbourne in 2004 or of being revived in Sydney? Knowing the record of Opera Australia, we should not hold our breath.

But it would be a pity if this were the end of it all. According to Deborah Jones in her review for *The Australian*, the 1997 version of *Lindy* had three acts, two intervals and more than two-and-a-half hours of music.

Perhaps thought should be given to restoring some of that narrative weight to the opera, to give the music more room to grow. If the story of Lindy's emergence on to the stage proves anything, it is that an opera is not made in a day.

—John Rickard

This month's contributors: Ben Fraser works with Australian Volunteers International and is currently based in Kabul, Afghanistan; John Rickard is an honorary professorial fellow at Monash University.

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Crime and

MOST AUSTRALIANS believe there is a crime wave in this country. We have been manipulated by the headlines of tabloid newspapers, the shock tactics of talkback radio hosts, and the false advertising and posturing of political parties anxious to achieve or maintain power. The result is that many Australians now think there is only one way to deal with offenders: lock them up and throw away the key.

The pre-election debate about crime and punishment in Victoria mirrored closely what has happened in recent years in State election campaigns all around Australia. Political leaders, supported by popular commentators, have suggested that crime has risen dramatically and that criminal sanctions are not tough enough.

There is little room in this popular debate for reasoned argument, accurate knowledge or reliable statistical information. Everyone is an expert in the field, and few bother to look at the facts.

Crime and imprisonment rates

Already there has been a dramatic increase in the national adult imprisonment rate, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), the most reliable source of data available on this area.

In the decade from 1999 to 2000, there was a 32 per cent increase in the rate of imprisonment—from 112 to 148 per 100,000 of the adult population. This represented an increase of 52 per cent in the total prison population—from 14,305 in 1990 to 21,714 in the year 2000 (ABS 4517.0, 'Prisoners in Australia' June 2001). This rate of increase has been sustained over the last two years.

Within the national prison population, there is a shocking over-representation of disadvantaged minority groups, including Indigenous people. Currently Indigenous Australians make up 20 per cent of our total prison population. That amounts to an imprisonment rate 15 times the non-Indigenous rate (ABS 4512.0, 'Corrective Services, Australia', September 2001).

The cost of imprisonment continues to increase year by year, as does the cost of every form of institutional care or residential service. Imprisonment costs vary according to the level of security of the facility—a

minimum-security cell comes in at about \$30,000 per annum, a top-security cell at \$120,000. Nationally, the recurrent expenditure on corrective services totalled \$1.5 billion for 2000–2001, with \$1.3 billion being spent annually on the operation of the country's 96 prisons. Such costs do not reflect the quality of the accommodation, but rather the costs of security installations, including wages of prison officers.

It is also clear from the most reliable sources that there has not been a significant increase in serious crime across Australia, despite repeated assertions to the contrary, and the presentation of misleading figures by groups who have a clear partisan agenda. Certainly there has been no increase commensurate with the 52 per cent increase in the national prison



population recorded during the last decade.

It is instructive to note that the majority (52 per cent) of those imprisoned in Australia today have not been convicted of a violent offence (ABS 4517.0, 'Prisoners in Australia', June 2001).

Nationally, there has been a significant increase in assaults, but this increase reflects the increasing rate of reporting of incidents of domestic violence and sexual assault in recent years. Indications are that it is not the offences that have increased, but rather the preparedness of victims to report them to the authorities.

Most Australians would be amazed to learn that there has not been a significant increase in the homicide rate in Australia for over 100 years (ABS 4510.0, 'Recorded Crime, Australia', May 2002). In 1915, the homicide rate was 1.8 per 100,000. In 1998 it was 1.6 per 100,000. During the intervening years, it hit a low of 0.8 during 1941, and a high of 2.4 in 1988 ('Crime and Justice', Adam Graycar, *Year Book Australia*, 2001).

Small increases in the last few years in the homicide rate are explained by the increase in charges of attempted murder and culpable driving resulting in death. Between 1993 and 2001, while the number

punishment

Australia should move from retributive justice to restorative justice, argues **Peter Norden**.

of victims of murder increased slightly—from 296 to 306—there was a slight decrease in the rate per 100,000 of the population—from 1.7 to 1.6 victims (ABS 4510.0, 'Recorded Crime, Australia', May 2002).

In some areas serious criminal activity has increased. Robberies more than doubled between 1993 and 2001. This increase, and the higher rates in crimes such as theft from motor vehicles, can be clearly linked to the increased use of illegal substances during the last 10 years.

Value for money?

The question to be asked of the State and Territory Governments around Australia is this: if there has

and practical, useful outcomes from government services in almost every area of civil society—except the prison system.

It is not possible to have such dramatic and costly increases in the use of imprisonment over a decade and still maintain other essential community services, particularly in the areas of health, education and welfare.

It is about time we left behind our penal heritage, with its focus on retribution through punishment, and raised our expectations of the correctional services in the various States and Territories of Australia.

Recently, the US Department of Justice released figures that indicated that the current American prison population had reached a total of 2.1 million



not been a proportionate increase in serious crime in the last decade, why should the Australian community be prepared to pay for a 52 per cent increase in the prison population, at an average annual cost of around \$50,000 per person?

It appears that the majority of those incarcerated have at least one previous period of imprisonment. Of those prisoners who were serving a sentence when the 2000 Australian Prison Census was taken, 56 per cent had previously served a prison sentence. For Aboriginal prisoners, the proportion was 76 per cent (ABS 4517.0, 'Prisoners in Australia', June 2001).

So what the ordinary taxpayers should be asking their State and Territory Governments is this: if our correctional system is so disappointing in terms of deterrence, and if the vast majority of those sent to prison reoffend following their release, why as a community are we spending an increasing percentage of the government dollar on constructing and operating new prisons? Why do we not, as a community, examine the effectiveness of our prison systems to ensure that we are getting the required results? If we saw equivalent poor results in the education or health systems, we would demand a better deal. Australian people, it seems, want value for their money,

citizens. More than four times that number were on some other form of supervisory order within the community. The highest rate of imprisonment was in the State of Louisiana—800 for every 100,000 citizens—indicating that one in every 125 citizens was in prison at any one time. At the recent national conference of Catholic Charities USA, held in Chicago, one of the papers documented a disturbing development: the Louisiana Department of Corrections has begun using the reading score of grade five and six students in public schools to predict the growth in the number of prison cells needing to be constructed in 10 years' time.

Citizens in Louisiana might be prepared to support expansionary prison policies rather than invest in the future prospects of primary-school children, but are Australian citizens going to be led into such misguided social policy? Are they ready to be manipulated by vested interests, including the private prison industry?

At the moment Victoria, for example, has the highest rate of private prison cells of any jurisdiction in the world, with more than 40 per cent being operated by private interests, largely owned by shareholders in the United States. If there were any

place in the world where private prison firms might be prepared to lobby governments and media outlets for an expansionary prison policy, it would be the State of Victoria.

Incarceration of the mentally ill

The National Survey of Mental Health and Well-Being, conducted by the ABS in 1997, found that almost one in five Australians aged 18 years or more met criteria for a mental disorder at some time during the 12 months prior to the survey. It also found that only 38 per cent of people with a mental disorder had used health services. These results suggest a large and unmet need for mental health services. Among this group, young Australians are the most highly represented.*

Throughout Australia today, those with a mental illness compounded by a problem of substance misuse are usually excluded from treatment when they finally approach either a mental health service or a drug treatment unit. Mental health services say that they cannot deal with the substance use; drug services explain that they are not equipped to deal with the symptoms of mental illness. In consequence, many young Australians are now the victims of what is called 'ping-pong therapy'—because our existing health services do not have the capacity to respond in an effective way.

Policy makers at all levels of government have many reasons to be concerned about young people with such a dual disability. They are at risk of becoming homeless and of being incarcerated within criminal justice institutions. Once within those institutions, their condition is rarely diagnosed, and only a very small percentage ever receives any drug treatment or behaviour-change therapy.

Recent comparative studies of mental health expenditure found that Australia spends about half the amount that equivalent Western countries spend. Poor community mental health services inevitably lead to an increase in self-medication by a growing number of young Australians. The consequent increase in illegal substance use in turn leads to a rapid inflation of the prison populations in all States and Territories of Australia (NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into Mental Health Services, Sydney 2002).

Much of the recent dramatic increase in the Australian prison population can be explained by recognising this nexus between untreated mental health needs, subsequent illegal use of drugs as a form of self-medication, and the eventual intervention by instrumentalities of the criminal justice system.

Imprisonment is much more expensive than community mental health care, and—more importantly—it is less effective.

Public preoccupation with punishment

There has been a significant shift in the public psyche in recent years. Public understanding of the role of

the criminal justice system, and the prison system in particular, has changed. The ideal of treatment and rehabilitation has lost much of its public support, displaced by an increased emphasis on punitive sanctions. Public debate about crime and punishment has taken on a strong emotive tone. Compassion for the needs of the less fortunate has been replaced by an almost exclusive concern for the needs of the victim and a determination to punish the offender.

The new emphasis on victims' rights (itself a reaction to neglect) and the growing sense of personal fear and insecurity has led to such draconian legislation as indeterminate sentencing, even for juvenile offenders. In the United States we have seen the re-emergence of such punitive measures as the death penalty, chain gangs and corporal punishment, and in Britain, the publicly available paedophile register and the requirement that those doing community service wear uniforms and undertake demeaning labour.

Not only has crime policy taken on an emotional tone, it has also now become highly politicised. The earlier bipartisan political approach has disappeared, and opportunistic political leaders now engage in a populist debate that does not recognise the need to refer to statistics, costs or actual outcomes. Expert and professional opinion is now relegated to a lower place on the scale of influence, behind so-called 'public opinion', as expressed on talkback radio shows and in newspaper vote lines.

In such a social climate, intensified by the events of September 11, fears and insecurities, particularly of the elderly (who are always the least likely to become the victims of crime), can be orchestrated into a perpetual state of anxiety and a false sense of public crisis.

Restorative justice

The issue of crime and punishment occupied the mind of society long before Dostoyevsky wrote his famous novel. Australians have continued this debate, sometimes basing their reflections on knowledge and experience, guided by statistical research and information. But increasingly, their responses are based in raw emotion following the publicity given to a notorious crime.

The call for increased police numbers and harsh penalties does not appear to be moderated by the fact that such approaches have little impact on crime. Twenty years ago in New Zealand, the sentence of corrective training was introduced to take the place of borstal and other forms of youth prison. It was designed as an alternative to longer-term imprisonment, a 'short, sharp shock' for young offenders between the ages of 16 and 19. It was a style of boot camp in which young criminals were pulled out of their beds at an early hour, worked hard, and at the end of the three months were automatically released. It emphasised discipline, health and fitness.

The Justice Department evaluated this form of sentencing in 1983 and found that 71 per cent of the

trainees were re-convicted within a year of release (*Restore*, No 21, Christchurch, New Zealand). A five-year follow-up study in 1997 found that, of all persons convicted in 1988, 92 per cent had reoffended. One would expect that findings of this nature would convince people that prison of this kind does not work.

Equally, increasing police numbers will not automatically reduce the crime rate. Dr Don Weatherburn, the Director of the New South Wales Bureau of Crime and Statistics, was quoted in *The Australian*, 30 September 2002, as saying: 'Police can't control the rise in child neglect and abuse, the growth in long-term unemployment, the fall in school retention rates, the growth in portable consumer goods or the spatial concentration of poverty. Yet, there's good reason to believe all of these factors are contributing significantly to Australia's crime problems.' (See also 'Unequal In Life: the Distribution of Social Disadvantage in Victoria and New South Wales', Jesuit Social Services, 1999.)

There is another approach that the Australian community and our political leaders could take. It is called 'restorative justice'.

Restorative justice is concerned with bringing about reconciliation and healing and ensuring that the views of all parties are heard. It seeks the views of the victim, the offender, and other members of the

community who could be regarded as stakeholders following the report of a criminal offence.

Restorative justice seeks personal accountability, notable by its absence in our present criminal justice system. It also seeks to create opportunities for better human interaction, and for the healing of wounds, especially the wounds of victims, who often feel unrecognised and unsupported in our existing structures.

Restorative justice makes reparation, rather than punishment, a central concern. Where it is being implemented, restorative justice has brought about a reduction in the rate of offending and in prison numbers.

How refreshing it would be to discover an Australian politician with responsibility for shaping criminal justice policy, who was also committed to implementing reform that incorporated restorative justice principles. Restorative justice is a positive approach to the complex issue of crime and punishment and it could enhance the quality of life of all Australian citizens. ■

Peter Norden sj is the policy director of Jesuit Social Services (JSS) and the convenor of the Victorian Criminal Justice Coalition.

*For more information see 'Heroin Use as a Form of Self-Medication', on the JSS website: www.jss.org.au

THE WORLD
SARAH LOWE

AIDS: South Africa's Crisis

T Contemporary myths and working with women

THE WOMEN'S SONG is almost deafening, echoing off the concrete walls. 'This AIDS is killing,' they sing as they file in from the dusty yard, 'but together we can make a change.'

More than 40 women press into the tiny hall, lining the walls three deep. They are resplendent in red pleated skirts and white T-shirts that proclaim 'Community against AIDS'. The singing shifts into prayer, call-and-response style, before stopping abruptly for the reports to begin. Women step to the front, holding up butcher's paper that records their week's work: the number of AIDS patients cared for, the number of clinics and townships visited, the number of condoms distributed. Then the women pack into a minibus hired for the occasion. We follow to a nearby township to see them in action.

We are in the Thoyandou valley, in Limpopo province, South Africa. Just north of these blue hills lies the Zimbabwe border, and through them cuts the main highway linking South Africa's lucrative

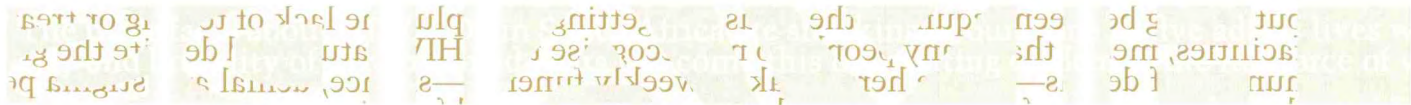
goldmines to the rest of the continent. It is a conduit for workers, goods and—like highways everywhere—sexually transmitted disease.

Many people here survive by working as farm labourers, but the wages are low and the work seasonal. A lot of men work in the mines or other industries around Johannesburg, and return home just once a year. Under apartheid, Thoyandou was the administrative capital of the Venda homeland. There were many more Afrikaners here then, living in the pleasant suburbs that ring the busy town centre. These days there are few white faces, and usually they belong to farmers who are holding on grimly to their acreage. Most other Afrikaners moved to Pietersburg or Jo'burg—or left South Africa altogether, often for Australia—some time in the past decade. Their former homes and overgrown gardens are now occupied by the small Venda middle class, and by non-government organisations like the Centre for Positive Care (CPC).

It is CPC's coordinator, Mashudu Madadzhe, who now steers the four-wheel drive ute around curves in the dusty red road. As she drives, she talks about these women, her peer education team, most of whom were once sex workers. Sex work, she explains, has long been accepted as part of the local culture. It is one of the few options for poor women during high unemployment. It is also a major factor in the spread of AIDS. Labour migration is another factor, Mashudu says, because men will often have other partners in the city.

When I ask why CPC deliberately recruits sex workers, Mashudu's answer is surprising. 'I think sex workers are the most powerful women in any community—the way they negotiate. They don't mind going to the bars to talk to men. When you build their morale, you will see they are very strong women.'

The program insists that if peer educators want to help spread the message about safer sex, they need to lead by example. 'When we started, we were not even allowed to enter people's homes,' Mashudu says. 'We targeted bus stops, shops and workplaces. We'd do street theatre, and people would come.' Now, she says, the peer educators are women of high status in their communities, and people clamour for them to visit their homes.



We arrive in the township—a grid of steep, rocky streets lined with identical two-room brick houses, each with a tap out front and a pit toilet behind. The women pile out, singing already, and a crowd soon builds. The melodies are church songs and freedom songs from the anti-apartheid era, adapted for a safer sex message. 'Condomise, condomise,' they sing—a new verb to me, but the meaning seems clear to their audience. Some of the women pull on trousers and hats, others flowery dresses, to act out a play exploring issues including alcohol abuse, domestic violence and HIV/AIDS.

The basic facts about HIV/AIDS in South Africa are shocking: around one in five adults lives with the virus; the number rises to one in three in the worst-hit areas. After the dislocation, poverty and brutality of the apartheid years has come this devastating epidemic, the full force of which is yet to hit. South Africa has the world's highest number of HIV-positive people, but the lag between acquiring the virus and getting sick, plus the lack of testing or treatment facilities, means that many people do not recognise their HIV status. And despite the growing number of deaths—people here speak of weekly funerals—silence, denial and stigma persist, depriving people of the support of their communities and families.

The persistence of denial seems extraordinary when every person here is likely to have lost at least

one family member to AIDS. In the cities every second billboard seems to feature Nelson Mandela urging parents to talk to their kids about AIDS. But the disease itself is complex. You can have it for years, and never be sick. You can pass it on to someone else in several ways, and they may sicken and die while you remain healthy. There is not just one way to die of AIDS; the most common AIDS-related causes of death here are tuberculosis and pneumonia.

Understanding HIV/AIDS requires a basic-level understanding of germ theory, viruses, the autoimmune system, blood-to-blood and mother-to-child transmission, safer sex and drug use and more. In areas like Thoyandou, literacy levels are low, basic health services and information are in short supply, and there are strong cultural beliefs about the spiritual dimensions of illness. So it is unsurprising that many remain ignorant about the epidemic decimating their communities. There is also a strong streak of resistance to the science of HIV/AIDS here, and to drugs like anti-retrovirals, which are not only beyond the economic reach of most Africans, but seen by some as too 'Western'. Every week there is a new traditional healer, or witch doctor, in the local news, claiming to have found a miracle cure. South African President Thabo Mbeki has only just began moving

away from a stated policy position that it is poverty rather than HIV that causes AIDS.

When I ask Mashudu about the impact of Mbeki's position, she grimaces. 'It is so frustrating. It does our work so much damage, because of course people believe what the President says.'

It is certainly true that the epidemic is caused partly by poverty, she says. Poverty, unemployment, gender inequality, illiteracy: all these things make people much more vulnerable. AIDS in turn increases people's poverty, because unlike other epidemics, this one hits the most economically-active members of a community first. Infection levels peak in the 15 to 45 age group; in other words, those who grow the food, work in the mines, or care for the children. It has a particular impact on women, who do most of the care for the sick, even when they are sick themselves.

LILLIAN TIPS HER FACE to the sky as she talks about the most painful times. 'I was feeling miserable,' she says. 'I didn't know how I could find life.' Her husband was working in Johannesburg, far from their tiny rural village outside Thoyandou. She travelled to see him when his visits back home became less and less frequent, and found that he had another partner and child in the city. The child had recently died of AIDS, so he made Lillian take the test. When she told

him the result, he went to his girlfriend, leaving Lillian alone. 'I couldn't take it,' she says. 'I took all the sleeping pills, I didn't care how much. When I woke up, I was feeling so sick.'

That was almost four years ago. Lillian returned to her mud-walled house overlooking the valley, and to her four children, now aged 14, 11, 9 and 5. She's seen her husband twice since, but he rarely sends money. 'What can I say?' she asks. 'I'm just living my life. I can't say I'm looking after myself, because sometimes I don't have the right food, like vegetables. Most of all I make sure that I never get a headache [one sign of AIDS-related illness]. If I do, I go straight to the clinic.'

Lillian's life changed when she confided her troubles to a woman at her church two years ago. The woman worked for a local AIDS organisation called TVAAP, or Tivoleni. She invited Lillian to a workshop, where Lillian met Mama Cecelia for the first time. Lillian was very thin and sick. 'She has no mother and father,' says Mama Cecelia. 'She was thinking about who will look after her children when she dies. Her husband is giving no support, and the mother-in-law the same.' Mama Cecelia is a generous woman. In addition to giving counsel, Mama Cecelia helps Lillian carry water, wash and cook,

of power to negotiate safer sex, and cultural factors, like the accepted practice of men having multiple sexual partners. One organisation is tackling the gender dimension of the epidemic from the other side by working to change men's attitudes and behaviour.

Targeted AIDS Interventions (TAI) began working in KwaZulu Natal with young women, aiming to empower them in their relationships with men. But it soon became apparent to TAI founder, Gethewana Makhaye, that if heterosexual relationships were to change, men needed to help make it happen. TAI set up an innovative program with the National Football Association, working through soccer clubs to involve young men in AIDS prevention. South Africa is a soccer-mad nation, as I discovered when travelling there during the World Cup. Young men who excel at soccer are respected by their communities, so they are ideal recruits for peer education.

Jerome, 17, has high hopes of playing for South Africa in the next World Cup final. Meanwhile, he's involved in theatre work and workshops at district soccer matches, helping spread the word about behaviour change.

The program was recently extended into schools on the outskirts of Durban, to boys like Andile, 15, a student at Telelegau Primary School. As Andile

and buys food with her own money when there is nothing to feed the children.

Tivoleni's support has changed Lillian's attitude to living with HIV/AIDS. 'At first I couldn't even talk about it,' she says, 'even when people said "look at those people who are HIV-positive: it's because they run around". But now I argue with them.' Lillian has told just a few friends of her HIV status, fearing discrimination against both her kids and herself. 'I live for my children,' she says, even if I have a bad day, they just make me smile.'

Across Southern Africa, AIDS is leaving increasing numbers of children to fend for themselves. There are predictions of one million South African AIDS orphans by 2005. When I ask Mama Cecelia about the likely future of Lillian's children, it becomes clear how few resources there are, even in the region's wealthiest country. 'We shall pray to God to take care of her children,' she says, 'but I'm not guaranteeing we can, because we have nothing.'

There are many HIV/AIDS organisations in South Africa. Some provide home-based care for AIDS-sick people, some do prevention work on the street, others fight for the rights of people living with the virus. Many, like CPC and Tivoleni, focus primarily on working with women, because women are the most vulnerable to the disease. They are affected by poverty, isolation, domestic and sexual violence, lack

explains, the program helps participants to identify their hopes for the future, and to learn about HIV/AIDS as one of the obstacles that may stand in their way. With infection rates in KwaZulu Natal province at almost one in three—the highest in South Africa—it seems likely that AIDS will steal the future of many of Andile's classmates.

In traditional Zulu culture, sex is not openly discussed, especially between young people and adults. Andile: 'At home, if you talk about sex, it's like "shhhh", it's something scary. But now, even on TV the president is emphasising that parents should speak to their kids about this killer disease, they should give information to their kids. They must not run away from this now.'

Andile says that there are a lot of myths in his community about HIV/AIDS, but because there are increasing numbers of deaths, people are finally learning more about the disease. Students at his school are asking him more questions. 'Kids feel that this thing is killing,' he says. 'But they also think that we must not discriminate against people who are HIV-positive. Maybe someday it will be your mother or father.' ■

Sarah Lowe is a writer and editor for Oxfam Community Aid Abroad. CPC, Tivoleni and TAI are supported by Oxfam Community Aid Abroad, part of an Oxfam program tackling HIV/AIDS in South Africa.

Law v Law

When fundamental human rights and immigration decisions collide

BECAUSE AUSTRALIA has no human rights act there is no way to challenge the legitimacy of laws that are intended to be cruel.

Take the instance of a Family Court order, made in Sydney on 10 October 2002, that allowed a baby to lose his mother, the mother to be deported, and migration laws that were designed to protect our sovereignty to triumph over laws designed to protect the best interests of Australian children.

The parties were 'Alexandrine Nevsky' and 'Damien Scott' (false names to preserve their identity), and the Secretary of the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA). Justice Richard Chisholm was the unlucky Family Court Solomon, come to judgment.

The mother was a Russian asylum seeker who had tried and failed to persuade Australia that she had a well-founded fear of persecution. If she had to go back to Russia she would, she claimed, be murdered, having already been threatened, assaulted and raped there, with what she claimed was official connivance, because she witnessed a crime. She was detained in Villawood detention centre and was awaiting repatriation, 'as soon as reasonably practicable'.

Her baby, conceived and born in Australia, is nine months old. His Australian-born father was caring for him and bringing him in to visit the mother three times a week. She wanted more access, and also asked for an order preventing immigration authorities from removing her from Australia, arguing that it was not 'reasonably practicable' to send her away,

because it was certainly not in the best interests of her baby to be deprived permanently of his natural mother. DIMIA's argument was that the Family Court did not have the power to make orders—even in a 'child's best interests'—that would effectively prevent DIMIA officers from carrying out a positive duty under the *Migration Act 1958*.

According to the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC), children are entitled not to be separated from their parents without their [the child's] consent, and then only

sympathy, but inexorably, he ruled in favour of DIMIA.

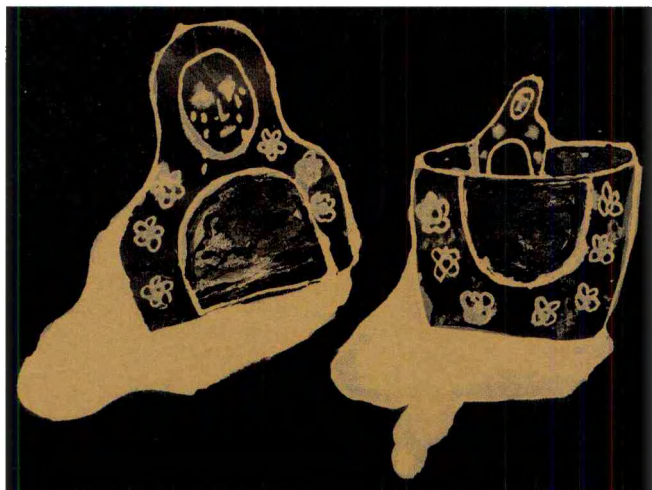
The Migration Act is a clear, detailed code for the efficient removal of unsuccessful migration applicants from Australia. Had the mother's argument succeeded, it would have significantly undermined a consciously heartless scheme.

Chisholm's judgment is larded with signs that the case could have been run another way. He seems repeatedly to have reframed the mother's arguments and pleadings to put her case in the best light. He lamented not being directed to even one Australian case which would have allowed a 'child's best interests' to override deportation decisions. He himself was aware of 40 years' worth of English cases that had gone the other way (not to mention European jurisprudence). It did not help. The worst result possible was arrived at.

Had the woman had a visa, the court would have taken a very different approach.

Just four weeks earlier, the High Court had ruled on whether it was an unacceptable infringement of a mother's rights of movement to restrain her from taking her child back to her native land—in this case, India. In *U v U*, the Indian-born mother's wish, when her marriage broke down, to take her eight-year-old daughter 'home' to Mumbai where her family and social supports were, was denied. The grounds: that the child's best interests required that she stay in Sydney so that the father could have frequent access.

The mother had argued that this breached her human rights under the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*. The majority of the High Court dismissed that argument saying



if it is in the child's best interests. But under common law interpretative traditions, a child's internationally guaranteed rights do not come into play unless they are part of an Australian law, or there is some ambiguity or loophole that the UNCRC would make clear. Justice Chisholm had to sort out what Parliament meant when it made the 'best interests of the child' the paramount consideration under the *Family Law Act*, but not even relevant to a Migration Act decision. With

that '[A] right of freedom of mobility of a parent ... must defer to the expressed paramount consideration, the welfare of the child if that were to be adversely affected by a movement of a parent.'

Even so, two judges disagreed: soon-to-retire Justice Gaudron and Justice Michael Kirby. Kirby said that the best interests of the child are the paramount, not the sole consideration, and that '[T]he economic, cultural and psychological welfare of the parents is also to be considered, because they are human beings and citizens too and because it is accepted that their welfare impacts upon the welfare of the child.' Both dissenting judges emphasised the gendered discrimination against mothers hidden behind the 'best interests of the child' argument. The mother will stay unwillingly in Australia.

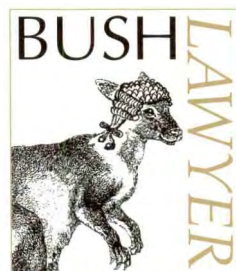
AUSTRALIA'S FOUNDING fathers decided not to create a bill of rights in the new Constitution but to leave their protection to the common law. The common law tradition leaves it to judges to 'find' or develop the law when old rules or statutes have to be applied to novel situations, deciding 'what Parliament meant'—when Parliament clearly hadn't meant much at all.

Parliament wished to protect our borders and enacted a comprehensive code to do so. Quite separately it also acted to protect the 'best interests' of Australian children when family relationships break down. But Parliament did not anticipate the probability that the one regime could affect the implementation of the other, and judges have different approaches to how the law 'is' or should be found. Because we have no national overview of the rights of children, they are scappily protected by a patchwork of laws in eight jurisdictions that deal with family and criminal law, equity, child protection and family violence regimes. Even the federal judiciary cannot agree on what a child's rights mean, without an international yardstick.

If Justice Chisholm had been Solomon he could have made the right decision about the care of a nine-month-old baby by testing the relative selflessness of those who claimed her custody.

In modern Australia, this is not a justiciable principle. ■

Moira Rayner is a barrister and writer.



THIS IS THE STORY of a poor man. I will call him Michael. I knew him only posthumously. His story emerged during a committal hearing involving two men charged with murdering him. Murder cases are solemn and melancholy affairs, but this was unusually desolating. If you are a celebrity, half the journalists in town will cover your minor driving case, but this was a case to which no one came.

I don't know anything about Michael's early life. In court we explored only his last few weeks. He was a homeless man with an intellectual disability and he suffered from alcoholism. It seems that he had been 'adopted' by, or had attached himself to the two men, also alcoholics, who were charged with his murder. They lived in a block of Housing Commission flats and occasionally allowed Michael to sleep there, sometimes in their rooms but often only in the communal laundry where the dogs lived.

There was evidence that Michael gave the accused men control over his pension moneys in return for their 'hospitality'—some food and flagons of wine. At first, the relationship between the various parties was friendly. After a time, however, it became abusive, probably because Michael was a petty thief. And 'petty' is precisely what I mean—the evidence was that his friends had accused him of stealing part of a loaf of bread and about a dollar in change.

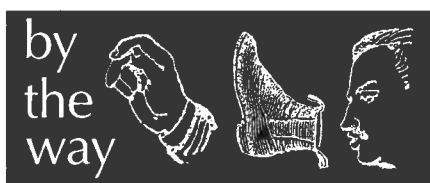
The retribution for these misdemeanours was severe. Several witnesses gave evidence of seeing Michael being battered with fists, iron bars and wooden broom handles over a three-week period before his death. An autopsy revealed that he had suffered multiple wounds to the head, some of which had become gangrenous. To complicate matters, he had also been suffering from a massive chest infection. The forensic pathologist's opinion was that he had died from sepsis—blood-poisoning, which had overwhelmed his immune system. In his opinion, the sepsis had been caused by the introduction of various dangerous bacteria through the head wounds and into the bloodstream. The bacteria had then colonised his lungs.

To prove a murder the Crown must show that a person has died and that the accused attacked him or her either intending to cause grievous harm or death, or with reckless indifference to human life. In this case, there were two legal points to resolve: had the accused caused Michael's death? And had they attacked him intending to cause him grievous bodily harm or death, or with reckless indifference to whether or not he died? On the pathologist's evidence I thought that causation could be proved. I was also satisfied that battering someone on the head with bars and broomsticks was sufficient to persuade a jury of an intention to inflict grievous harm. I committed the two to the Supreme Court for trial.

Postscript: Before trial, the defence obtained further scientific evidence from a microbiologist. His opinion—that the organism that killed Michael was very unlikely to have migrated from the head wounds—contradicted the pathologist's opinion. The Director of Public Prosecutions withdrew the murder charges. The accused pleaded guilty to serious assault charges. Michael died, it seems, of neglect and the accumulated disadvantages of poverty. ■

Séamus O'Shaughnessy is a Sydney magistrate.

Dead end



Huli-doolally

I KNOW IT SOUNDS ODD and I'll try to explain it in my cryptic way, but I found myself in recent weeks recalling the World Cup of Soccer staged in Korea and Japan earlier this year.

Unless you happen to be a whale, you'd probably agree that the Japanese in our time are a people who place a high priority on politeness and punctilio, especially in dealing with each other and with other nationalities. That's why playing host to the 2002 World Cup stretched their cultural resources.

Years ago, when Japanese postwar economic recovery included, among other ploys, the close imitation of certain western manufactured items (especially cameras), a story went round that the Japanese had renamed one of their many small islands 'Usa' (pronounced Ooza). They then shifted various kinds of plant to Usa and, so the story goes, labelled the goods produced there as 'MADE IN USA'.

With the World Cup imminent, bringing invading hordes of soccer fans who, to put it mildly, would need to be treated with a severity that the Japanese usually reserve for endangered marine species, someone in authority must have recalled the old 'Usa' trick. But this time the Japanese didn't just rename an island, they sort of subconsciously invented a country.

This country was called Huli (pronounced Hooli) and its people were the Huligans. For some reason, the Japanese expected waves of these Huligans to be attracted to the World Cup venues, some of which were small provincial towns vulnerable to unruly influx. But these Huligans, the Japanese were at pains to insist, were not to be confused with those similarly named characters from the incontrovertible source of soccer violence, the United Kingdom. Such a confusion would cause diplomatic offence and international angst. Japanese World Cup planning could not be seen to be reviling in advance supporters from the very home of 'the beautiful game'. By constantly stripping the Huligans of any *familiar* national connection, the Japanese distanced them from the British and gradually brought into being, by implication, a phantom homeland. The real hooligans ceased to be the lager louts of England and Scotland and became the dregs of Huli, a vaguely located, independent state alive in rumour and hearsay.

By one of those quirks of language that are more common than we think, Huligans, as they surfaced in Japan for the World Cup, turned out to speak a brand of English. Obscurely recognisable phrases like 'Yoo wot?' and 'No-wot-I-meen?' and 'Goin darn a boozier wiv wossisname' recurred among a succession of glottal stops and serial fricatives that seemed always to be on the verge of the English language that we know without ever quite making the jump. Despite this tantalising familiarity, the Huligans' conversations with each other in their own language seemed—as is often the case with foreigners overheard by the determinedly monolingual—to be aggressive and acrimoniously argumentative. But Japanese authorities quickly explained

that it was Huligan style to be abusive, to curse constantly and to be routinely recalcitrant. How to explain, though, their rampant destructiveness?

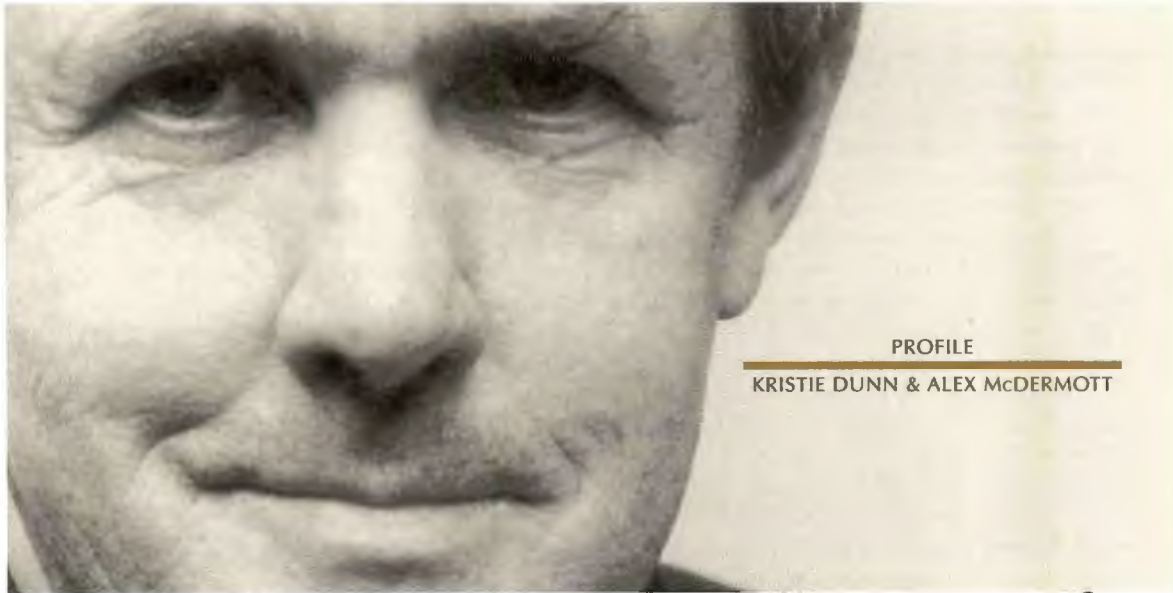
A timely survey conducted by international law specialists, Coopers Lysol, revealed that in the land of Huli there was almost no glass. This was the reason why Huligans seemed to become panicked by seeing their reflections in shop windows and smashed as many of them as the supply of casual half-bricks would allow. And the Huligan custom of raining rocks and bottles randomly on cars, fans and players of all teams might well have been a cultural matter: a Huligan expression of friendship through the passing on of natural and man-made artefacts. But officials admitted at the time that more work was being done on this warrior behaviour by arms-manufacturing firm Shrapnel and Semtex, who had a professional interest in the emergence of aggressive peoples.

WHATEVER THE ANSWER to these ethnological questions, the need to cope with the arrival of the Huligans in large numbers at the World Cup venues, while not impugning the British, had the Japanese on the back foot. It was with horror, for example, that organisers realised within only days of the opening ceremony that the Huligans' propensity for throwing missiles might be encouraged by the sight of railway-line ballast—an endless supply of palm-sized rocks readily available over miles of track and at all stations. Their solution to this dilemma was lateral, sensational and, remembering 'Usa', very Japanese. Thousands of litres of a special resin were sprayed onto the tracks, glueing the rocks in position. So consolidated and carpet-like did the terrain thus become that even if Huligans of vast muscular development (not likely, as bulbous abdominal growth was their physical forte) conceivably managed to dislodge some of these stones they would have brought with them a fifty-metre spine of track and a snaggle of sleepers.

And so, smoothly releasing the United Kingdom from its traditional connection with soccer disruptions, Japan unleashed briefly upon the world the Republic of Huli. Huligans slotted seamlessly into the role of the World Cup Other, absolving blacks, homosexuals, women, Brits, German tourists, people of Middle Eastern appearance, the camera-bristling Japanese themselves, and numerous other minorities and eccentrics from complicity in acts of an insecure nature.

Recent local events—dawn raids, ethnically targeted interrogations and the like—would suggest that this efficiently executed exercise in the creation of a handy Other did not go unnoticed, not in Australia anyway. ■

Brian Matthews is a writer and academic.



PROFILE

KRISTIE DUNN & ALEX McDERMOTT

Still Life

a conversation with Don Watson

The historian, satirist, speech-writer and author talks to *Eureka Street* about myths, contradictions and life after political death.

IN DON WATSON'S HOUSE there is a bunch of orange calendula crammed into a white teapot on the coffee table. Next to it, a pile of books. There are more piles on the mantelpiece and the other three coffee tables; on the shelves that line the walls, books lie stacked in front of the upright rows. Among them are his wife's most recent (Hilary McPhee's *Other People's Words*) and Watson's own Keating tome, the cover of which is a respectful maroon, the lettering on its spine gold embossed, misleading in its suggestion of a heavy, humourless political biography. They are there, it seems, like the others—to be picked up and dipped into, facts checked, phrases remembered, then put aside again, back into the pile.

We set up a couple of tape recorders, notes and, as it happens, Watson's first book, *Brian Fitzpatrick: A Radical Life*. It is a study of the radical libertarian, historian, journalist, scholar and drinker, published in 1978 and dedicated to Watson's parents. The cover is a flush and revolutionary red. Watson stands a little adrift in the middle of the room, looking down at the *Fitzpatrick* cover, as though it were Banquo's ghost. 'My God, what are you going to do to me?' he intones gravely. It's hard to know whether he's serious or mocking and, if the latter, whether the mockery is reserved chiefly for him or for us. Then he sits down on a large sofa as we continue to set up, and looks at the painting opposite, a 6' x 4' Jan Senbergs oil that hangs above the orange

flowers. It shows enormous hillsides swelling up like bulbous growths, a road disappearing into them, the ocean to the left, rendered chiefly in greys and black. The painting catches that ghost light you get at dusk, in winter, with clouds massing overhead, the ocean brooding and night fast closing in.

Outside of the painting we are in midday light in the heart of Fitzroy, just off Melbourne's Brunswick Street. The room is very still. When Watson finishes a sentence and pauses to think, it is quite, quite silent. At first he speaks quietly, slowly, listing the achievements of the Keating government: 'It was the story of a virtuous government doing what was required by necessity for the good of the country for the long term.' His tone is weary. Why is he telling us this? Why are we asking him about it? Will Collingwood win tomorrow? Imponderables, imponderables. He is giving us a retrospective version of those sorts of 'annual report' speeches that he will bemoan later in the conversation and which are so beloved of many State governments: we spent this much on this and this much on that; we were growing Australia together.

We ask him about history, about Paul Keating and Don Quixote, about the visceral side of politics and human life, and gradually, like an old car that begins to remember its love for the road, he warms up and starts to purr. He gets going, engages the gears, and the words start to fly. No matter how quick they

'Some of us know that it's not enough to be perfectly comfortable and relaxed. It's just not enough. You need to connect to something else in this world. It is not enough to build [your life] around an ironing board and a kitchen table and watching your shares go up and down. I confess, it doesn't satisfy me.'

come the words have flow, no matter how rapid-fire the rain of ideas they come out well-measured, just so. Then he starts asking *us* questions. 'What generation are you?' he wants to know, squinting quizzically. 'X?' What do *we* think? 'I am actually sick of the boomers. I am sick of my own generation,' he tells us. Not the people, but the received wisdom. 'We've got people coming to dinner tonight and I know that everyone will take exactly the same view and I'll end up doing imitations of John Carroll again, try to sound as right-wing as I possibly can, just to irritate them. But all you need to say is, "Well, you know, there is a case for bombing Iraq" and they just go ...' [facial pantomime of inchoate shock and moral outrage]. What Watson is describing, he says later, is essentially a scrap with oneself: 'You reach an age, or your generation does, when you must keep forcing

yourself to examine what you think to stave off mental rigor mortis. You sit somewhere between this state and the equally soft and unhappy option of right-wing fogginess. Both sides chorus away and you're forever in danger of submitting to one of them, not because their sounds seduce, but because you want an easy life and hope to silence them ... so you really do, you look around for someone who's got a different view.'

And after almost three hours of being in the conversational car we're taking the bends with gusto, talking about who you want to win the football tomorrow, about what going to the football was like 20, 30 years ago (you drank beer and stood on the tins for the view, back when tins were tins and not aluminium). Then he kicks us out because he's about to drop from hunger, poor bugger. And we leave, walking down the middle of the street in broad mid-afternoon light, wondering how you turn 15,000 words of this man's conversation into 3000 words of article. Imponderables, imponderables.

DON WATSON'S CV should be distributed to angst-ridden 15-year-olds as an example of how very varied life's course can be. And to angst-ridden 20-, 30- and 40-year-olds for that matter. Childhood on a dairy farm in Poowong, Gippsland. (Poowong, now that you've asked, means carrion, or putrefaction, in the local Aboriginal language, at least according to a highly reputable tourism website. Someone got the last laugh there.) Undergraduate degree at La Trobe, back when it was young, treeless and well funded. Honours there, and a PhD thesis at Monash. Taught history for ten years at Monash and Melbourne Universities and at Footscray Institute of Technology. Then the Fitzpatrick book in 1978, and in 1984 two books—one for children, *The Story of Australia*, and one for grown-ups, *Caledonia Australis: Scottish Highlanders on the Frontier of Australia*. Plus the writing of consistently wicked satire for *The Gillies Report* in the '80s, co-writing *Manning Clark's History of Australia: a musical* that premiered (and flopped) in 1988, speeches for Premier John Cain, and speeches for Paul Keating PM from 1992–1996. Poowong boy makes good.

Caledonia Australis is not just about the settlement of Gippsland by Watson's Highland ancestors, and how they visited upon the Kurnai people a destruction of similar or greater magnitude to the one that had been wrought on their own Celtic ancestors by the British; it's about the making of a frontier society. 'Because I grew up there, it became terribly interesting [to me] how a sense of normality and a story of history was created,' he says. 'And when you dig a little bit you find under the surface all sorts of people wandering around with contrary views.' Later he goes on to say, 'A world without contradiction and paradox is tedious. The essence of life is paradoxical.' Little wonder then, that he describes as 'the

wonderful, most self-indulgent quote of all time' Walt Whitman's line, which he paraphrases thus: 'Do I dare contradict myself? So—I am multitudes.'

Studying Australian history in the late '70s and early '80s seemed like one of the great gifts that was given to you, he tells us. 'You could be paid to study and teach Australian history. And it was infinite—so much to be looked at.' This widening sense of the fields of possibility is apparent in his early work. There is a leap that takes place somewhere between *Fitzpatrick* and *Caledonia Australis*. *Fitzpatrick* is about as close as you imagine Watson could or would ever want to get to a 'straight' history of the mostly public life of a mostly public intellectual, despite its assertion that 'there was much irrationality in his universe'. In *Caledonia Australis* the net is cast wider and the approach more nuanced: Watson uses periodicals, diaries, newspapers, religious sermons and reformist tracts to explore the cultural realm that these people, his ancestors, occupied. The irrationality of their universe is given time in the sun, taken to pieces and put back together again. And he tries to get behind the pioneering myths that such societies create to iron out the obvious contradictions involved in the colonial project, where 'in a new environment old habits of mind attached to new objects'.

WATSON HAS WRITTEN recently of Geoffrey Blainey's *The Tyranny of Distance* that 'there are remarkably few people in Blainey's book, few moral dilemmas, few minds and fewer doubts.' In contrast, in the 1997 introduction to *Caledonia Australis*, Watson writes that he sets out 'to give a more sympathetic portrait of the pioneers than any I had ever encountered.' 'I wanted,' he writes, 'to give them blood as well as bones; religion, motive, choices, memories, identity, ancestors, an inheritance of their own.'

Which all perhaps helps to explain how and why the so-called 'culture wars' of the last decade—that awful period when even to look at Australian history as something that was ambiguous, divided, polyglot, endlessly fecund and possible ... all got stood on—has come to Watson as such a personal affront. 'I think the black armband thing is one of the really wicked things that's happened in this country,' he says to us bluntly. 'I don't think anyone's woken up to how damaging and plain bloody rotten that campaign was. I think Blainey and Howard and the rest of them have done real damage.'

Watson responds succinctly to this view of history in the 1997 introduction: 'If we don't confront the possibility of evil as well as the good in creation we are left with a moral and aesthetic void—a great hole where a drama should be.' This void is concealed, he goes on to argue, by myths that no longer

— — —
speak to us, and that conceal the people, the doubts and the contradictions. And the myths, he maintains, keep the people from him. His project in *Caledonia Australis* is 'to make a crack in the deep encrustation of myth which surrounds the settlement of Australia', not because he loathes the people, he writes, but because the myths 'are inadequate to what I know or imagine about them'.

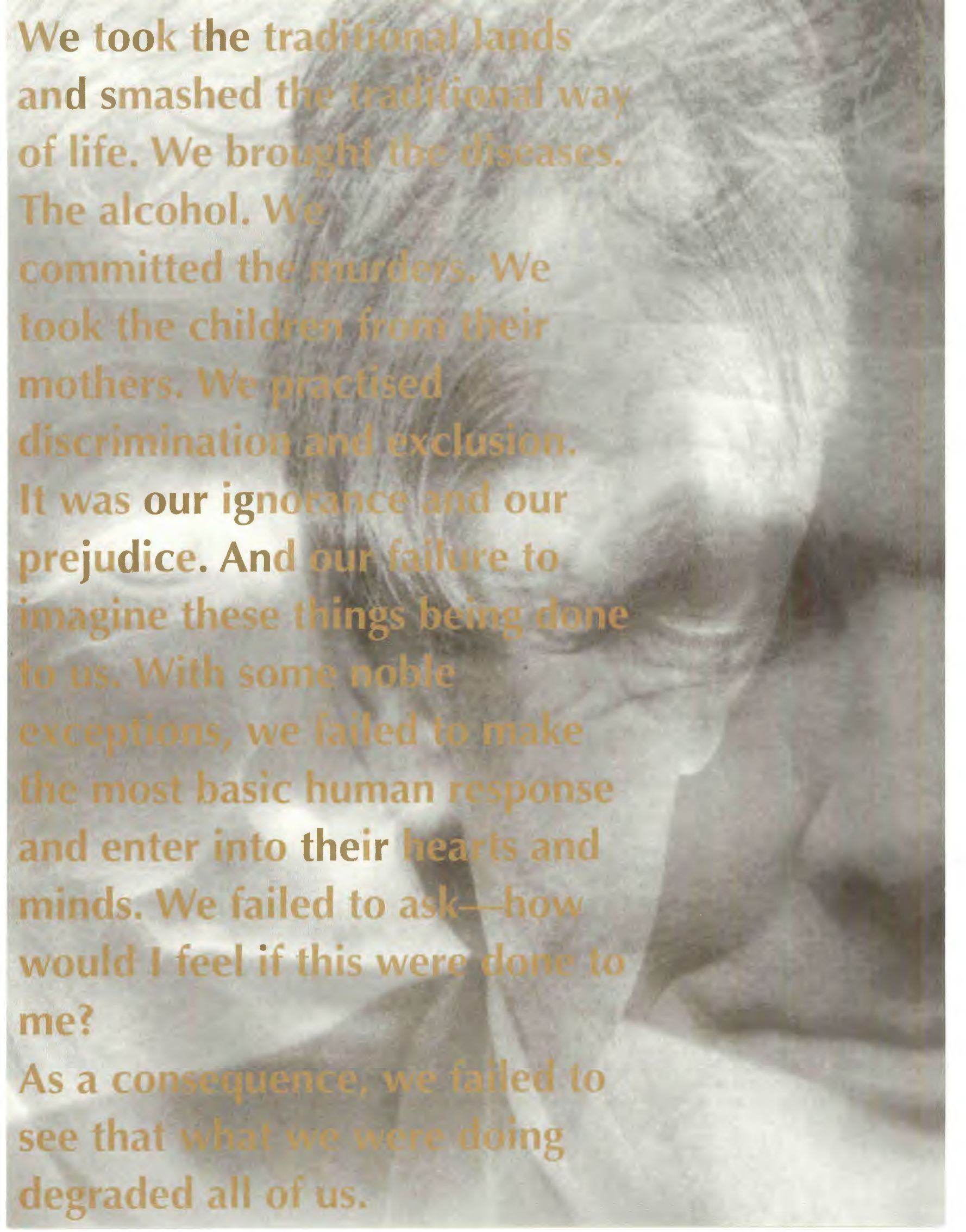
Replace the phrase 'settlement of Australia' with 'Keating government' and in that revised sentence you have an apt description of the rationale of his most recent book. Not at all the usual political memoir, *Recollections of a Bleeding Heart: A Portrait of Paul Keating PM* is a fascinating mix of reflection, homage and frustration. It is, as Drusilla Modjeska

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has described it, 'a book driven by the "grip of ideas" ... and tethered in human weakness and foible'. It is also obsessed by the paradox of an historian alive to contradiction and ambiguity occupying the rabbit burrow that is the prime minister's office.

Life in the rabbit burrow of politics is a strange place for Watson to have ended up, as he readily acknowledges, for politics, after all, is about trying to 'iron out the paradox and get everyone thinking the same way'. It's a 'problem for someone who's an historian and in some ways whose whole state of mind is suffused with doubt as a daily event, to work in an environment where doubt must never be revealed. Little question marks appear above your head, cartoon-like, and you have to——'. He makes a gesture of pushing them aside.

But Watson found a kindred spirit in Keating, whom he describes as a 'vivid paradox'. In *Bleeding Heart*, Watson recalls the overwhelming impression of melancholy that marked his first meeting with Keating. It was this, he says, that persuaded him to take the job. Here was a man who interested him. And in becoming his speech-writer Watson became, according to Keating, a sort of alter ego. Watson: 'He always said that I was a surly mad bastard and I thought that *he* was the surly mad bastard. But as we're nearly always wrong about ourselves, perhaps we were both wrong, which makes us equally right I guess.' Then there is Keating's description from his speech, at the launch of *Bleeding Heart*, of Watson as a fruit bat, always returning to feed on the darkness.



We took the traditional lands
and smashed the traditional way
of life. We brought the diseases.
The alcohol. We
committed the murders. We
took the children from their
mothers. We practised
discrimination and exclusion.
It was our ignorance and our
prejudice. And our failure to
imagine these things being done
to us. With some noble
exceptions, we failed to make
the most basic human response
and enter into their hearts and
minds. We failed to ask—how
would I feel if this were done to
me?

As a consequence, we failed to
see that what we were doing
degraded all of us.

'He hasn't read Freud on projection and he should,' Watson laughs drily. 'He knows who was feeding on darkness.'

Perhaps what Keating and Watson share (and what the current political culture lacks) is an awareness and imagination nourished by a sense of the visceral. 'Visceral' is a word that occurs and reoccurs in Watson's writing and conversation. It is against the viscera, Watson writes in *Caledonia Australis*, that the official myths of the singular, depopulated history oppose themselves. In the mythical universe the hero must be disembowelled to be preserved: 'the doubtful and ambiguous portions must be taken out along with any other matter which might compromise his virtue or complicate the lesson his life is meant to teach'. The bones made bloodless.

Importantly, mind is not opposed to body here. Perhaps Watson would concur with Whitman's bald announcement that 'having pried through the strata, analysed it to a hair, counselled with doctors and calculated close, I find no sweeter fat than sticks to my own bones'. For it seems we need guts; we need to love our own bones and sinew to have genuine thought, not because we are islands unto ourselves, but because we seem to need to start with a sense of what's vital if we are to connect with others. Otherwise words are just empty mouthings of air.

Keating knew this, according to Watson. It is what made him such an effective communicator. For Keating 'represents a sort of visceral approach to life, which a lot of us feel ... We know it, our culture knows it, it's in the culture, it's in every great book or work of art we've ever seen.' Keating got to the guts of things. Remember his threat to John Howard—that he would 'drive an axe into his chest and lever his ribs apart'. 'There is also,' Watson continues, 'a need in people sometimes to make a bloody big noise, just shout, say something savage, not be reasonable. And I think Keating understood that, and I think so do—strangely enough—millions of people in this country.' Watson has had, if not millions, certainly hundreds of people coming up to him to say, 'God I miss him, how I wish we had somebody in our lives that made our hearts beat just a bit faster and made our brains race, even if it was anger or disappointment, or whatever ...'

Watson sits upright. 'I sometimes think that the divide in politics is really a psychological one ultimately, between people who can live with the circumscriptions of life and ...' he trails off. And begins again: 'Some of us know that it's not enough to be perfectly comfortable and relaxed. It's just not enough. You need to connect to something else in this world.' 'It is not enough,' he says to us urgently, 'to build [your life] around an ironing board and a kitchen table and watching your shares go up and down. I confess, it doesn't satisfy me. I actually feel sometimes I have to restrain myself from wanting

to break windows as a matter of principle.'

Not only were Keating and Watson linked by their refusal to accept the circumscriptions of life; they also shared a distinctive view of Australia's trajectory as a nation. So how did the urban, political Irish Catholic Keating and the rural, historian, Protestant Watson come to this shared understanding? Watson explains it as an intellectual attachment born of a common affection for the place. But perhaps it is also psychological. 'I think you can draw a lot of lines in politics between those with healthy Oedipal impulses and those where they didn't function. In my case it might have functioned a little bit excessively, I don't know. But I think that put me in conflict with the Anglophile view of the world which Paul was natively in conflict with.' It is an Oedipal rebellion against the history of his childhood that he has, it seems, never shaken. And it is in contrast to the conservatives, who 'just want to be like Dad from the

'You can actually deal with quite complex ideas, and ambiguities in life, and people will be intrigued by them. They want to read about them ... they don't want everything simplified, or brought down to things about which there can be no apparent dispute.'

time they're born ... You could tell, the back[s] of their heads were a different shape. You'd see them in the cafeteria, sitting there with their Dad's haircut, their Dad's briefcase, their Dad's everything ... all fate holds for them is which character in *Wind in the Willows* they're going to grow to be most like. It's a kind of anthropomorphological fate.'

IN *Bleeding Heart*, Watson states that politics and history are linked by the craft of storytelling. Reading the Placido Domingo speech that Keating wrote and delivered to the National Press Club in December 1990, long before Watson came onto the scene, it is striking how Watson-esque some of the themes are. Watson agrees. 'Anyone who thinks that Keating got his ideas beyond economics from Manning Clark, or from me, or from whatever, wants to read the Placido Domingo speech.' In that speech, Keating describes leadership as being 'about having a conversation with the public', and exhorts the media to join with him in 'spinning the tale, the great tale of Australian economic change, and wrapping it up in interesting ways, with interesting phrases and interesting words, which can communicate all these very complex ideas to our population'.

As speech-writer, Watson became chief storyteller. 'In a way what a speech is always ... trying

to say ... is "you're part of the story", ' he tells us. And 'the worst thing that can happen to you in politics is that people think you're writing your own story'. Watson's conclusion in *Bleeding Heart* is that ultimately this was the key to the rejection of the Keating government—it failed to find a place for the people in the story. 'Part of the massive irony of this is that it ends with him unable to have a conversation with the people, no longer able to spin his tale and the media not listening to him, or working avidly against him. And all the nice little themes which begin with the web of the family and spread out into the continent have all got tangled horribly in the centre ... a great big hole in fact.'

And we are, it seems, yet to emerge from the hole. In his 2001 *Quarterly Essay, Rabbit Syndrome: Australia and America*, Watson gives us a scathing polemic on the Australian identity crisis. He argues that unlike America, Australia no longer has a sacred story to connect us, as sacred stories must do. Too many of us are excluded from the story of Anzac mateship and empire loyalty. And yet John Howard, that 'Crocodile Hunter in miniature' as Watson describes him to us—wandering around 'in a big hat talking about mateship all the time'—continues to try 'to stuff a pluralist, postmodern bird into a pre-modern cage' with stories and myths a good 50 years out of date.

So is his bleak assessment of the Australian psyche in *Rabbit Syndrome* a 'fuck you' to the Australian people for their rejection of the story he and Keating tried to weave? We put this to him. There is a pause. 'That's a very cynical reading,' he says quietly, with a faint smile. It was a pamphlet, and pamphlets are meant to provoke. And sometimes 'it's good that people write the extremes'. While he rejects our analysis, he acknowledges it is a reaction against the 'present regime' of things, which has permeated public debate with eulogies to the 'aspirational', who Watson describes as 'the end of history people'. 'What they're talking about is like the gold rush without the sense of collectivity. Everyone's an aspirational, like a gold-digger; but the gold-diggers banded together. Even if it was just against the Chinese sometimes, they had a sense of *esprit de corps*.' It was different in the Menzies era, in which, Watson says, there was a tradition that 'you could connect to the lives of people who were less well off. Whether it was *noblesse oblige*, or Christianity, or whatever, those sorts of things connected you to someone else.'

THIS SENSE OF connection is a theme we return to again and again. When people listen to politicians speak, Watson says, 'they want to know, "how does what you're doing connect with my life?" and they also want, although they may not be aware of it, to be a bit *thrilled* by things. You know—oo!', and his eyes widen. And there is something more. 'There is a role that politics can play which is to articulate for people

in their everyday lives those sorts of things which are usually reserved for funerals. You are actually trying to get not just to the realm of common sense ... you are also trying to get to the realm of feeling.'

It is this quality that marks the great speeches, like the Gettysburg address. And it is a quality achieved, according to Watson, by the choice of one word. 'The Gettysburg address is really taking the bodies and lifting them up to the abstract ... But there's a line in there, the visceral line in there, which could only be written by a man who has a higher sensibility, and a sense of what these people went through, when he actually says "the men who struggled here"'. And it's the word "struggle" that's so important. That's a writer's word; it's a writer's sensibility; he's imagined—here you have 20,000 bodies. Fresh really, only a few months old, and he doesn't say "who fought here" or "who fought this battle here" but "who struggled here". Hear that read and it makes the hairs on the back of your neck stand up; it makes your eyes go a little bit glassy and you think "God". And it's because Lincoln imagined himself into their lives, and thought, "this was a struggle".'

Watson sits forward in his chair. 'It's where a man's empathetic imagination meets a political need, if you like, or finds a human need, and he finds it in a word ... If you're the mother or father or brother or sister of one of the men who fell at Gettysburg and you hear those words of Lincoln, you'd cry, you'd cry, but you'd go away feeling enlarged by it, because he's actually done what I think words are meant to do—he's actually given a voice to your feelings.'

And it's at that point, he says, sitting back, that politics and politicians and working in politics interest him. It's where, he says, he becomes 'a mad humanist'. 'Where politics connects itself to the human condition in a way that ennobles it, if you like. Gives it a proper meaning. Rather than its being the management of things.'

This sense of the importance of the marriage of words and feeling marks Watson's most well-known speeches. Not only do they ask us to imagine ourselves differently, but they bring us together in a way that the rhetoric of Howard's mateship or Bracks' 'Growing Victoria' fails to do. Not that Watson is averse to rhetoric. As he points out, the Gettysburg address is pure rhetoric. So too is perhaps his best-known speech, the Redfern speech, which exhorts non-Aboriginal Australians not only to put ourselves in the shoes of Indigenous Australians, but to 'enter into their hearts and minds'.

Despite the crafting that goes into their preparation, speeches, Watson maintains, belong to the speaker, not the writer. An example from *Bleeding Heart* supports this view. Watson was surprised that a section of a speech in which Keating symbolically handed over the republic debate to the people had not been reported. He then discovered that Keating had decided on the spot to cut out that whole section. He

wasn't ready on the day to do it, Watson says, and no amount of careful scripting can change that.

The process of writing a speech is similarly unpredictable. 'Because, really, you don't know: what are the implications of the thought you are having when you begin this speech? You don't know until the words take you there, in a way.' Watson felt privileged to be given freedom to write without being expected merely to follow direction. 'It's in the writing that you discover what you're trying to say, and I think Paul understood that.'

But what of the conversation with the public that Keating spoke of in the Placido Domingo speech? Does a scripted speech written by a speechwriter distance a leader from the public? Watson agrees that Keating, like other leaders, was concerned that reading a scripted speech doesn't engage in the same way—'it's not like having a real conversation'. It 'necessarily removes intimacy', Watson says. 'The fact that it's a scripted speech is somehow like drawing a screen down, and because it's coming from someone who's unknown and unseen, makes it all the more mysterious and remote—if you like, suspect.' On the other hand, a scripted speech can strike more of a chord than an off-the-cuff ramble. 'Someone in the background who can write tolerably well, and has time to think about what should be said, might actually engage the public better than the politician who simply gets up there and thinks, "Can I say the same things to these people that I've said before?"'

WRITING A BOOK about Keating was something Watson decided to do as soon as he took the job. In the four years he worked for Keating, Watson collected an enormous amount of material. But when it came to writing it up, he was confronted with the dilemma of how to make it work. 'What I was trying to do with the Keating book was write an unheroic history. It didn't make sense to me, having been in the mix, to then sit at the top and write it as if you could see that all these things had logical sorts of antecedents and everything was done according to a plan—the way a straight political history is nearly always written. That would have meant leaving out an enormous amount of value ... Paul was a vivid paradox in a way, both the public persona and the private, and I somehow wanted to tease that out.'

He compares writing about complex events to playing music. 'I listen to Richter playing Schubert all the time,' he says, 'and you hear him teasing these things out, and he might take five minutes longer to play a sonata than any other pianist, and he's really just sort of pulling at what the essence of it is, and what truth is sitting there in the notes. And it's funny because [Richter] said before he died that in the last years of his life he just played from the music. It wasn't about playing it from memory, because he

said, "The music's there, you just have to find it on the page" ... It feels to me like a bit of a parallel with trying to write about complex events—that it's there somewhere, and you can probably never find it, and you can never do it the same way twice. Literally you can't.'

When pushed to say why he thinks his book, *Recollections of a Bleeding Heart*, has been such a success, Watson points first to the public's ongoing fascination with Keating: 'Keating is a fantastic subject. And there is an enormous amount of interest in him ... I had a very good subject to work with.' But it is also, he muses, the way the story is told. While it is readable, it resists the temptation to simplify. It shows that 'you can actually deal with quite complex ideas, and ambiguities in life, and people will be intrigued by them. They want to read about them ... they don't want everything simplified, or brought down to things about which there can be no apparent dispute.'

He concludes: 'Because it doesn't have clean lines. That would be my answer.' And he points to the canvas on the wall. 'It's a bit like that painting there—the Great Ocean Road going into, into nowhere.' But, we remind him, we know where this story ends, and that's part of the fascination. Watson laughs. 'It's a bit like a hanging. Why do you read to the end of books about hangings? But you do.' Because you wonder, *How will he take the drop?*

'He [Keating] always said that I was a surly mad bastard and I thought that *he* was the surly mad bastard. But as we're nearly always wrong about ourselves, perhaps we were both wrong, which makes us equally right I guess.'

It's like a slow death, we say. He agrees. 'That's where it's got a bit of the Ned Kelly in it. And the Ronald Ryan as well.'

But of course the story doesn't really end here. The final sentence of *Bleeding Heart* says it well: 'Political death is like the other kind—the body keeps twitching after the head is cut off.' 'I wasn't thinking about a hanging man then,' he tells us thoughtfully. 'I was actually thinking of a chook. But it does ...'

There is silence. He sits back in his chair and we all breathe out. Then his stomach rumbles. The game is up. ■

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Recollections of a Bleeding Heart, which won the Age Book of the Year and the Courier-Mail Book of the Year awards, is published by Random House.



An essential ambivalence

'The publication of *Broken Song* seems to me a landmark event,' said **Robert Manne** at the launch of Barry Hill's epic account of the life of T.G.H. Strehlow.

THE SUBJECT OF *Broken Song* is in part the life of Theodor George Henry Strehlow and, in part, his great life-work, *The Songs of Central Australia*—or perhaps, to be more exact, the complex relationship between the life and the book.

Let me outline a little of Strehlow's life, as I have come to understand it through Barry Hill's book. Theo was the youngest son of the Lutheran missionary, Carl Strehlow, who settled with his wife at Hermannsburg, in Aranda territory in Central Australia, in 1894. At first, Pastor Carl's purpose was to draw the Aranda to Christianity and to sever the connection with their heathen past. With time, fascination and respect for Aranda culture ambushed him. It was this highly ambiguous legacy—to draw the Aranda

people into the higher truth of Christianity while also recording and even celebrating aspects of their traditional culture—that Carl Strehlow bequeathed his son.

Because of the remoteness of Hermannsburg, all five of Theo's elder brothers and his sister were taken home to Germany. Theo alone remained, to become what he called 'the silent presence' at the Strehlow home. At Hermannsburg young Theo grew up with the German language but, with Aboriginal nursemaids, was 'cradled in Aranda', in Barry Hill's lovely phrase. Although as an infant Theo knew the touch of Aranda women and as a growing child the companionship of Aranda children, against the pull of the erotic Aranda culture—where sexuality was regulated by taboo and not by guilt

or shame—the priggish young Lutheran resolutely turned his back. By the time he went to Adelaide to complete his schooling and to university, following the horrible death of his father, he had also apparently turned his back on the landscape of his Central Australian home, with its terrible heat and aridity, and its insufferable plagues of insects and flies.

In the first half of the twentieth century, university English departments often provided a kind of decompression chamber for intellectuals destabilised by the transition from a religious to a secular world. At university Theo read English—and Classics. He became a literary man, who considered writing a thesis on A.C. Bradley and Shakespearean tragedy. Fortunately for him and for his country

he was convinced by an academic adviser that, because of his unique knowledge of an Aboriginal language, a return to Central Australia to study the phonetics and grammar of Aranda might be a wise career move.

At Hermannsburg Strehlow initiated, with his studies in Aranda, a more or less conventional academic career which was, however, punctuated by a fascinating interregnum as the Northern Territory's first patrol officer for Aborigines, during which time he fought bravely against the physical and sexual abuse of Aborigines while displaying a high-level capacity for what Hill calls 'political suicide'.

Following his return from Adelaide to Hermannsburg, Strehlow embarked upon what turned out to be the two great enterprises of his life.

THE FIRST—the systematic collection of the most sacred objects possessed by the Aboriginal men of Central Australia, the *tjurunga*—began almost accidentally. Concerning this collection, as Hill makes clear, many difficult questions arise. The surrender of the *tjurunga* involved the relinquishment not merely of sacred objects but of an entire metaphysic, culture and way of life. Why were the objects surrendered to Strehlow? Was it an act of free will, as Strehlow believed, an emancipation of the individual to Christianity, or perhaps a conscious choice to leave in Strehlow's hands knowledge of secrets that were certain, without him, soon to pass away? Or were the surrenders—for money or rations—a sign, rather, of conquest, of a culture now saturated in unutterable despair? And why, Barry Hill asks, did Strehlow cling to his collection—which eventually included twelve hundred *tjurunga* and extraordinary photos and ceremonial film—as a vital dimension of his being and identity, for the remainder of his life? Dark questions hover over Hill's account of Strehlow the collector, or the hunter as he sometimes, with heavy irony, described himself. As the Aranda people began to interrogate the circumstances surrounding the collection, the questions became clouds in the final years of his life.

Even more importantly, from the time of his return to Hermannsburg, Strehlow found his life's vocation—the collection, translation and transformation into a kind of Western poetic, of Aboriginal songs.

Strehlow's masterwork, *Songs of Central Australia*, was published in 1971, although it was completed many years before. Discussion of this work's meaning is at the heart of the complex and sinuous argument of *Broken Song*. Nothing I can say can convey the richness of Hill's multi-layered analysis. In part there is in it an Oedipal theme: Strehlow's intellectual victory over his powerful father through the clearly superior quality of his work. In part Hill wrestles, like Jacob with the Angel, with the question of translation—of how far Strehlow's literary transformation of the songs, where music was claimed to be at the service of the words, was an act of colonial appropriation. And in part, as an alternative, there is the question of whether in *Songs of Central Australia*—which Barry Hill likens to Homer and the Torah—Strehlow had provided us with a gift of a book in which black and white Australians might one day discover the material both for spiritual sustenance and reconciling myth.

Judgment about the nature of Strehlow's achievement, and of the relationship of the achievement to the life, lie at the centre of the questions asked in *Broken Song*.

Hill's own judgment on these matters, it seems to me, rests on a profound ambivalence, which he refuses to



simplify or resolve. Towards the end of his life Strehlow received the award of Doctor of Letters from the University of Adelaide. One referee spoke of *Songs of Central Australia* as a book which would be remembered when the linguistics of Chomsky and the anthropology of Lévi-Strauss were gathering dust. A second referee claimed, rather differently, that as with all Strehlow's work, *Songs of Central Australia* revealed what he called 'a consistent failure to make the most of unparalleled opportunities'. Between these positions Barry Hill occupies a kind of tentative middle ground. [Strehlow's] 'work', he writes, 'would monumentally stand forever, as would the imprint of his personality in that work, the long river of himself that we have been following ...'

In my reading of Hill, the impression of that long river on the achievement of

Songs can be analysed in two distinct ways.

In coming to an assessment, one vital theme is Strehlow's attitude to Aboriginality and Aborigines. This is one of the most complex strands in this book. There is no reason, first of all, to doubt that Strehlow felt strong bonds of attachment to the Aranda people. At times of rejection or imagined academic slight, it is the Aranda to whom he turns as his only true friends. On the other hand, concerning the Aranda, Strehlow always believed that the people with whom he formed attachments were the last generation of a dying race, who belonged to a culture on which the sun was setting once and for all. His attachment to traditional Aborigines was often an extension of his own rather arch and ordinary cultural despair. In his mind he championed the spirituality of the Aborigines against modernity but thought of this as a cause already lost. Unlike the genuinely great anthropologist, Bill Stanner, Strehlow seemed incapable of seeing Aborigines as a people with a future, despite the fact that they belonged to a culture under threat. Stanner's essay on the state of mind of an Aboriginal friend pondering the unmaking of his world—'Durmugan—A Nangiomeri'—is, in my opinion, one of the greatest Australian

essays ever written. Strehlow was incapable of empathetic understanding of such a kind. For him the transitional Aboriginal culture was 'decadent'; its members 'soft' and 'lazy' 'parasites'. While *Songs of Central Australia* was written as an epitaph, the Arnhem Land song cycle recorded by his friends, Ronald and Catherine Berndt, belongs unmistakably, as Hill points out, to a living present.

The following subversive thought occurs to Barry Hill in *Broken Song* more than once: that because of his sense that he is recording the songs of a dying culture, Strehlow's role was essentially that of the embalmer.

This points to the second dimension

Above left: Strehlow's translation committee, 1938. From left: Strehlow, Conrad, Zacharias, Jakobus, Nathaniel and Moses. Above: newlyweds, Ted and Bertha Strehlow, ready for their camel trek, 1936.

of the link between the biography of Strehlow and his book—the impact of his strange personality on his work. Because of Barry Hill’s access to Strehlow’s diary, a privilege which he understands and handles with great delicacy, we learn almost too much here about his inner life. There was in Strehlow volcanic sexual passion—seen in his first, great unrequited love for Sheila and his second marriage, to Kathleen. There is also in him its opposite—the capacity for violent, uncontrolled rage, seen in the floggings of his children when life was not going well. There was in him, throughout his life, tormenting self-doubt, self-pity and self-loathing; and an almost grotesque capacity to rationalise wrongdoing, like the grubby sale to *Stern* magazine of many photographic images of sacred, ceremonial significance, which cast a shadow over the last months of his life. There was in him, as life went on, a growing paranoia, especially in relation to academic authorities, with whom he

manufactured many bitter disputes over the ownership and management of his collection. There was in him, too, when passion died, a frightening coldness. After falling into the arms of a young woman, he flatly informed his wife of more than 30 years that he could never love a city girl.

Above all there was in him an appalling egomania. Strehlow believed that with his passing the voice of the Aranda would die; he believed that *he* was the last Aranda man. Rather than moderating his egomania, his second wife seems, to judge by Barry Hill’s book, to have fanned the flames. In his last days Strehlow railed against the world like an un-self-knowing King Lear, to whom his wife played the role of a goading Lady Macbeth. In this tale there could be no Cordelia, because all his adult children had been dispossessed.

In the beginning of the penultimate section of his book, called ‘Possession’, Hill quotes Maurice Merleau-Ponty: ‘The healthy man is not so much the one who

has eliminated his contradictions as the one who makes use of them and drags them to his vital labours.’ How far did Strehlow use his contradictions to complete his *Songs*? How far did his contradictions, or perhaps, fatal flaws—to move from Karl Marx to Manning Clark—limit what might have been accomplished?

Barry Hill’s book has interested me greatly, and in many ways. It is a venture both audacious and uncompromising. In the history of Australian high culture—that is to say, of the application of serious and critical intelligence to the questions of greatest moment in the spiritual life of this country—the publication of *Broken Song* seems to me a landmark event. ■

Robert Manne is Professor of Politics at La Trobe University. The above is an edited version of his November launch speech for Barry Hill’s *Broken Song: T.G.H. Strehlow and Aboriginal Possession* (published by Random House).

TRAVEL

Taking Turkey

Historically one of the world’s great cities, Istanbul is a register of the tremors of our times.

Robin Gerster visits a city that is geologically, geographically, economically, culturally—and now politically—on the edge.

THE SECURITY AT Istanbul’s Ataturk Airport had been reassuringly rigorous. Gimlet-eyed, heavily armed police looked on as long lines of embarking passengers were efficiently processed through several security stages before being disgorged into awaiting aircraft.

Some of these planes, I noticed, belonged to Azerbaijan Airlines. Istanbul to Baku on Azer Air: no thanks! I boarded a Singapore Airlines 777 to take me back home to Melbourne after what had been a memorable sojourn in Turkey, attending a conference at Cannakale—the legendary Hellespont of myth and history, across the Dardanelles from Gallipoli—on the

subject of ‘Australia at War and Peace’. For one long immersed in the literature of war, the visits to Gallipoli and Troy had been an almost incredible ‘field trip’. I’d even own up to a mild patriotic *frisson* when I first set eyes on the fabled topography of the Anzac battlefields—the ‘Sphinx’, Lone Pine, the Nek. The stroll along Anzac Beach, however, had been pure touristic bathos. It is an innocuous, even slightly grotty stretch, and the only war relics I discovered were a rubber thong and a baseball cap presumably discarded by one of the backpacking pilgrims who have made Gallipoli a ‘Mecca’ for young Australian travellers.

But it was Istanbul—the metropolis that straddles the tectonic edge between Europe and Asia, Byzantium by the Golden Horn, imperial Constantinople, the city of emperors and sultans, the throbbing heart of an Ottoman Empire that ran for over 450 years—that had been the real revelation. In this age of acute Islamophobia, it had been a pleasure to visit such an accommodating, benign Muslim nation, at least as manifested in scholarly, courtly Istanbul. Whatever its problems—they are many, and they run as deep as the Bosphorous—Turkey seemed to this fleeting traveller to have made a good fist of incorporating Islam into a

vigorous secular culture.

But now all I wanted to do was to go home. So why the hell was my plane taking so long to get moving? The whiff of cigarette smoke was the first indication that something was amiss. A passenger had been detected smoking in the toilets. Before long, a solitary male passenger was escorted off the plane by security people furiously mouthing into walkie-talkies. The darkest fears of the air traveller, post-September 11, were instantly activated. (This was 6 October 2002: a week before the Kuta bombings.) 'Did you get *all* his bags?', I half-jokingly inquired of a steward who was wearing a frown rather than the trademark Singapore Airlines smile.

chorus just before dawn. Staying at the 'Empress Zoe' hotel, deep in the bowels of the old town, Sultanahmet, I copped a full blast from the tiny mosque located across the road. The cacophony from the loudhailers perched on its solitary minaret shook me from the deepest of jetlagged sleeps on my first morning in the city. The call to prayer from the stupendous Blue Mosque, which looms over the 'Zoe' as it looms over all of Sultanahmet, was a whisper by comparison. By Day Three in the city I found myself waking early to prepare for the onslaught.

But it was my only discomfoting brush with Islam during my time there. Infidel that I am, it was impossible not

design of the Australian War Memorial in Canberra—is the most obvious reminder that Constantinople was a Christian city, under Rome, for more than 1100 years. After the city's sacking in 1453, it was converted to a mosque. In 1935, Ataturk had it reconverted into a museum. This was a typically far-sighted move by the so-called 'father' of modern Turkey, whose image is everywhere to be seen in Turkey today. If you subscribe to the 'Great Man in History' theory, Ataturk fits the bill as well as any. As the Ottoman general Mustafa Kemal, he was the hero of Gallipoli, and later led the Turkish Nationalist Forces in defeating various foreign invaders in the Turkish Wars of Independence in the early



The heart was pounding a bit harder than usual as we eventually took off for the three-hour hop to Dubai, taking a flight path that decorously skirted Iraq. 'So you got rid of that guy just for smoking, that's good!', I later quipped to the same steward, cocky now that I had a Bloody Mary under my belt and the plane had levelled out in the beautiful deep blue of a harmless Middle Eastern sky. 'There was another reason, which I can't tell you about,' he grimly replied, scurrying down the aisle.

AN ALARM CLOCK in Istanbul is about as pointless as a hearty appetite in Britain. It never gets put to proper use. The duelling muezzins of Istanbul begin their daily

to be impressed by the elegance of the Islamic architecture that dominates Istanbul's skyline. The aesthetics are devastating—and I'm not only talking about the vast domed contours of the exteriors. The graceful painted arabesques of the interior of the Blue Mosque, for example, make the iconography of most Christian churches look tacky by comparison. It is a breathtaking cityscape, dominated not merely by classic Ottoman religious structures like the Suleymaniye Mosque, but an eclectic mix of East and West, including synagogues, European-style palaces and a surprising sprinkling of Byzantine buildings.

Aya Sofya, the celebrated basilica completed in 537—its dome echoed in the

1920s. He was integral to the abolition of the decadent sultanate in 1923 and was the first president of the new republic. As president, he committed his country to a secular path and determined that it would not be enslaved to strict Islamic law. He abolished polygamy and made civil marriage mandatory, introduced surnames, and replaced the Arabic alphabet with the Latin script. He changed Constantinople's name to Istanbul. He even got rid of the fez. It is largely because of him that Turkey has not gone the way of some of its neighbours.

One of the great sites of Istanbul is actually out of sight—the 'Sunken Cistern', an unappealing name for the vast underground Byzantine water-storage tank

constructed during Justinian's reign in the 6th century. Elevated, lamp-lit walkways take you through a kind of vast Cistern Chapel—apparently the 'tank' was constructed from the columns, capitals and plinths of ruined buildings. There is a café located in the ambient gloom where one can soak up the atmosphere over a coffee, though the constant drip from the vaulted ceiling is disconcerting. Back out in the sunlight, there is a mesmerising list of attractions to take in—that is, if one is able to fight off the battalions of touts who roam Sultanahmet.

Istanbul's touts are among the most insistent that I have come across. One of them even offered me the shirt off his back. I'd commented favourably on the shirt in an attempt to distract him from his object—luring me into his carpet shop to spend large amounts of money. He proceeded to unbutton the sweat-stained

reasonable *modus operandi* and we jauntily ventured inside its domed depths. We soon found ourselves prostrate on a marble slab, alongside a young Spanish woman from Andalucia and her Swiss boyfriend, being worked on by two hirsute, muscular Turks. The Andalucian must have been unimpressed at sharing the pleasures of the bathhouse with two middle-aged Antipodean interlopers, but bore up well.

She was in no danger from her masseurs, whom I suspect were men's men in the classical mould. 'My' man pounded and pummelled, soaped and sluiced with an immodest gusto, throwing in an affectionate grunt or two for effect. Just when thoughts of T.E. Lawrence's bodily travails at the hands of a bunch of lascivious Turks were coming unpleasantly to my mind, he rolled me over onto my back and went to work on my chest, his hairy claws then running up and down my throat in a

are going broke, and a flood of rural immigrants (many of them conservative Muslims) is gravitating to already bloated Istanbul.

While Turkey negotiates its own delicate internal balance of modernity and traditionalism, secularism and fundamentalism, it is bordered by countries—Iraq, Syria, Iran—who abhor its courting of the West and its good relations with Israel. The landslide electoral victory of a moderate but essentially conservative Islamic government (a stunning result guaranteed to get under the skin of Turkey's powerful military elite, which sees itself as guardian of the nation's secularism) has added to a pervasive sense of instability. To top things off, its greatest city lies directly on one of the world's most active fault lines and is overdue for a catastrophic earthquake. No wonder the people of Istanbul are edgy.

And no wonder people say Turkey 'lies at the crossroads'.

My own father, for example, ventured abroad just twice in his life, in the early 1940s, both times to Bougainville and both times with the aim of killing as many Japanese as possible. Some of the original Anzacs would never have even heard of Turkey before lobbying there in 1915. And 'Constantinople' would have signified an almost unimaginable object of desire.

garment and offer it to me, if only I'd come inside and drink some apple tea and meet his family.

The presence of the touts is significant, for today's Istanbul is crawling with foreign tourists, cashing in on the calamitous collapse of the Turkish *lira*, which has made the city laughably inexpensive even for exchange-rate paupers like Australians. Taking Constantinople and knocking Turkey out of the war was, of course, the major ambition of the abortive Gallipoli campaign as Churchill conceived it. Tourists have succeeded in Turkey where the Allied invaders of 1915 could not.

In Istanbul, Islam seeks an easy accommodation with Western hedonism. Indeed, it capitalises on it. The *hamam* (traditional bathhouse) attached to the Suleymaniye Mosque—designed by the great 16th-century Ottoman architect Mimar Sinan—advertises itself with the slogan 'Men and Women Together For Tourist'. My travelling companion for the day (a male) and I thought this a

pincer movement. Strangling, I remembered from my *Lonely Planet*, was a favoured Ottoman method of executing one's enemies, including Grand Viziers and even princely heirs apparent ...

The 'Unspeakable Turk': old stereotypes die hard. Long despised as 'the sick man of Europe', Turkey is a repository of negative connotations. The European Union has once again rejected its application for membership on grounds that include the lack of free speech and the imprisonment of dissidents. These are aspects of a sprawling nation likely to be hidden from the tourist beguiled by the urbanity of contemporary Istanbul, as especially evident in the largely 19th-century Beyoglu district just over the Galata Bridge from Sultanahmet.

This latest rejection has depressed a country that has striven hard for acceptance by abolishing the death penalty and adopting a new civil code, and has started to deal more tolerantly with its Kurdish minority. The *lira* is a joke, unemployment is skyrocketing, small businessmen

AUSTRALIAN WORLDLY experience has historically been linked with involvement in overseas conflicts. Indeed, for several generations of Australians, travel meant war. My own father, for example, ventured abroad just twice in his life, in the early 1940s, both times to Bougainville and both times with the aim of killing as many Japanese as possible. Some of the original Anzacs would never have even heard of Turkey before lobbying there in 1915. And 'Constantinople' would have signified an almost unimaginable object of desire.

Now that the once-circumscribed activity of 'war service' has broadened into a mercilessly random threat that knows no quarter and respects no boundaries, human or geographical, it is apposite that present Australian fears are located most acutely in travel—in getting on a plane, in venturing into the foreign, or simply in leaving home.

After the 'incident' at Ataturk, my Singapore Airlines jet arrived back safely, to the customary relief one feels these days at arriving home in one piece. It was early October: end of term was coming, and Christmas with the family was just around the corner. The flight was long but uneventful, with the only real turbulence south of the equator. Its route went directly over Bali. ■

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A Dickens caravanserai

IT'S STRANGE TO reflect how well Dickens, in a thousand shadowy forms, holds the stage or the various kinds of screens that substitute for it.

My own generation inherited the kind of feast of Dickens that overtook Britain and the Commonwealth after the war, and led to the famous David Lean films of *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations* and to the first spate of BBC television adaptations. One of the first things I remember seeing on television was a 26-part dramatisation (in half-hour episodes) of *David Copperfield*, with that fine actor Robert Hardy in the title role. My mother reread the book in small chunks to keep up with the adaptation and see what it was highlighting.

The upshot of all this, for a middling Anglophile child growing up in the Antipodes in the 1950s, was that you had experienced the dramatised shadow of Dickens long before you had read a word of him. Pickwick and Nicholas Nickleby and David Copperfield and Fagin and Pip and all that endless troupe of grotesque beauties were part of the air we breathed.

It was as if the culture you lived in had read Dickens long before you had, and therefore you experienced the storylines and the smog-laden, half-lit atmospherics whether you went on to read the books or not. Often we did not, or not in any hurry. I suspect Dickens should be read as young as possible, when the reader is not yet consciously distinguishing between the romantic and the real, so that he can be rediscovered like a lost treasure of far-off childhood, bottomlessly wise and poetic. If he is looked at in late adolescence (with the backlog of all the dramatic versions) he is liable to come across—he certainly did in the age of Bob Dylan and Mick

Jagger—as hopelessly antiquated, corny and unreal. The eye of childhood knows better: it loves Dickens and ever will.

All of which was encouraged 40 or more years ago, a period when the Poms and their loyalists across the seas saw Dickens as a mirror of a more egalitarian world, or at least as embodying the liberal anger and the liberal romance of a world that had a moral destiny in that direction. This was the period of the Welfare State in Britain, of protectionism and one of the world's highest standards of living in Australia.

It's this period that produces *Oliver!* and the one-man-show Dickens readings

of Welsh actor Emlyn Williams, who had written such staples of stage and screen in the '30s and '40s as *Night Must Fall* and *The Corn Is Green*. Simon Callow's *The Mystery of Charles Dickens* is clearly in this tradition, and is a smart career move on the part of the actor, who has also recapitulated Michael MacLiammoir's *The Importance of Being Oscar* and made spoken-word recordings of Proust and Anthony Powell. Callow played the title role in *Amadeus* on stage, and went on to play vicars in Merchant-Ivory adaptations of E.M. Forster, and a suave gay in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. He is the biographer of Charles Laughton and is clearly interested in the point at which the world of acting connects with the world of the larger culture. He is almost a character actor, though with a star's presence and *amour propre*.

His one-man Dickens show is a triumph of theatrical wit and élan. This is Dickens mediated, of course, through the lens of Peter Ackroyd's biographical vision, and it's Dickens the possessed man—his works so many animate fragments in his mind's eye—that the show takes as its subject. Mercifully, *The Mystery of Charles Dickens* doesn't preserve the aspect of Ackroyd's biography that has the biographer in perfervid dialogue with Dickens himself. However, both the script and Callow's performance streamline Dickens into a figure somewhat more histrionic and, in modern and psychological mode, rather more melodramatic than the giant whom history discloses.

But where there is tension and contradiction, where there is the action of a man who seems possessed, there is drama, and Callow is consummate in his ability to juggle and twist and conjure round the looming spectres of Dickens' nightmares. There is the blacking factory and the shame at the fact of home, the two evoked with a wondering pathos, fish-mouthed,

with an 'oh' beyond words. There is the desolation of Dickens' marriage, the brick wall down the middle of the bedroom, and the affairs—at least of the heart—with the stepsister and with Ellen Ternan.

Throughout all this, Callow moves like a thing of magic (and does a couple of literal magician's tricks), with a kind of irresistible theatrical brio that keeps the eye riveted even if the mind is backing away. It is a tirelessly energetic performance, the detached narrator's voice alternately plummy and whip-like, the Dickens voice neutral—sometimes heroic and sometimes abashed with fear—and then all around him the great waves of Cockney and caricature. It's so resplendent that you don't know whether to laugh or cry at this stalking ghost of British theatrical glory. Of course, Callow has you laughing quite a bit at Dickens and, at times, with a catch in your throat.

Perhaps because it is so much a performance of its time, I wondered sometimes if Simon Callow wasn't milking Dickens a bit much, as if somehow there were too many smoky dreams from childhood in his conception of the novelist and his characters (or in Patrick Garland's, his director).

Sometimes the characterisations are clairvoyant; they captivate the attention and seem to come from a deep well of literary memory. His Miss Havisham is on the edge of this, and even his Sidney Carton—despite being interspersed with oom-pah-pah guillotine noises—has an unearthly quality. Callow can flex his face to turn into the chinless judge in *Pickwick*, as well as Sam Weller, and the effect is marvellous, even if the surrounding contour of the script is staid. Callow's terrific at the kind of hectic that rages in Dickens' blood, although Ackroyd's outline inclines him in advance to present Dickens as a kind of cavalcade of incantatory sadness and mania. The effect is dramatic—a kind of suite for Great Man with Dancing Skeletons. We believe absolutely in the power and glory of Simon Callow's histrionics, and we're also moved by them. We even believe they are a genuine window through which to look at Dickens. But you do feel as though you have been in the presence of a powerfully realised cartoon rather than a human being.

It's all very complex, this mirroring and mimicking; it's also very like Dickens, with his indelible sense of line and his

pure grandeur of the ventriloquial. But it also follows a logic of melodrama and showmanship.

None of which is meant to diminish Simon Callow's art. His metamorphoses of face and voice are extraordinary, and every so often that impossible thing happens in the theatre and we find ourselves staring into the eyes of ... Fagin. That kind of transfiguration is not to be sneezed at. This is a complex, engrossing performance, a trouper's tour de force, and it deserves the praise that it has received, although it cannot by definition equal the glow of what it would be like to hear Simon

Callow read 50 consecutive pages of a Dickens novel.

THE EFFECT OF *Oliver!* on any audience (in any half-competent version) is so much an effect of charm it's enough to make you doubt the function of criticism. Lionel Bart's 1960 musical (one of the last of the classics) still comes across like a folk masterpiece. Bart had trained with Joan Littlewood and made his money writing songs for Tommy Steele, but with this tremendously cheery re-statement of Dickens' *Oliver Twist* he seems to have penetrated some deep strain of the popular that wanted to sing forever of glorious food, and pledge itself to do anything for you, dear, anything, because it considered itself your mate.

Oliver! can be taken as the East End's revenge on *My Fair Lady*, that other musical with a high-toned source, which also plays on a storyline of artistic complexity while preserving a fairy-tale structure. Like the Lerner and Loewe reanimation of Shaw's *Pygmalion*, *Oliver!* has a leading role for an actor who can patter his way through *Sprechgesang*. It has the iconoclastic charm of Cockney music hall songs in a canonical context. It is also genuinely operatic, as *My Fair Lady* is, in telling the story through the music: the workhouse waifs rhapsodising food, Bumble's cry of 'More!' and the rollicking sadism of the song that follows—Fagin's demonstration of pickpocketing to the delicious strains of the music of the yiddisher theatre. These translate Dickens' story into the universal language of a rough music that reshapes that story as a form of 20th-century folk experience.

It's arguable that Shaw and Dickens were always of the Cockneys' party. Certainly the musicals are, though in the case of

Oliver! there's none of the countervailing glamour of Higgins' tin-god misogyny or Ascot or the Ball. When Oliver falls among thieves he falls from the world of the child-starving hypocrites into the magical world of the Artful Dodger and Fagin. Of course this is also the murderous, woman-bashing world of Bill Sikes (one of the most gruesome worlds Dickens ever evoked). But the way in which *Oliver!* makes the melodrama fizz is to give it a maximum comic rollick, and to present that comedy in the most communitarian form possible—as a set of music hall routines.

The Londoners are among the more easygoing people on earth, particularly the Cockneys. This is a self-portrait written (or translated) at just the point where they were enjoying a maximum relaxation and self-confidence, let's say a few years into the career of Tommy Steele, and just before Michael Caine's first films. *Oliver!* is also, of course, a musicalising of the common person's possession of Dickens. *Oliver Twist* had been filmed a dozen years before, with Alec Guinness' famous portrayal of Fagin and with Anthony Newley (another Cockney songster) as the Artful Dodger (just as the Leslie Howard/Wendy Hiller film of *Pygmalion* had led the way for Lerner and Loewe).

And the upshot in *Oliver!* is terrifically Dickensian, even though it is not dominated by the horrific vision of *Oliver Twist*. It's as if the musical releases the side of Dickens that delights rather than appals: the gusto, the comedy and the weirdly ambiguous image of the child, so innocent and so much an apple of temptation to every adult eye that beholds it. Nothing in *Oliver!* is more brilliant than the knockabout Huck Finnism of the 'Consider Yourself' duet between the Dodger and Oliver, or the parody of upper-class courtliness in 'I'd do anything', which is further parodied, with dark irony, in Nancy's love for the brutal Bill Sikes. And yes, *Oliver!* does have its darker Dickensian hues too. But it has them with a taut economy, and places them in a predominant context of great fun, even if much of that fun is of imagining a 'fine life' somewhere else.

Oliver! was the one wildly successful home-grown British musical of a period that was obsessed by Britishness in everything from *Camelot* to *Mary Poppins*. It's earthier than any of them and far

more intent on, and glorying in, low-life. It was first performed in London, with the benefit of a magnificent design by Sean Kenny, and a revolve that transfigured the stage with shreds of fabric and colour. Now we have the Cameron Mackintosh revival of *Oliver!*—nearly eight years after its London resurrection—directed by Sam Mendes, of *American Beauty* fame, preserved by a team of Mackintosh assistants without an Aussie among them.

It's a lush, globalised creature this *Oliver!*—dominated by the Anthony Ward design, which uses great mesh 'trucks' running sideways above the stage, and hoisting 50 feet in the air. It's a kind of elaborate cut-out production, sometimes literally so, with its glaring cardboard renditions of famous London buildings, which should delight children's eyes. But it has plenty of swirl and smog and chiaroscuro made vivid with a flash of crimson or scarlet. All very handsome, if a bit consciously so, occasionally making the spectator hunger for the litheness of Sean Kenny. The kind of painting-box postmodernism that is one aspect of the production reaches its zenith in the scenes when Oliver is briefly with Mr Brownlow. These are too artificial for words in their two-dimensional Prince Charlesism.

Otherwise this is an energised, state-of-the-art production, which does everything it can with a splendid old vehicle without actually landing planes on stage or crashing chandeliers. Kids, in particular, should be exposed to it because *Oliver!* is a child's-eye view of Dickens. It works pretty much like a dream, even with the residual consciousness that things are a bit bigger than they need to be. The crowds of kids (some black and brindle to summon up today's multicultural London) are splendidly choreographed by Matthew Bourne, and restaged by Geoff Garrett. They also sing well, while looking appropriately raggedy.

The night I went, Oliver was Sam Larielle, and he managed to look like an angel while also evincing lots of glee. The Artful Dodger, Ben Nicholas, was a snappy dancer and managed his songs with ebullience. Tamsin Carroll is terrific as Nancy. She belts out her songs with energy and with a grand torchy voice, acting with her whole body to create a marvellous image

of a good-hearted, attractive woman who has no illusions about her ruined love and her ruined world. This is the kind of musical theatre performance one longs for, and for once you do feel, as Cameron Mackintosh says, that she is going to be a star.

Elsewhere, the production is a bit blurry when it comes to detail, even if the overall Mendes-vision has a kind of royal seal of approval that pretty consistently entrances the eye. Steve Bastoni is effective as Bill Sikes. But Stuart Wagstaff is the merest bit of fluff and fuss as Mr Brownlow, and Mark Mitchell is a tenorish and approx-

even if he lacks the effortless comic brio to make the old Jewish master crim into the figure of incessant delight. Waters has a natural authority. With his mouldering, leading-man features he looks good in the role, but there's a missing streak of geniality or comic timing that makes him seem a bit like a smothered prophet. On the other hand, he registers moodiness and humanity, and the performance grows in stature with a dramatic rendition of 'Reviewing the situation'. In a slightly distracted way Waters does have his own magnetism.

So this is a fair enough production of *Oliver Twist*, the comic book, for massed choir and raggedy-tail cub patrol. Yes, it's Dickens as a child might delight in him.



imate Mr Bumble even if his other half, Sally-Anne Upton, packs a punch. If the cast lapse from their Cockney into broad Australian—and they do—nobody's going to take too much notice. I remember, years ago, Garrie Hutchinson reviewing an *Oliver!* with Garry McDonald as Fagin and asking, 'In what sense is this British theatre?' Obviously *Oliver!*—and perhaps even Dickens—comes out of an aspect of England for which the land of convicts and castaways and gold-diggers has a special affinity. After all, Australia was Mr Micawber's destination, wasn't it?

Accent is not a problem for John Waters, who emigrated 35 years ago from Britain, in the supposedly 'bad' old days when we imported 'lead' for shows. He has no problems with a Fagin voice,

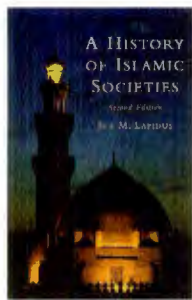
All that oom-pah and play, but there are shadows here as well as wonders. I would have liked more of a Pied Piper of a Fagin, but there's a place too for these flickers of worry, this suggestion of a bright man sinking. And yes, there'll always be a Dickens while they keep belting out *Oliver!*

The theatre itself, that tired old pick-pocket and receiver of stolen goods, doesn't look half bad when its money-bright priorities are intent on this still-glittering prize. ■

Peter Craven is the editor of *Quarterly Essay* and *Best Australian Essays*.

Photographs above: John Waters as Fagin and Tamsin Carroll as Nancy, with the 'raggedy-tail cub patrol'.

THE SHORTLIST

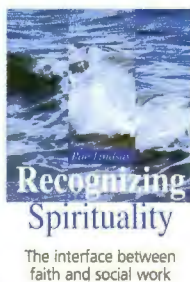


A History of Islamic Societies (2nd ed), Ira M. Lapidus. Cambridge University Press, 2002. ISBN 0 521 77933 2, RRP \$59.95

A 100-word analysis of a 1000-page book is a nonsense. But this review is simply to celebrate a gift. Ira Lapidus has brought his encyclopaedic account of the Islamic world up to date, and leaves us indebted to him. His *History* became an indispensable reference tool when first published fourteen years ago. Now that it is open season for every ancient anti-Islamic prejudice, this factual and evenly written history is a precious resource. He describes the history and geographical spread of Islam in detail, and concludes with judicious treatment of selected themes. —Andrew Hamilton

Recognizing Spirituality: The interface between faith and social work, Rae Lindsay. University of Western Australia Press, 2002. ISBN 1 876268 75 1, RRP \$38.95

If many ordinary people experience and heal their discontents through religious symbols, but the education of experts trained to help them do so excludes discussion of religious faith, what is gained? This is the issue that Rae Lindsay addresses in this modest and well-planned discussion.



The challenge that she faces is to find a way through the prejudice that religious faith, particularly when studied from inside, is not a suitable topic for academic discourse. Her response is to focus on spirituality—the consideration of the deeper, and not necessarily explicitly religious, values by which human beings live. She offers a coherent account of spirituality and its development, and of spiritualities represented in Australia. She points to widespread dissatisfaction among both teachers and students of social work that such an important area of human experience is neglected, and summarises the body of thought reflecting on how social work students can appropriately be introduced to it.

Recognizing Spirituality also offers material for broader reflection by those concerned that religious voices are not adequately heard in society. Better than pulling up the drawbridge, or hurling molten lead from the ramparts onto the secular heads below, is Lindsay's quiet exploration of what precisely religious faith has to contribute and how it can best be incorporated into particular conversations. —A.H.



The Pocket Guide to Saint Paul: Coins encountered by the Apostle on his Travels, Peter Lewis & Ron Bolden. Wakefield Press, 2002. ISBN 1 86254 562 6, RRP \$29.95

Many would argue that the most important pocket is the hip pocket and, if so, this work is the best of pocket books. For it describes the coins produced by the towns which Saint Paul is recorded to have visited. It puts Paul both in his place and in the money.

It is in the best sense of the word an amateur book—written by people who love their subject, are deeply knowledgeable about it and wish to share their enthusiasm with their readers. The denominations of coins and the effigies carried

on them reveal a surprising amount about the culture, economy and status of the towns which produced them.

It is not the writers' fault that their surmises about what Paul may have thought when he handled the coins seem a little strained. Compared to the stories of Jesus, whose parables are full of references to money and to the significance of particular coins, Paul's letters show less interest in how you make money than in what you can do with it—support the impoverished Jewish church, for example. Being like Paul in that respect, I found only one thing lacking in this book: an account of how much you could buy with each coin. —A.H.

Understanding Deleuze, Claire Colebrook. Allen & Unwin, 2002. ISBN 1 86508 797 1, RRP \$35.00

French philosopher Gilles Deleuze is the subject of this admirably clear, explanatory work. Trained in classical philosophy, with its ideal of dispassionate reason, Deleuze accepted Marx's insight that our theories mask and sustain power relationships, and Foucault's more radical assertion that theories produce and are produced by power relationships. Deleuze argued even more radically that no real world or universal theory underlies the play of desire, the life force of the world. The task of the philosopher is to think of the new possibilities that this life force can take, and not to be captured by images of a stable humanity and of pre-existent laws declaring what it means to be human.



This view of the world, as one in which the life force continually produces different possibilities, is profoundly counter-intuitive. Hence, Deleuze's vocabulary is full of neologisms and of words used in new senses. He is a difficult writer because his thoughts are difficult to think. He tries to evoke a recognition of the life force which produces identities, societies and persons. His method led him to look at the rhetoric of creative writing and of art, to see the new questions and possibilities which style creates.

Deleuze's work is valuable as a correction to an excessively rationalist philosophy. He is less attractive as a stand-alone guide. For, if he undermines the ideal of the infallible detached observer, he also weakens the solidity and claim of the other in need. He offers a needed remedy against arrogance, but few resources against barbarism. —A.H.

The Many-Coloured Land: A Return to Ireland, Christopher Koch, Picador, 2002. ISBN 0 330 36383 2, RRP \$30.00



When a fine writer returns to Ireland after 40 years, and ponders his Irish convict ancestors, we would expect some sharp insights. Christopher Koch provides them, especially in his laconic and vivid portraits of disappointment. *The Many-Coloured Land* is worth reading, even if a little disappointing—the travel narrative is too slack and mundane to carry the burden of Koch's large interests.

I found the first chapters the most interesting. In them Koch meditates on the Irishness of convicts who came to Tasmania, including his maternal great-great-grandmother. His evocation of Thomas Meagher, the most charismatic of the Young Irelanders in personality and literary style, is sufficient to make the book a cause for gratitude. —A.H.

The good and faithful servant

D R H.C. 'NUGGET' COOMBS, the subject of this biography, was something of an enigma. The author quotes the journalist Dominic Nagle writing in *The Australian*, when Coombs was made Australian of the Year in 1971: 'He behaves in such a confident way. When he moves, it's like a piston: well-oiled, regular, got a job to do, no mucking about please, pow pow ... Even when he sits down, it's all go ... like a teacher or a general he ticks things off with the forefinger of one hand on the palm of the other.'

Perhaps that was the secret: the complete public servant, the consummate if restrained public intellectual, the workaholic identifying things to be done and ticking them off as he went. He had much to tick off—a lifetime of achievement.

As a public servant, Coombs served under seven prime ministers, from Curtin to Whitlam. As Director of Rationing (1942), Director-General of Post-war Reconstruction (1943–9), Governor of the Reserve Bank (1949–1968) and in numerous advisory roles, he remained for nearly 30 years at the centre of the elite of Australia's public service. For another 20 years he was active in public life, involved in the institutions of the arts, science, education and Indigenous affairs.

They were different times, when the traditions of public service professionalism and independence were alive and well, respected and relied on by politicians and the community. In 1949, according to Menzies' biographer, Allan Martin, a number of Menzies' colleagues wanted to 'cleanse' the public service of Coombs and others who had favoured the 'socialistic' ideas of the previous government. 'Menzies refused, on the grounds that under the Westminster system a permanent public service that served every administration whatever its

colour, was the one guarantee of probity in government.'

Menzies was not disappointed. Twenty years later, Coombs suffered the 'irritation' of Billy McMahon describing him as 'a kind of guiding philosopher' and the mild embarrassment of the congenitally self-effacing when, prior to the 1972 election, Whitlam announced (by agreement) that Coombs would become his adviser if

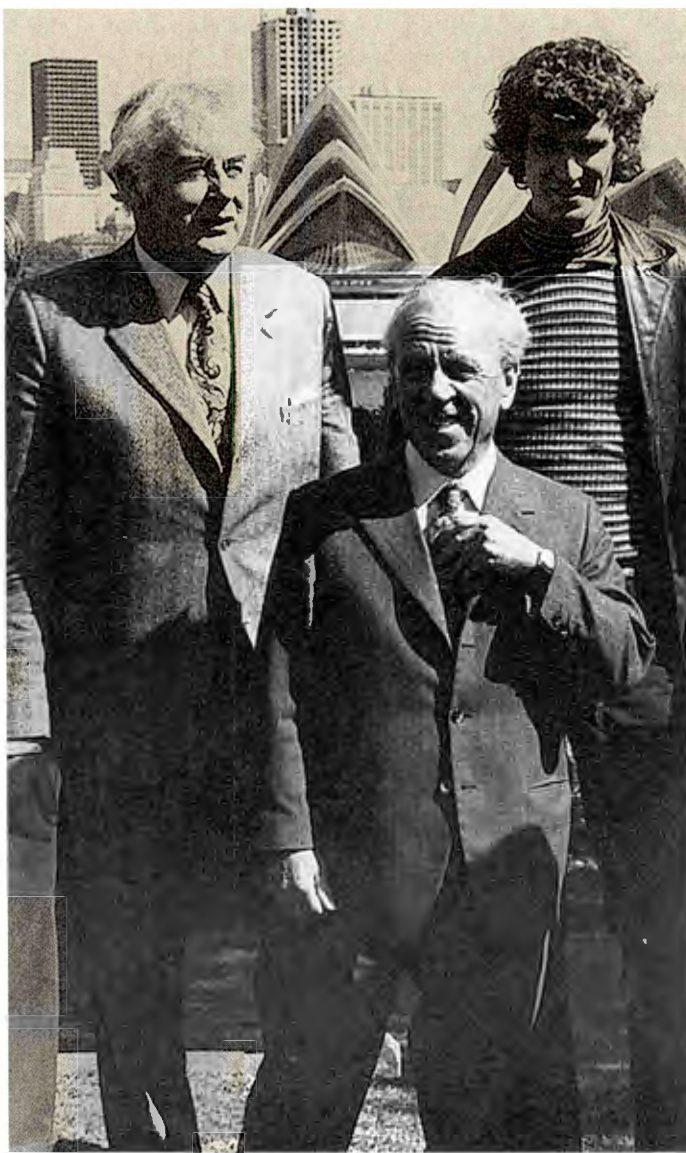
Whitlam were elected to government.

Coombs' career spanned the golden age of the Commonwealth public service headed by a group of talented mandarins who were both powerful and influential. 'Government' comprised ministers and bureaucrats. According to the late Allan Davies (in *Australian Democracy*) more than 70 per cent of substantive legislation emanated from the public service.

In Coombs' words the bureaucracy held a 'substantial monopoly'. It was a system that seemed to work, but by the mid-1970s (when Coombs chaired the Royal Commission on Australian Government Administration) he was concerned about the proliferation of lobby groups and new notions of participatory democracy. He observed that 'if, despite the formal structure of representative and ministerial government, decision-making is to become the function of a wider range of groups, the exclusiveness of the relationship between bureaucracy and ministers will be significantly eroded'.

The Royal Commission report called for increased 'responsiveness' from public servants to outside views and interests. Arguably, they were ill-equipped to adapt—one alleged justification for the rapid rise of a new class of ministerial advisers, said to be more 'politically astute' than public servants.

As Rowse points out, there is considerable nostalgia for the golden age, articulated by Coombs himself in his 1993 R.D. Wright Lecture, and reflected by others such as Hugh Stretton, who rightly lament the demise of the broadly educated Mandarins imbued with an innovative and humane public policy ethos. Certainly somewhere in the changes which began in the 1970s too many babies have been thrown out with the bathwater and



'Tall Poppies' come in different sizes: Coombs with Gough Whitlam (left) and David Williamson (right) in 1973.

something important has been lost from Australia's public institutions and government.

In spite of his great and diverse achievements, Nugget remained famously self-effacing and modest. He cherished his privacy, so by agreement this book is about his public life. Tim Rowse made diligent attempts to find out what made his subject tick. In answer to this question the philosopher John Passmore, who knew Coombs well, replied: 'I never knew. I just saw him as a series of admirable projects.' The author's interviews with Coombs himself don't reveal much either.

Rowse is acutely conscious of the difficulty. 'The resulting book is more impersonal than most readers of biography would wish.' This seems an understatement. Most biographies have a tantalising and elusive quality. Here it's as if, having ordered fillet of sole in the Fawly Towers restaurant, the enthusiastic customer is served with the backbone instead of the flesh.

So the author makes 'a virtue of impersonality' and explores 'some themes in Australia's twentieth century'. Nugget, however, is always there like the central figure in a crowded Caravaggio painting.

THE EXPLORATION OF themes is meticulously researched and amounts to a comprehensive history of Australia's public intellectual life from the 1920s until the end of the century. It deals with the guided (and sometimes misguided) development of a nation. But the thematic approach combined with the 'virtue of impersonality' detracts from the narrative aspect of a biography to which many readers of 'lives' are accustomed. However, for those interested in the public dialogues and initiatives relating to issues such as trade policy, banking, arbitration, external relations, the widening role of government and the foundation and development of some of Australia's great institutions, this is a fascinating and invaluable book.

Coombs was first and foremost an economist, whose views on public policy were undoubtedly influenced by the Great Depression, his experiences of a wartime economy and the widespread enthusiasm to create a more just society and a better world which followed those two catastrophic events.

Rowse identifies Coombs as an 'economic rationalist' in the sense that 'economic rationalism' is a 'way of thinking about public policy in which "politics" is viewed from the standpoint of "the economy"'. The point is elaborated and well made, distinguishing true 'economic rationalism' from current popular usage, in which the term is associated with neo-classical economics and its ideological and essentially right-wing political orientation.

Coombs' economic rationalism dictated opposition to inflation and policies of Labor Governments which he perceived as conducive to inflation (for example, under Curtin and Whitlam), and opposition to those interests favoured by conservative governments which risked 'Australia's hard-won social cohesion'. He constantly sought a reasoned dialogue about economic policy and its purposes, and from his Australian context no doubt envied 'the rapport between government, economists and entrepreneurs' which he had found in Sweden in a pre-war study of the Swedish economy.

Coombs' rational and disciplined approach included a commitment to accountability and good management which sometimes led him into conflict with the arts constituents of the Australia Council and other cultural bodies. His rationalism, however, embraced a critical view of the assumptions of many of his economist colleagues, and when he was considering public policy on issues such as Aborigines, the environment and quality of life, it allowed him to explore how the economist's craft could help resolve some of the problems which in today's world of

ideological economics seem intractable. As Tim Rowse puts it: 'The mission of the economist was not to promote growth; that was a "heresy" into which too many economists had fallen. To be an economist was to present conscientiously to the public answers to the question: how to revalue the resources we have so as to use them sustainably and equitably?.'

Coombs' view of the interaction between politics and economics seems now to belong peculiarly to the last century. Rowse makes an interesting analysis of the continuities, if any, between now and then by critically considering journalist Paul Kelly's book, *The End of Certainty*, and particularly Kelly's description of 'The Australian Settlement' which, he argued, endured from Deakin until the 1980s. Kelly is a great chronicler of political events, a master of broad-brush descriptions of what took place.

But Kelly, according to Rowse, 'has ignored any alternatives to the Australian Settlement other than those now proposed by neo-liberal intellectuals in the 1980s. His story takes Australia from "immaturity" to "maturity", without raising the question of whether there could be alternatives to the market-orientated maturity to which we are being pulled . . . by global forces.'

Coombs had, as Rowse points out in some detail, made valiant attempts to moderate the Whitehall/Westminster paternalism of the Australian Settlement which might, if adopted, have resulted in a more palatable antipodean response to so-called global imperatives. Among Coombs' successors as public-policy makers there are not many prepared to concede, as Coombs always did, the possibility that on occasions they might have been wrong. This, in spite of the book's flaws as a biography, is the reason why *Nugget Coombs* is such an important piece of work. It's not only an insightful piece of Australian history; it poses the questions that an enquiring

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intellectual and committed Australian such as Coombs might have asked if he were alive today. Nugget described himself as an 'enabler'. What are today's policy gurus enabling? Coombs was always a listener as well as an enabler. Listening is another

quality which has slipped from public life and been replaced by the tyranny of opinion polls. ■

John Button was a minister and senator in the Hawke and Keating governments.

BOOKS:2

JON GREENAWAY

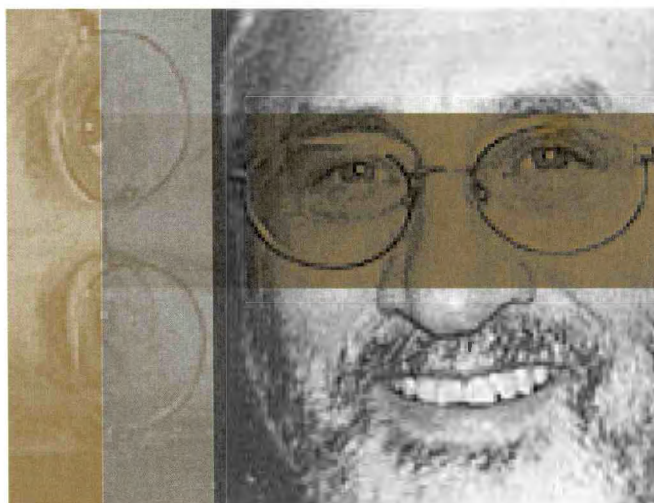
To have and have not

Globalization and its Discontents, Joseph E. Stiglitz.
Allen Lane, 2002. ISBN 0 393 05124 2, RRP \$29.95

THE TERM 'GLOBALISATION' has made a rapid transition since its omission from the 1997 edition of the Macquarie Dictionary. The once awkward bit of jargon that rolled heavily off the tongues of protesters and PhD students of development finance is now a term with 21st-century clout and currency. We understand what it denotes—the closer integration of national economies via the removal of trade barriers. But do we understand its connotations, given that it is used to explain a variety of phenomena—everything from currencies disappearing under the weight of massive betting by currency speculators to watching *Sex in the City* broadcast in Turkish?

For Joseph Stiglitz, globalisation is about the developing world's being denied the opportunity for greater prosperity because of vested interests in the global institutions that govern it. Stiglitz, former chief economist at the World Bank and joint Nobel Laureate for 2001 (with George Akerlof and Michael Spence), is one of a rare breed of economists who looks past the slide-rule mentality of classic economic theory and judges the performance of markets by the public good. As a lauded academic, his prime achievement lies in studies that show how the amount of information possessed by participants determines whether a market functions as it should. The urgency in this critique of the global financial architecture constructed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organisation and Washington, seems born of a desire to make sure people know what is going on.

Until there are changes to the standard remedy handed down to poor countries when their economies nosedive, Africa, Asia, South America and the former Soviet Union will continue to lurch from crisis to crisis.



Joseph Stiglitz left his position as a White House adviser to work at the World Bank in 1997. It is tempting to think he was offered the job as chief economist at the World Bank as part of a strategy to muzzle him. He had already roughed up a few egos in the Clinton administration with his occasional, but strident, criticism of economic policy set by Treasury and the Federal Reserve. But if it was hoped that the stirrer would get lost in the World Bank/IMF nexus—well, no go. Along came the Asian financial crisis and, following on its heels, the 1998 Russian meltdown. Stiglitz began to warn against the austerity measures enforced by the IMF on the countries they were bailing out with

massive loans. By doing so he managed to lever apart, at least for a time, the cosy relationship between the two institutions whose headquarters face one another across a Washington street.

GLOBALIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS brings together the arguments Stiglitz made when at the World Bank. It is based on two central observations: first, the policy prescription foisted on countries as varied as Argentina, Indonesia and Côte d'Ivoire is unyielding to the demands presented by their particular contexts. Secondly, the IMF is failing to fulfil its mission, articulated by John Maynard Keynes at its establishment in 1945, of promoting growth and employment in member countries by mitigating market failure and fiscal crises. Stiglitz argues that the IMF, urged along by US policy makers, has come full circle. It now acts for the benefit of markets above the interests of developing countries and their peoples.

This is not a dry argument—figures stacked up against benchmarks, illustrated by parabolas and graphs. Stiglitz draws conclusions from what he has seen in the countries he has visited and suggests reforms so that globalisation spreads wealth rather than poverty. He describes, for example, the frustration of a competent post-civil-war Ethiopian administration over IMF high-handedness. The IMF demanded that Ethiopia maintain a budget surplus even if that meant schools and hospitals could not be built. The government was chided for not clearing an early loan repayment with the fund beforehand, an attitude Stiglitz brands as neocolonialist.

Despite near-zero inflation and slow but steady growth, Ethiopia had to fight against suspension of its IMF program. It had to risk its ranking by rejecting the IMF's recommendation that it open up its banking system to competition—this at a time when the indigenous banks had fewer assets than could be found in a middle-income suburb of Sydney.

To be fair to the IMF, it is not the only institution that can be accused of bureaucratic fussiness and attaching unreasonable conditions to aid. Debt relief campaigners claim that some administrations in sub-Saharan Africa spend more time writing reports to direct donors than making sure the money is put to good use. Even

in extreme emergencies, such as post-referendum Timor, the UN must conduct lengthy competitive tendering processes for the most basic of items. (A few years ago at a meeting in Bangkok an aid official with the Australian embassy justified cutting funding to a remarkable project run by a Burmese medico on the Thai side of the border, on the grounds that the facilities were not hygienic. Brave souls took on the Herculean task of unpacking the remark.)

According to Stiglitz, the IMF is positively dangerous when it promotes privatisation and market liberalisation before adequate regulations, associated infrastructure and competitors are in place. The nadir of this approach was seen in Russia when Yeltsin cronies were buying up all the state monopolies they could at prices way under the odds while the IMF lent billions of dollars to fund the 'shock therapy'. The IMF is also ill-informed when it dismisses the role governments in poorer countries can play by husbanding projects and developing markets. Stiglitz recounts seeing the wreckage of a scheme in Morocco, in which villagers supplemented their income by growing chickens

to sell at market. The public enterprise that distributed the chicks was shut down after the IMF told the government it shouldn't be in the chook business.

But dealing with major fiscal crises is the most important mandated responsibility of the IMF, and it is here, according to Stiglitz, that the most damage has been done. After the collapse of currency values in East Asia in 1997, the institution's economists were more concerned with keeping inflation down than with managing it. It failed to take account of the impact of this policy on economies, and on employment. The high interest rates demanded of countries in the letters of agreement signed with the IMF kept inflation under control but sent indebted companies to the wall, particularly in Thailand. There, the contraction of gross domestic product was near 10 per cent in the year following the devaluations. In Indonesia it was a staggering 17 per cent. Recalling the riots that followed the slashing of food and fuel subsidies as part of the austerity measures required under the IMF agreement, Stiglitz asks whether the nature of the 'regime change' that took place under their watch could have been any worse.

An alternative approach was taken in Malaysia, where Dr Mahathir ignored IMF advice—more from habit than judgment—and introduced capital controls and short-term freezing of foreign-held holdings to prevent speculation by 'hot money' and a rush of capital out of the country. Though Malaysia is perhaps more vulnerable now to another dip in regional growth and investor confidence, it emerged from the crisis of the late '90s in far better shape than some of its IMF-advised neighbours.

Stiglitz notes the crossover of key IMF staff to large investment banks and the close relationship between the institution and the captains of US economic policy. Little wonder the IMF insists on policies—high interest rates, budget surpluses, liberalised financial capital markets—that best suit the interests of US investors. He calls this the Washington consensus.

Yet when the principle of free trade obliges US administrations to hold their nerve against vocal domestic lobbies, they so often revert to protectionism. In 1994, aluminium prices dropped to a level where Russia had a competitive advantage over US producers. Anti-dumping tariffs were imposed on Russian aluminium and the establishment of a cartel followed—

hardly the kind of instruction on how to operate in the free market to give a country emerging from communism. Recent decisions protecting the US steel industry from cheaper imports, and providing huge subsidies for American agribusiness, give scant reason to believe that Washington will prove its words by deeds any time soon.

NATURALLY *Globalization and its Discontents* has drawn flak from its main target. Kenneth Rogoff, who fills a similar position at the IMF to the one Stiglitz held at the World Bank, has been leading the IMF charge, posting an open letter on the institution's website after the book was published in America. His liverish response (made strange by some feeble-minded humour) fails to nail Stiglitz as the mad professor. Rather, it makes his argument all the more compelling. Rogoff does make a valid point, however, when he argues that the book was written with the benefit of hindsight: the IMF has learnt how to do things better after some of the most turbulent years in its history.

Argentina is now the focus of IMF concern. The riots, the run on bank savings, and the creation of a clutch of currencies by regional governments to replace the near worthless peso, have happened since the IMF caused panic by withholding payments of a loan last December. This was despite austerity measures in Argentina to curb public spending and repay over US \$100 billion of inherited debt.

Are they learning indeed? ■

Jon Greenaway is a freelance writer, currently based in London.
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Bystander, 2002. ISBN 0 9577978 2 6, RRP \$24.99

Take Back the Truth: Confronting Papal Power and the Religious Right, Joanna Manning.

Crossroad, 2002. ISBN 0 8245 1976 0, RRP \$39.95

Sacred Silence: Denial and the Crisis in the Church, Donald Cozzens.

John Garratt Publishing, 2002. ISBN 1 875938 94 X, RRP \$29.95

The First Five Years of the Priesthood: A Study of Newly Ordained Catholic Priests, Dean Hoge.

The Liturgical Press, 2002. ISBN 0 8146 2804 4, RRP \$54.95

Aquinas and His Role in Theology, Marie-Dominique Chenu.

Liturgical Press, 2002. ISBN 0 8146 5079 1, RRP \$44.95

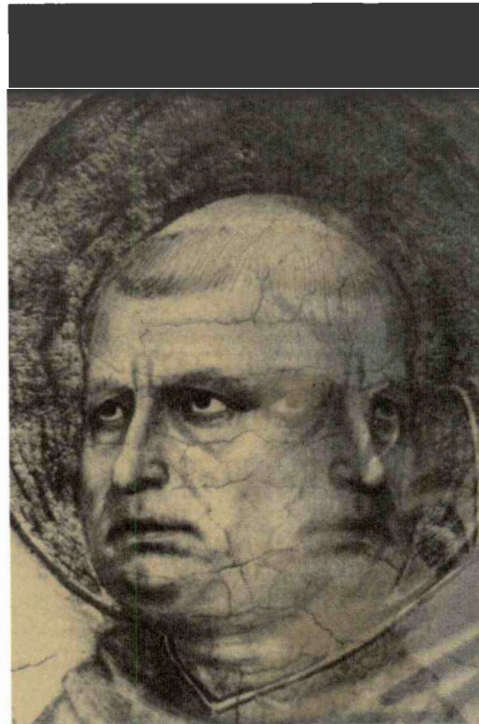
BOOKS ABOUT REFORM are a bit like a barium meal. They are usually heavy going and can cause dyspepsia. So we only read them if we believe that they will help our condition. They must persuade us that there is something wrong with us, provide an attractive picture of a healthy state, and persuade us that we can realistically expect to pass from sickness to health. Otherwise, why bother?

As there was in the late medieval world, there is now so much interest in reform of the church that you could spend much of your time reading about it. So, I chose five books that approach the condition of the church from different perspectives, and subjected them to the barium test.

John Hanrahan's account of the church is autobiographical. It was published posthumously, and would have benefited from stronger editing to eliminate repetition. It diagnoses a pathological church.

Hanrahan joined a religious congregation at 12, was ordained a priest and left shortly afterwards. He was never really at home. His motivation for going to a minor seminary was fear, in reaction to brutal treatment at school. He was also unfortunate at key times of his life to encounter controlling people who saw it as their mission to strip away self-confidence and self-respect. He accepted that in the Catholic Church all things were well, and that in it were to be found the wisest thinkers, the most dedicated people, and the happiest of human lives. He hoped that when he became a priest, his own dimly intuited weaknesses would be transformed into a fulfilled and generous life. But it never happened, and he eventually realised that his hopes were built on a lie.

Hanrahan offers no image of a healthy church, nor does he believe that transformation would be possible or worth working



for. As the title suggests, this is an angry book. But his anger is tempered by self-awareness and by a surprising generosity to many of his former companions. His experience of marriage and particularly his care for a daughter born with epilepsy clearly blessed him. In both he discovered the life and compassion that his association with the church had denied. The contrast justified, if any justification were needed, his decision to leave the church.

Donald Cozzens and Joanna Manning address the sickness of the Catholic Church broadly and descriptively. Manning calls for the more extensive surgery. The cancer which she identifies is widely disseminated: it is an authoritarian clerical control exercised harmfully to impose outdated beliefs and regressive social and moral attitudes, particularly to sexuality,

to the place of women in society and to the role of the laity in the church. She attributes these attitudes to Pope John Paul II and to many reactionary lay and clerical movements which he favours. To support her argument, she draws on a wide variety of Catholic writing and telling anecdotes.

Manning, who describes herself as having moved beyond the Catholic Church, focuses on pathologies. Nevertheless, she offers an implicit picture of health, pointed in a summary wish list at the end of the book. She wants the Catholic Church to welcome the postmodern construction of truth. In the conversion entailed in this, Catholics would recognise that insistence on certainty in moral and doctrinal issues reflects a passion for power and not for truth. Once Catholics accepted that the church should be both plural and inclusive, they would naturally dismantle coercive institutions and practices.

Take Back the Truth offers little that's new by way of argument or illustration. It is a classical liberal plea for an inclusive church. But Manning's background is significant. She has been long committed to social justice, and once dedicated nine months to making the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. She is serious, and so are the forms of corruption to which she draws attention.

Manning quotes Donald Cozzens' reflections on the current state of the Catholic priesthood. The reference to crisis in the subtitle of *Sacred Silence* indicates that Cozzens' interest is in pathologies. It was fired by the recent publicity given to paedophilia and the way in which this was covered up. In this book, he explores the denial of reality and the conspiracy of silence that affect his Church more broadly.

He gives many examples of denial and its effects. They include the refusal to acknowledge the decline in vocations,

with the result that many Catholics cannot receive the Eucharist. It is also impossible to talk freely, he argues, about the number of gay seminarians, the alienation of women, the extent of sexual abuse in the church, and about women's ordination. In some cases silence is imposed by sanctions. Cozzens explores the reasons why silence and denial flourish.

He also offers a better way: a contemplative form of living, which would counteract the fear and the brutal pragmatism in which silence and silencing breed. In addition, he attributes to the whole church the task of preserving the truth of the Gospel. As a result, teaching naturally takes the form of dialogue that is based on trust. Trust, in turn, will be reflected in the consultation of laity in the appointment of bishops, and of theologians and of women in matters concerning them. A program based on truth will also require more open ways of forming priests.

Sacred Silence is more narrowly focused than *Take Back the Truth*, and the examples which he gives of a church behaving badly are more telling. Cozzens' suggested changes accept the existing framework of Catholic belief and discipline, and so it is not inconceivable that they might be adopted in a less fearful climate. But as with Manning and Hanrahan, his image of the church is idealised. The church is the most important show on earth, as well as in heaven. The pressure of such an ideal is less likely to create reform than a resistance to it that will be masked by the cooption of the language of reform.

Dean Hoge's sociological study of Catholic priests in their early years after ordination is as narrowly focused as the reflections of Manning and Cozzens are broad. He presents the results of questionnaires and interviews both with priests who have remained in ministry and those who left within five years of their ordination. His study—impressive in the modesty of its goals and findings—concludes with

reflections by many people responsible for the spiritual development, placement and mental health of priests.

The recommendations made by the participants in the study are not sensational but they bear reflection. All the young priests and former priests recommend that there should be more openness about sexuality in the teaching and curriculum of their formation, a realistic seminary formation that introduces students to what awaits them in their ministry, better mentoring of the newly ordained, and more opportunities for them to speak honestly together of their experiences.

This program is minimal when compared to the larger agenda of church reform espoused by others. It has to do with the small satisfactions and local relationships of parish ministry. The critical challenges here are how to deal with a heavy burden of work and how to accept loneliness and appropriately find intimacy after moving from the more communal world of the seminary. Certainly Cozzens' analysis of the denial and silence endemic in church affairs illuminates some of the factors that contribute to dissatisfaction in ministry. But Hoge does not detect a cancer in the church. He identifies less dramatic ills: sprains, strains, instances of undernourishment and infection. No one form of treatment will heal them all.

In the responses to the study, there is one telling difference of emphasis. A bishop notes the individualism of the young priests and their emphasis on needs, calling for more evangelical zeal. A psychiatrist distinguishes between needs and desires, saying that people will not function well pastorally unless their emotional needs, no less than their physical needs for food and shelter, are adequately addressed.

This is one of the few times in the book when the difference between the present state of the church and the imagined ideal is handled. But an idealised church and ministry seem also to be reflected in the surprisingly high percentage of priests

who emphasise the difference between clergy and laity, and want it strengthened. The tension between ideal and reality is not resolved, but the book suggests that a high theological and spiritual rhetoric is of limited value unless it is firmly grounded in the human reality of the candidate. Where Christian or priestly identity is founded on a vision of difference from others, the path to disillusionment is already signposted.

IN THE FINAL BOOK reviewed, Marie-Dominique Chenu, a French Dominican priest, writes on Thomas Aquinas in a work which is over 40 years old, but only newly translated. Chenu was a theologian and pastoral theorist who was constantly harassed by the Roman authorities. His studies of medieval philosophy and theology were influential in Catholic theology, leading to an appreciation of the importance of historical context in theology. His account of the medieval world is not one of serene agreement on faith, but of passionate difference about central questions.

His Aquinas, too, is not the authoritative official theologian, but the controversial thinker who incorporated into his theology the secular philosophy of Aristotle and insisted on giving secular answers to secular questions. He struggled against a theology that simultaneously claimed too much knowledge of the world, and was too incurious about it.

In some respects Chenu's work shows its years. In 1959, Thomism was dominant in philosophy and theology, and Chenu could assume general familiarity with his ideas and language. What then was a popularising work will now be demanding for most readers. But the conditions within the church that Chenu implicitly addresses, namely an unreflective and uncritical appeal to authority and evasion of the challenges the world addresses to us, are still with us. His account of Aquinas offers an imaginative, confident vision



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and an unpolemical trust in reality.

Of these books which I have reviewed, those by Hoge and Chenu were the most satisfying. Paradoxically, although less concerned than the others with the pathology of church, they were more helpful in envisaging what reform might look like. Perhaps this is because the literature of reform, by focusing on the corruption within organisations, tends to make the corruption gargantuan, and the organisation itself appear powerful beyond measure. Those who corrupt the organisations by abuse of power are usually driven by an exaggerated sense of the importance of the organisation. Their critics unwillingly collude with them in confirming both the importance and power of the organisation, and the conviction that it is under threat.

It is precisely this myth of church as an institution of unalloyed achievement, of unassailable reputation, of total indispensa-

bility, that needs to be addressed. The myth has to do with overcoming death and limitation, a condition addressed subtly by Saint Augustine in his reflections on the death of his friend when both were adolescents:

For the grief I felt for the loss of my friend had struck so easily into my inmost heart simply because I had poured out my soul, upon him, like water upon sand, loving a man who was mortal as though he were never to die. My greatest comfort and relief was in the solace of other friends who shared my love of the huge fable which I loved instead of you, my God, the long-drawn lie which our minds were always itching to hear, only to be defiled by its adulterous caress. But if one of my friends died, the fable did not die with him. (Confessions, IV.8)

The myth which Augustine identifies in friendship can also attach to the church.

Although there is something divine and lasting in it, this quality inheres neither in its good reputation, its hierarchy, the weight of its teaching authority nor in the security conferred by membership. These things are passing. But even critics of the church are attracted to the myth of a powerful and much loved church, even while they wish to build it on different foundations.

Hoge's study is refreshing because he restricts himself to the small and half-measurable realities of the human heart. Out of these, myths are not easily built. Chenu presents a large picture of the church whose institutions help us while we are on our journey to engage with the God who is at work in the world. But the church, as we know it, is for travellers. It is not their rest. ■

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BOOKS:4

HUGH DILLON

The perennial observer

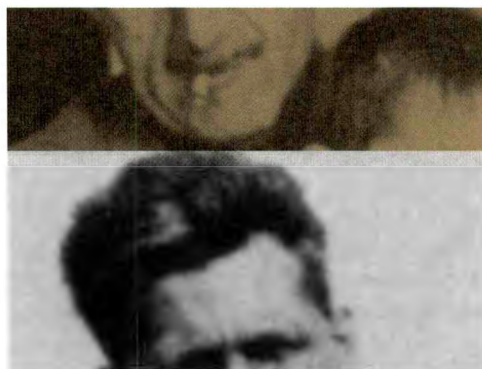
W

HY DO WE continue to read George Orwell? Not only, I believe, because he was so insightful about totalitarianism and other aspects of the politics of the 20th century. Although Orwell (born Eric Blair) was famously suspicious of saintliness ('Saints should be judged guilty until proven innocent,' he said of Gandhi), Susan Sontag's observations in her 1963 essay on the French philosopher Simone Weil seem somehow apt for him:

Some lives are exemplary, others not; and of exemplary lives, there are those which invite us to imitate them, and those which we regard from a distance with a mixture of revulsion, pity, and reverence. It is roughly the difference between a hero and a saint (if one may use the latter term in an aesthetic rather than a religious sense) ... No one who loves life would wish to imitate her dedication to martyrdom, or would wish it for his children or for anyone else whom he loves. Yet so far as we love seriousness, as well as life, we are moved by it, nourished by it.

Orwell was, above all, a writer of serious

Orwell's Victory, Christopher Hitchens. Faber, 2002. ISBN 0 713 99 584 X, RRP \$29.95



purpose. As he himself identified in his essay 'Why I Write', and Hitchens underscores, he had 'a facility with words and a power of facing unpleasant facts.' He also had a determination to reject the life of a middle-class gentleman, as it had been prescribed for him, and to live on his own terms for good or ill. And why *did* he write? As familiar as we think we are with him, it is worth refreshing our memories:

Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, *against* totalitarianism and for

democratic socialism, as I understand it ... What I have most wanted to do throughout the past ten years is to make political writing into an art. My starting point is always a feeling of partisanship, a sense of injustice ...

It was this almost unique combination of elements in him—how many others can you think of like him?—that lent Orwell his serious quality, made his life exemplary and makes him still an essential writer. It is also why he has been either attacked or shanghaied ruthlessly or simplistically since he died in 1950 by many who refuse or fail to understand him.

For many years Christopher Hitchens has made clear his fierce and protective admiration of Orwell. I don't have a full bibliography of Hitchens' references to and articles on Orwell, but my own random collection of Hitchens' works shows that he returns again and again to Orwell, like a rabbi to the Talmud.

As readers of Hitchens will know, he is witty, combative and stylish. They will also know that he is rhetorical, has a

tendency to smugness and superciliousness, and honours Orwell's austere rules for plain English more often in the breach than the observance. He writes vivid, sententious, sometimes ornate prose. But—agree with him or not—he is always provocative reading.

Orwell's Victory is neither biography nor balanced exegesis of Orwell's work. It is polemic (against those whom Hitchens regards as Orwell's enemies) and apologia. The book has obvious strengths. As well as being immensely readable, Hitchens knows his Orwell. Until Sonia Orwell died, many of George Orwell's collected papers were kept from researchers. Peter Davison's 20-volume collection of the papers is a marvel of editing, and Hitchens has clearly invested much time studying it. He has also, over the years, immersed himself in Orwell's critics—of various stripes.

Hitchens subdivides his 'apologia pro George Orwell' into ten essays: an introduction, Orwell and Empire, the Left, the Right, America, 'Englishness', feminists, the novels, language, and Orwell's notorious list of communist 'fellow-travellers'.

It is difficult now, given the apparent triumph of liberal democracy in so many political and economic spheres, to recall how little confidence most Europeans—and, indeed, Americans—had in democracy during the Thirties. By the time war broke out in September 1939, most European countries were either led by dictators or had large, popular Fascist and Communist parties dedicated to the overthrow of parliamentary democracy.

Orwell was no supporter of the Churchillian variety of liberal democracy. He believed fervently in both liberty and equality—no matter how great the tension between them. He also understood that, under the liberalism of his youth, inequality and social injustice were rampant and cruel. But equally, his experiences in Spain during the Spanish Civil War taught him the evils of Stalinism, the most devastating critique of which is to be found in *Animal Farm*.

The great fear of the Left in Orwell's time—and ours—was of providing ammunition to its critics. Orwell was hated by communists because he was thought to be aiding the capitalist enemy. But he refused to be anybody's ideological foot soldier when honesty required a 'decent' (the characteristic Orwell term) response to an outrage, whether committed by the Right or Left.

Hitchens' essay 'Orwell and the Left' is a broadside against those whose 'sheer ill will and bad faith and intellectual confusion ... ignite spontaneously when Orwell's name is mentioned'. He selects various targets, but it is Raymond Williams, the doyen of British cultural studies, for whom he reserves his deadliest venom. In criticising Williams' *Modern Masters* book on Orwell, he accuses Williams (among other things) of 'ingenious dishonesty and evasion'. Williams' admirers will cringe or bridle, so well-struck are Hitchens' blows.

Hitchens also takes a swipe at the Right's attempted annexation of Orwell. (This, I think, is the best piece in the book.) Here he brings out something of the real Orwell, the 'rather gruff English Home Counties Tory' who 'spent his entire adult life in conscious repudiation of this fate and this identity'. His target is, again, intellectual dishonesty. He makes plain that Orwell was the ally of the Right *only* in also opposing Stalinist totalitarianism. The essay on Orwell and feminism is unsatisfac-

tory. Hitchens, for reasons which elude me, seems to have felt obliged to defend Orwell as though he were living today. He died nearly twenty years before Germaine Greer published *The Female Eunuch*. He was not a feminist but nor were most Englishmen in 1950. While he shows that Orwell was not a misogynist, Hitchens does not emphasise adequately that much modern feminist criticism of Orwell fails to treat him in the context of his times.

The best of the rest are Hitchens' introduction and the essays on Empire and the novels, which are excellent. The piece on the novels is an especially perceptive engagement with Orwell. The others strike me as underdone. Anyone well-versed in Hitchens' prolific output will find some familiar ideas repeated. But this is a small sin—Hitchens' best ideas always bear reconsideration—and, in any case, the book may well encourage a new generation to read Orwell. ■

Hugh Dillon is a Sydney magistrate.

BOOKS:5

STEPHEN HOLT



The Girl from the Fiction Department: A Portrait of Sonia Orwell, Hilary Spurling.
Hamish Hamilton, 2002. ISBN 0 241 14165 6 RRP \$29.95

SONIA ORWELL, like Denis Thatcher or Gavin Kernot, would never have been written about had her spouse not been a figure of note. Yet this consideration does not detract from the importance of Hilary Spurling's engaging portrait of George Orwell's second wife and widow.

Sonia Orwell's life, as presented by Spurling, a friend-turned-biographer, is a pointed lesson in the perils of trying to live a life as a figure of art and fiction: the account is replete with instances of her subject's life imitating art. Sonia was reckoned a beauty, and painterly comparisons were always at hand when friends and acquaintances sought to describe her. To Mary McCarthy she was 'like all the Reynoldses and the Romneys in London's Wallace

collection rolled into one'. Stephen Spender talked about her 'round Renoir face'.

Sonia believed (unwisely) that 'man could do nothing greater than write books'. Though she rejected a Catholic upbringing, and ended up becoming something of an anti-religious bigot, she was shaped for life by a convent education, particularly when two enthusiastic young nuns imbued her with a love of fine literature.

For Sonia, books were always spilling into real life. Her formative years bear a remarkable resemblance to scenes from any of Orwell's pre-war novels, with their seedy social milieu. Like Orwell, she was the product of a moribund social order. Born in imperial India, she never knew her father before he died. Her widowed

FLASH IN THE PAN

Splatter movie

Pollock, dir. Ed Harris. Why do impossible people fascinate us so? Jackson Pollock was by all accounts about as unpleasantly impossible as a person can be. Sure, his painting had a massive influence on post-war art-making, but you have to have a lot more than just talent to influence the way people turn up their jeans legs. His iconic status (proved by his continuing sartorial sway) is matched perhaps by the stretch of his canvases but not by the love he shared with man (nor woman, neither).

Pollock is a bio-pic of sorts, and in truth could just as well have been called *Krasner* (his wife and an Abstract Expressionist herself)—but of course that is not how we record history, particularly the history of modernism. But my wee historical quibble aside, Ed Harris has pulled



off something almost marvellous. The film has some of the problems associated with the dreariest of bio-pics—Val Kilmer looking as though he's dipped into a dress-up box to prepare for his role as Willem de Kooning, and the odd over-anxious inclusion of dates and place names—but not much else really gets your goat.

Harris' decision to concentrate almost exclusively on the relationship between Pollock and Krasner was a wise one, allowing us to see the inextricable connections between the production of a man's work and a couple's domestic reality. (In this case, not a domestic reality anyone would envy, but certainly one to acknowledge.)

Marcia Gay Harden (above) and Ed Harris (right) are painfully good (if a little too handsome) as Pollock and Krasner,

and the scenes of Harris actually tackling the canvases are genuinely breathtaking.

This film is more glorious craft than it is perfect film-making (losing the story every now and then to virtuoso acting) but it is an impressive debut for Harris as director, and an appropriately unsympathetic portrait of a very difficult man.

—Siobhan Jackson

Beyond disbelief

The Ring, dir. Gore Verbinski. Remember that very dark and disturbing 1988 Dutch thriller *The Vanishing* (*Spoorloos*), directed by George Sluizer? Some years later in 1993 Sluizer allowed a Hollywood remake complete with tacked-on happy ending and a total lack of the sinister force that drove the plot in the original version. Well, *The Ring* is doing just that with a dark and disturbing 1998 Japanese thriller called *Ringu*, except that, having borrowed its main plot and premise, it thought it might as well rummage around in videos of *The X-Files*, *The Shining*, *The Sixth Sense* and *Psycho* (yes indeed, a shower scene and a high-backed chair that swings around to reveal its occupant in what Peter Wimsey's sidekick Bunter used to describe as a very imperfect state of preservation). The make-up specialist gets a whole line in the credits and well deserves it, the tireless chap, unless of course he has shares in the manufacture of corpse-green maquillage, in which case it's sheer insider trading.

The story of the original is riskily simple and requires considerable athleticism in one's credulity: the Japanese version pulls it off by being uncompromisingly strange and crazy and, well, thoroughly Japanese. You have to believe that if you watch a certain video, the phone will ring and you will be told you have seven days to live. After the set time your heart stops and you are found dead and with a terrible expression on your face. The Japanese version is subtler and scarier by far: the Hollywood version has to add the ooga-booga factor.

The video in question is about five minutes long and consists of mysterious

ladders, chairs, mirrors, and a long-haired woman with a menacing smile (standard art-school stuff in fact, but no-one warns you that installation art can be as lethal as it is pointless). The American version of this stars Naomi Watts as a single mother journalist with an old-for-his-age little boy. When her niece dies after watching a strange video, she intrepidly goes alone to the remote mountain motel where it all took place. Then she watches the video, and the rest of the film is a race against time. (Day 1, you see a ladder. Oh dear. Day 2, I think you see a housefly and get a nosebleed. Day 3, I forget.) Anyway, this wonderful mother leaves the video where her kid can get it and since the father has also watched it the whole family is up for the chop. The video switches itself on at odd times just to let them know who's boss. But you know the one thing they never do? They futilely take the plug out of the wall, but they don't ever consider getting rid of the telly.

—Juliette Hughes

Dream factor

Donnie Darko, dir. Richard Kelly. If theatre grew from religious ritual, film has its roots in the subconscious. We love the cinema because it's as human as dreaming. Neophyte American director, Richard Kelly, obviously thinks so.

Though only 26 and fresh out of UCLA, Kelly didn't want to make a predictable 'calling card movie' designed to impress Hollywood with its box office potential and subtle product placement; he wanted to make a strange film about the apocalypse and teenage angst. The result, *Donnie Darko*, comes across as a Philip K. Dick rewrite of 'The Catcher in the Rye'.

The eponymous Donnie Darko (Jake Gyllenhaal) is an intellectually gifted, but disturbed, teenager at odds with the values of small-town America. And if non-conformism isn't burdensome enough, he's also experiencing 'daylight hallucinations'. These feature Frank, a man-sized rabbit, who tells him the world will end in precisely 28 days, five hours, 52 minutes and 12 seconds.

Before the arrival of Judgment Day, however, Donnie has time to romance the new girl at school, Gretchen Ross (Jena Malone), burn down the house of the local self-help guru, Jim Cunningham (Patrick

Swayze), discuss time travel with his teacher (Noah Wyle) and riff about the sex life of Smurfs with his buddies.

Kelly propels this eccentric narrative by jumping from one genre to another—high-school comedy, teenage slasher film, Lynchian paranoia—but somehow his rampant eclecticism never gets annoying—mainly due to his witty screenplay and the charm of Gyllenhaal's performance.

Donnie Darko might have been a better and more accessible film if Kelly had halved his ambitions and pursued the more predictable story of a family scarred by mental illness, but where's the bravery in that? After all, if dreams don't make much sense, why should the 'daylight hallucinations' we know as the movies? In the end, Kelly got to make the film he wanted to, and that's a major achievement in itself.

—Brett Evans

Bowled under

Crackerjack, dir. Paul Moloney. There's something sinister going on in Australian film, a conspiracy lurking in the back rooms and corridors of power, a secret cabal of obsessed fanatics surreptitiously pushing their secret agenda: how else can you explain the number of films about lawn bowls in recent years? *Greenkeeping* (1992), *Road to Nhill* (1996), and now *Crackerjack*—surely this particular niche of the market has been grossly over-represented? It's not as if there's something inherently cinematic about the game (the latest rendition is certainly one of the least cinematic films I've seen in ages)—and it's not as if any of the earlier contributions to the genre were international smash hits. I know I'd be happy never to see another quirky Australian 'comedy' for as long as I live.

The plot is pretty basic: obnoxious lout (played by Mick Molloy) is rude to old people (the lawn bowlers), but finds redemption in their traditional ways (beer at 1972 prices) and helps save their club from a fate worse than death (poker machines). Given that there are at least three comics in the cast (Mick Molloy, Judith Lucy and John Clarke), some of whom are actually capable of pulling a laugh, you'd have hoped there'd be no need to put the inverted commas around the word 'comedy'. However, since the film is

basically a 'star' vehicle for Molloy, you'd also have to think his bumcrack flashing, bad-boy persona was funny before you'd put the commas away. Some people do, I think, but surely not enough to build a whole film around? Given that Molloy has been described as the 'brains trust' behind the film (a scary idea, that one), writing and co-producing as well as starring in it, it shouldn't come as too much of a surprise that he features heavily. You'd have



to wonder, though, about who the filmmakers are trying to reach with this one. Certainly, the only people in the world who will get the 'champagne bowling' joke towards the end of the film are D-Generation fans. And if you don't know what I'm talking about already, you're probably not the person this film was made for.

—Allan James Thomas

Graeco-Romantic

My Big Fat Greek Wedding, dir. Joel Zwick. When you've sung at countless Mediterranean weddings, you view *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* with a sense of familiarity that borders on ownership. It doesn't disappoint. Nia Vardalos is a Greek-American stand-up comic whose routine covers territory familiar to Australians who enjoyed the *Wogs Out of Work* phenomenon. It's great that the producers decided to go with her as the star instead of unimaginatively casting someone like Penelope Cruz or Catherine Zeta

Jones—Vardalos is able to convince as someone who really needed a makeover, a true *jolie-laide*.

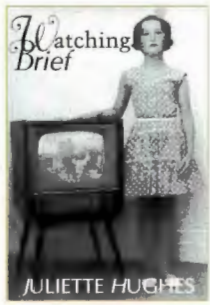
The story is a simple one: Toula Portokalos (Vardalos), a plain, clever Greek-American girl, meets Ian Miller (John Corbett of *Sex and the City* fame), a sensitive, clever WASP. They fall in love. How they negotiate the cultural differences is the plot and the extended joke. Parents come in for a fair bit of fun-poking.

Michael Constantine plays the father as a beleaguered traditionalist whose real benevolence means that he is smoothly and continuously outmanoeuvred by the women he thinks he rules. His eccentricities are hilarious: his home remedy for any skin ailment is Windex; he tries to find a Greek derivation for every word imaginable, including *kimono*. Lainie Kazan's extravagant, opulent Jewishness transmogrifies beautifully into Greek-mother-of-the-bride. That fine, elegant actor Andrea Martin is marvellously sharp yet nutty as Toula's Aunt Voula.

The cinema was choctop-full of various ethnicities besides Greek, including this Irish-English bitzer and Dutch-Irish friend. Italians in particular were loving it, claiming the experience as well, screeching with recognition and celebratory validation.

Like *Wogs Out of Work*, it's damn funny, perpetrating its stereotypes in such a benign yet sharp way that you just laugh and laugh. It's joyous. Go.

—Juliette Hughes



The audio gets visual

WHEN I WAS VISITING my mum last week, she showed me her nice new widescreen telly packed with what the catalogues call features. But the most amazing thing it does is give you subtitles if you press one of the buttons on the remote. I believe it's called teletext.

It was an epiphany. I'd popped in late one evening while she was catching the end of a Jackie Chan movie. She loves Jackie Chan, just as she loves Mel and Harrison and Sean and especially Bruce. It's one of the things I share with her: neither of us can sit through *Brief Encounter* (what a pair of big soft sawnies, she'll say) but give us an action fella and we can appreciate the efforts he's making. All that trembly-voiced whingeing reminds us too much of family character analysis, something that is a hazard where there are five sisters with big lives and wide vocabularies. Anyway, while making cups of tea, wandering in and out of her boudoir, chatting to the sister at whose house Mum lives, I noticed that there were subtitles on even though the film was in English.

I was entranced when I took notice of what they were saying. By that time there was a Jean-Claude Van Damme movie on and it was obvious that the writers either have a wicked sense of humour or are so earnest that it makes no odds, because the inspired composers of teletext don't just give the dialogue, dear me no: Van Damme walked into a bar and the legend appeared: *World-weary heroic music*. *Threatening music* heralded the advent of three swaggering toughs, mere Van Damme thump-fodder (flying tackle coming up); Van Damme gets the girl: *Romantic music* (wedding tackle ditto). *Sneaky music* (speaks for itself); *Triumphant music* (see *Sneaky music*) and assiduously recorded *sighs*, *sarcastic laughs*, *groans* and other non-verbal sounds. I've drawn the line at Van Damme in the past (Mum doesn't) but these subtitles make him so watchable now: the man's craft is broken open for the discerning. What more joys await? That's it. Sell the dogs and children and buy a new telly—conspicuous consumption, here I come. I now understand why there are so many quite respectable-looking TVs on nature strips all over town, put out for the hard rubbish collection.

However, I'm not sure whether teletext will be able to do justice to one of my new favourites, Steve Irwin aka the Crocodile Hunter. When I first heard those vowels, diphthonged,

triphthonged, gigathonged, I balked: he couldn't be real; it had to be parody. (How would teletext do his 'croikey!?!') I watched with critical fangs bared, much as a taipan might regard him, as he risked a mauling from my incredulity. But, like the mesmerised reptile, I was charmed. He is more than a showman—he is aware of the socio-political pressures that threaten animals. In late October Channel Ten showed him in East Timor, rescuing two horribly neglected captive crocodiles. I was sceptical, because it seemed there was so much more to do in that country. But he was well ahead of me. He and his wife Terri funded a medical centre for the local population as well as transferring the animals from the cesspits they were confined in to more humane enclosures. The Irwins both spoke intelligently of Timorese beliefs (the crocodile is sacred to them) and argued that you can't expect people who have been starving and under threat of violent death for so long to be able to care for difficult captive animals that can't be released without threat to themselves and others. In other programs Irwin speaks passionately against the hunting of whales in the Southern Pacific (he's trying to get it banned; he wept openly as beached sperm whales died on a beach in Tasmania). He is fierce against the 'sustainable use' doctrine that would turn all wildlife into farmed commodities for handbags, chess sets and suchlike. He argues that it is a cynical ploy by powerful men who want to destroy diminishing wild habitats. Well, he's convinced *this* family of his bona fides. Merry Christmas to him and his family, and crikey, I'm glad he's so hyperactive because you need a lot of energy to fight the fight he's fighting.

THIS CHRISTMAS WE won't be watching the telly, texted or not. There will be turkey, carols, mince pies and really good Christmas trees. We'll have people coming from overseas, and we'll do the Kris Kringle because only Bill Gates could buy more than a packet of chewy for everybody in this extended family which includes armies of friends. And on Boxing Day we're going to treat ourselves to the second episode of *The Lord of the Rings*. I want to book seats in that Gold Pass cinema where they have recliner chairs and a bar. Frodo, Gandalf and a ginger shandy—perfect felicity. And the same to you all. ■

Juliette Hughes is a freelance writer.



Eureka Street Cryptic Crossword no. 109, December 2002

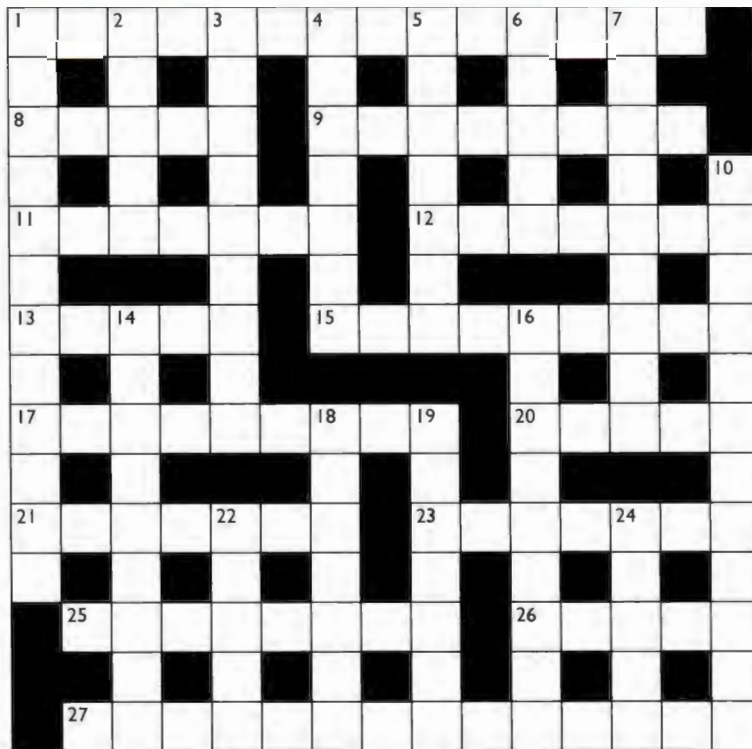
Devised by
Joan Nowotny IBVM

ACROSS

1. How you act towards the share market, perhaps, when there is a slump. Boring? (4,8,2)
- 8 & 9. Santa Claus in Europe—he gives presents to children in the first week of December. (5,8)
11. Old fluid container—use it to colour thoroughly. (3-4)
12. Being confused, hated to make a pledge that would last this long. (2,5)
13. Wolf down in the canyon? (5)
15. Fill the gaps with it, maybe, when one wants to 13-across. (9)
17. Proprietor on vessel has title, by right. (9)
20. Trace out the story but mark the insertion with this. (5)
21. No. 1 current flows back in this issue. (7)
23. In plant, found small ant—an adapted species. (7)
25. Quote the reference for this commendation. (8)
26. Concede that the harvest provides revenue. (5)
27. With good reason, one may gather skilfully. (14)

DOWN

1. Continuing electricity supply needed to be able to complete the marathon race, for instance. (7,5)
2. Be quiet! Annoy the boss? Get out of it! (5)
3. Trailing along the Rhine, tear out the guide sheet, perhaps. (2,3,4)
4. Has goose-pimples, possibly, just from wearing a torn singlet. (7)
5. Girl in bed, the other way round, enjoys Italian cheese. (7)
6. Got up and put up with it. (5)
7. Using flexible cane, train the horses; that's how to go down the straight! (2,1,6)
10. In Australia, 8 & 9, called by a different name, may give presents on a date in midsummer. (9,3)
14. What a performance! Perhaps ask Ron: 'Indite it for us, please'. (9)
16. Journalist on the carriage—his writing is so dull and stereotyped! (9)
18. Tissues often replace them today; that is, in coils of yarn, for instance. (7)
19. European has crushed ant for meal. (7)
22. Some people train in an eccentric outfit. How daft! (5)
24. Not in charge, but sour just the same! (5)



Solution to Crossword no. 108, November 2002



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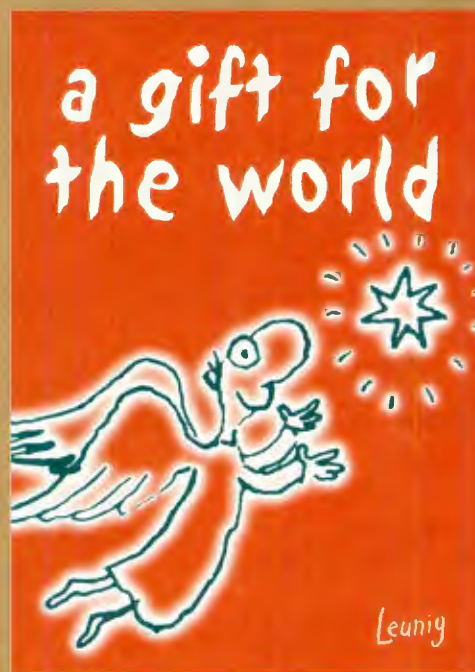
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