

EUREKA STREET

Vol. 3 No. 7 September 1993

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The Year of Living Expectantly

What Aboriginal leaders are saying

Margaret Simons

Why we say the things we do

Rowan Callick

Republican visions

States of the nation

Terry Monagle

The state of liberty

Philip Pettit

Melbourne Writers' Festival: Peter Craven reviews the work of Vikram Seth

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The Hon PJ Keating, 1992*

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For some, the future still rates a smile: girl from Cherbourg Mission Station, Murgon, QLD. Other Aborigines are not so sure. —'The Year of Living Expectantly', pp18-25.

Cover: Arthur Panbegan, Aurukun leader, performing a 'Bora' (initiation) bird dance ritual at Laura, Cape York Peninsula. Photo by Emmanuel Santos.

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PO Box 553
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Tel (03) 427 7311
Fax (03) 428 4450

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ANDREW HAMILTON
AND EDMUND CAMPION

The Year of Indigenous Peoples

SOMETIMES YOU ARE STARTLED when you hear the penny drop. I was attending an Aboriginal Mass at the beginning of the national liturgical music conference in Melbourne. The Mass was celebrated on a pontoon by the World Trade Centre, and to look across the Yarra was to be played into gentle ironies of time and place.

The backdrop was the Spencer Street Bridge: a no-nonsense affair built for horses and trams. Just beyond it, in shocking pink, was a full frontal advertisement for strippers, over which crawled the flyovers from the Kings Street Bridge and the Westgate Bridge, monuments to the car and to utility. In the distance stood Emerald Hill and its colonial town hall.

In the foreground was the Yarra. On its far side was moored the *John Batman*, named for the man who bought Victoria from the Aboriginals for a handful of trinkets. This boat, like the nearby *Polly Woodside*, is now a tourist attraction. As descendants from the Yarra tribe welcomed the participants to their land, pleasure boats, among them the *Blackbird*, plied up and down the river, men with tinnies leaning against the rails enjoying the sun and boing the proceedings in crude friendliness. Meanwhile conference-goers politely clapped the singers and dancers, especially when land was mentioned.

It was a sunny day, ideal for relishing ironies. But when the Torres Strait Islanders began to sing, the penny dropped. For the tone and cadences of their singing recalled exactly the singing of Guatemalan Indians with whom I had spent a previous Christmas in Mexico. They had been driven out of Guatemala by massacre, starvation, torture and indignity. Both Campeche and the Yarra were suddenly the places, and this the year, of indigenous peoples.

The similarities now stood out. This ceremony was celebrated in awkward English instead of awkward Spanish, and the tunes were mostly North American rather than Latin; but in both the ritual was something to be done, with space for a chat or a smoko, and not something to be thought; both found room within the western liturgy for symbols from their own cultures, and shared a common delight in making something out of the totally inadequate materials allowed them. These were liturgies appropriately celebrated on a raft while others had taken over the land.



But the ironies were now sharp-edged. For in Mexico I had come to the Guatemalan Indians as a friendly visitor. Here I had inherited, and would hand on, a dispensation by which this land by the Yarra had been taken from the natives, and been made fit for strippers, boozers and cars. These ironies are hard to bear. But perhaps the Mass did enable them to be endured, and saved the need to articulate them. For at the Mass the sound of clapping by the complicit was the sound of nails being hammered: the hands into which they were hammered were those of the Aboriginals and of those from any race who would follow Jesus. And the Mass recalled a death and a sure hope for a land without ironies in which all would be native. ■

Andrew Hamilton SJ teaches in the United Faculty of Theology, Parkville, VIC.

can no longer read Australian history along denominational lines. The very first paper gave a Sydney evangelical perspective on 19th century convents. The Reformation is over.

NOTHING HAS SPEEDED this process so much as the protestantising of Catholicism. When Rome shows herself willing to learn from Geneva and Canterbury, then we are in a new age. Consider the evidence of recent decades: the Bible at the centre of Catholic theology, liturgy and spirituality; Catholic liturgy in a language 'understood of the people'; a morality of striving for justice and mercy rather than a morality of guilt; the freeing of lay intelligence and the slow erosion of clerical control systems; a laity who set their own spiritual agenda, as in the prayer group movement; and ecclesial pluralism, which shows that the church is now humble enough to learn from multicultural society. In each of these one can detect a position taken by historic Protestantism. These were the spiritual gains of the Reformation, now taken on board by Catholics.

It would be silly to suggest that this process has been fully realised yet. The old denominational subcultures survive tenaciously, as conference guests at Macquarie University's Robert Menzies College learnt. There, Catholics and interstate Anglicans were able to experience the distinctive culture of Sydney Anglicanism, from the no-booze rule to the bare meeting-hall architecture of the college chapel. It is one of the strengths of Christianity that it has energised a variety of such subcultures. Nevertheless, what is happening remains clear: the Reformation divide has been bridged and differences are being elided.

Not that we are entering an era of passionless, homogenised Christianity, free of tensions. If the Catholic-

Protestant distinctions are disappearing, they are being replaced by a new line of demarcation between fundamentalists and pluralists. This fault line runs through all the denominations, identifying and grouping Christians of disparate churches. It, rather than one's denomination, determines where one stands on church authority, women's ministry, the sources of spirituality and a variety of justice issues, such as homosexual law, civil dissent, international aid, Aboriginal land, arts funding and the threat to the ABC. The fundamentalist-pluralist axis is the new dividing line between Christians.

Only those who like to think of Christianity as a tea party will feel threatened by this. Historically, disputes between contending parties have been creative moments for Christianity, leading to new growth. The

Clive Yankaporta, a leader of the Aurukun community, demonstrating traditional spear throwing at the Laura Festival's sacred grounds, Cape York Peninsula, June 1993.

Photo: Emmanuel Santos

Crossing the divide

THE RECENT *Studying Australian Christianity* conference in Sydney was a significant event because it signalled the evaporation of denominationalism in Australia. In the past (say, up to World War II), the story of Christianity in Australia could be told in one sentence: Anglicans made the laws, Methodists did the work, Presbyterians made the money and Catholics made the jokes. No more. As the Sydney conference demonstrated in papers, personnel and audience, you



conference heard convincing evidence from Melbourne's Dr Muriel Porter of the energy and solidarity currently seen in the Anglican church after years of tussling about women's ordination. Rooted in history, Christianity has always found the strengths to go beyond history. Yet there are many Christians who seem weighed down by all that history, to the point of inertia. History does not free them, it immobilises them. The 200 years of Australian experience, or the 2000 years of world Christianity, are so heavy with precedent and wisdom that for some they make the future seem frightening.

These people, however, share the continent with another religious tradition, one that is 40,000 years old. In all that time, as Pope John Paul II said in Alice Springs, the Spirit of God was with the Aborigines. Compared with 40,000 years of Aboriginal religion, the 200/2000 years of Christian history seem like the first sentence or page of a long book. Happily, the *Studying Australian Christianity* conference spent much time on Aboriginal matters; for here, as elsewhere, the Aboriginal perspective has good things to teach us. The worst storm is invigorating, said Pascal, when you know your ship will reach the harbour. ■

Edmund Campion was co-convenor of the *Studying Australian Christianity* conference at Macquarie University.

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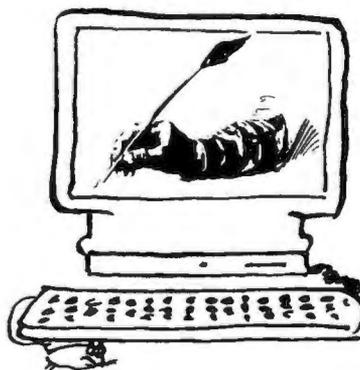
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Opportunities lost

From Ruth Crow

In the retirement village where I live (Princes Hill Village) there seems to be a very high proportion of elderly Roman Catholic women of Irish ancestry (I have a theory of why this is so). I am very, very impressed by their great sense of community and wonderful practical political nous. Also their ready sense of humour ... the sense of the ridiculous.

Once I heard Veronica Brady speak of the 'absurdity of our society' in a talk on SBS on the history of the English language. The Irish use of English was termed 'the language of the oppressed'.

Why I am saying this is because I feel so saddened to think that from about 1940 to about the end of the 1960s the left in Victoria was denied this influence (the sense of the absurd, the use of the language of the oppressed) because of the DLP's condemnation of communism, etc.

This bigotry was brought home to a few people in the Federated Clerks Union in 1968 or thereabouts. At that time the clerks union was controlled by the DLP. My husband, Maurie (who had been an organiser of the clerks union before DLP control) moved a resolution for peace using the words of Pope John XXIII. The DLP members did not recognise these words, show-

ing that they were not aware of the changes made by Vatican II. They decided the resolution.

Maurie printed the three attitudes to peace in a leaflet: 'What the Pope Said'; 'What a Member of the Communist Party Said'; and 'What the DLP Members Said'.

So for many different reasons I greatly welcome *Eureka Street* as part of my everyday life.

Ruth Crow
North Carlton, VIC

Documentary sources

From Mary Helen Woods

The genesis of the document 'Why Can't Catholic Women Be Priests?' was an informal chat after a lecture given at the Thomas More Centre some time last year. The hundreds of young Catholics attending Thomas More functions had often complained that, after many years in Catholic schools, their knowledge of Catholic teachings was scant. We decided that another part of our activities would be to put together a series of documents, directed at Year 12 students but useful also for adults.

Thomas More is a relatively new organisation, working in conjunction with the National Civic Council and the Australian Family Association.

When Bishop George Pell indicated that he would be happy to help us write on the topic 'Why Can't Catholic Women Be Priests?' we were delighted. We knew that our document would be enhanced by the official teaching authority attaching to a bishop. As well, Bishop Pell has an illustrious academic record, culminating in a doctor of philosophy degree from Oxford University. The topic for his thesis was 'Exercise of Authority in Early Christianity 170-270AD'. After a great deal of careful discussion between Bishop Pell, Anna Krohn (a bachelor of divinity) and myself (no theological qualifications, but a lively interest in all things Catholic) we finally produced a document.

Bishop Pell submitted it for the advice of a number of theologian friends, some of whom he considered to be more 'liberal' than himself. He

then discussed securing an imprimatur for the document with Archbishop Frank Little. Last, but not least, we 'road-tested' the document on Year 12 students and their teachers in several Catholic schools. Responding to some criticism from the students, we rewrote it until finally we had a document with which everyone was happy.

We ordered 5000 copies; 2000 we sent to parish priests and Catholic school principals in most areas of Australia and New Zealand, with an order form for more copies. The demand was overwhelming: 25,000 copies have left the centre, and we have reordered another 15,000. Clearly, we had found an area of vital interest to Catholics.

That we had also touched a sensitive nerve among some other Catholics was demonstrated quite graphically by Pamela Foulkes' article in *Eureka Street* (August 1993). Ms Foulkes' criticisms adopted much the same tone (and in some cases even the same language) as other complaints.

First cab off the rank had been A New Vision for Woman Inc. in its journal 'Communications'. This was closely followed by Sister Elaine Wainwright, lecturer in Scripture at Banyo Seminary, writing in Brisbane's *Catholic Leader*. WATAC (Women and the Australian Catholic Church) produced a six-page analysis of our document which was sent to the Australian Bishops Conference. Another group, Women for the New Covenant, was reported by the newspapers as being unhappy with what we had said.

Each of these groups had two common themes: that what we had done was 'dangerous' and 'confusing', and that, as Pamela Foulkes said, Jesus 'did not ordain anyone, male or female', so we were wrong to rule out women's ordination in the Catholic Church. A document which does nothing more than explain the official teaching and practice not only of the Catholic Church but of Eastern Orthodoxy for 2000 years, and of the Anglican Church from its foundation until the last two or three years, can only be 'dangerous' and 'confusing' to those who are confused about the content of the Catholic faith.

To use these tendentious adjectives demonstrates all too clearly how fundamentally illiberal are the liberal

thinkers within the Catholic Church. Those who defend the Church's doctrinal and moral teachings have as much right (let alone responsibility) to spell out the Church's teaching as those who dissent from it have to express their own. To the suggestion that Jesus did not ordain anyone, male or female, Bishop Pell writes: 'Obviously, if priesthood is a human construct, which did not go back to Christ and the apostles, Christian communities would have considerable freedom in the exercise and development of this role.'

'However, ministerial priesthood was exercised in the early church from the beginning and there is a scriptural basis for ordination to the priesthood in the New Testament. Faithful Catholics and Orthodox have always held this.'

Soon after our document came out, Pope John Paul, addressing the American bishops, made it perfectly clear that the issue of women priests was not an open one. 'Respect for women's rights is without doubt an essential step towards a more just and mature society and the church cannot fail to make this her worthy objective.'

'However, in some circles there continues to exist a climate of dissatisfaction with the church's position, especially where the distinction between a person's human and civil rights and the rights, duties, ministries and functions which individuals have or enjoy within the church is not clearly understood.'

It has become fashionable for the media—and indeed for some Catholics—to proclaim that when Pope John Paul is gone, women priests will be ordained. This seems to us to be based more on wishful thinking than on anything else. In the last analysis, I too am confused about the position of the dissidents. They reject a teaching expressed as clearly by the 'liberal' Pope Paul VI as by the 'conservative' John

Paul II. They state that Christ 'ordained' no one—a proposition condemned by a general council. They thus deny the authority both of the Pope and of a general council. It is obvious that they accept no authority other than their own.

After all, are we really to accept that the Holy Spirit has permitted the Catholic Church to teach, and act on, falsehood for 2000 years? If true, it is a good argument for leaving the church, not for remaining in it.

Mary Helen Woods
North Melbourne, VIC.



Pamela Foulkes replies:

I was heartened to learn from Mary Helen Woods that my uneasiness at the Thomas More Centre's document on the ordination of women put me in such good Catholic company. A New Vision for Woman arose out of a national conference of the Brigidine sisters, WATAC was initiated by the major superiors with the approval of the Bishops Conference, and Sr Elaine Wainwright is an internationally recognised biblical scholar. This would certainly seem to place in doubt the document's statement that 'most Catholic women' oppose women's ordination.

Ms Woods' response, like the original document, expresses a closed model of the church, in which everything is set in concrete. There is no space here for open discussion of issues and the free movement of the Spirit. Those who disagree are declared 'illiberal' and asked to leave. She re-

treats behind the wall of authority, refusing to deal with any of the arguments raised against her position.

Bishop Pell's assertion that 'there is a scriptural basis for ordination to the priesthood in the New Testament' is quoted without any supporting scriptural evidence. Ministerial leadership was certainly exercised from the earliest days of the church in a variety of ways, by both men and women. But the establishment of an institutionalised cultic priesthood was a gradual development that did not originate in the practice of Jesus. The bishop seems to be unaware of the 'considerable freedom in the exercise and development of this role' evident in the life of the church.

Ms Woods' reference to the argument from women's civil rights is a red herring in this discussion. It is not an argument that I have used, or would wish to use. As her original document states, priesthood is not a right but a 'calling from God'. Ordination is for service within the church community, and is rightly dealt with in a context of scripture and theology—though a growing perception that the state may be acting in a manner more consistent with justice and human dignity than is the church, necessarily raises questions for the Christian community.

The longevity of a particular practice is not of itself a sufficient reason for its continuation. Popes have been wrong before. Church practice and teaching have been changed: slavery and usury being but two examples. Pope John Paul has publicly expressed the contrition of the church for centuries of anti-Semitic theology. The church is not, as Ms Woods seems to think, a closed entity, and to declare that a major question of church order is a closed issue is a denial of the Spirit.

Vatican II recognised this in *Gaudium et Spes*, which set the church the constant duty of 'scrutinising the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the gospel'. At a time when the shortage of ministerial leaders is denying the Eucharist to many of the baptised, a full and open discussion of the issue of sacramental leadership is of vital importance to the continuance of the church's life.

Pamela Foulkes
Sydney, NSW

Canonically speaking, again

From Gerard Goggin

Andrew Riemer would appear to be at last addressing the point made by many critics of pedagogical arrangements in English departments in Australia and elsewhere for the past 20 or so years (*Eureka Street*, June-July 1993). Namely that the canons of literature and culture at any particular historical juncture are constituted in complex relationships of power to the texts and oppositional practices that they exclude, including those of groups contesting powerful economic, social and institutional arrangements.

Of course, Riemer actually inverts the terms of this insight and declares that 'most members of English departments, even those most vehement in their desire to save the world through the reform of the curriculum, would agree that the "producers" (otherwise authors) of those texts who had been marginalised by the canon—women, blacks, working-class and regional writers—were themselves profoundly influenced by the writers of canonical texts, no matter how much we might lament the deleterious effects of such influence.'

As such, Riemer is engaging in a rearguard action to shore up a set of texts and teaching practices that possess all the intellectual ballast of the weekly columns of B.A. Santamaria, as well as being distinctly inimical to academic freedom.

In the service of this doomed project, he peddles the cautionary tale of Robert Hughes. We find that the bright young blade in the 1950s was free to cut lectures and read what he wished, just like Andrew Riemer. But only because the necessary intellectual wherewithal—some might say cultural capital—had been imparted at an early age with the requisite discipline.

What a load of self-serving obscurantist nonsense! Robert Hughes plays a key role in Riemer's not so antic fable due to his recent confused and reactionary jeremiad on education and culture in the US. This manoeuvre

saves Riemer the inconvenience of actually engaging with those developments in detail or gaining some understanding of Australian debates.

Hughes caricatures a plethora of arguments about what gets taught in universities, whose cultural values are served, and how traditions come to be (disputes given a keener edge in Australia in the wake of John Dawkins).

The growing importance of such arguments means that Riemer, Professor G.A. Wilkes and others have to justify why their antediluvian interpretations of culture and ideology should persist as some doctrinal basis of the teaching of English.

In essence, Riemer is objecting to students and academics actually engaging intellectually with what is being taught, and deigning to ask why certain things are taught and others excluded or demonised. This sort of critical inquiry and cultural polemics were not apparently the province of dilettantish young males in the golden age of the FJ Holden and Robert Menzies.

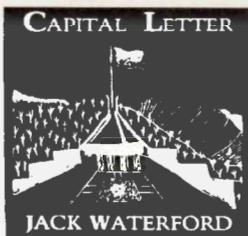
Fortunately, the English department at the University of Sydney has opted for an approach to teaching literature that will add some intellectual vigour and sustenance—letting the (which?) tradition out of custody—as well as nodding its head gently towards the fact that teaching and writing literature is a political affair through and through.

I studied in this department in 1988 and have returned this year to take up a degree. It appears less hostile to contemporary intellectual thought than it once did—glasnost is in evidence.

I do not think such changes will provide very much challenge to dominant sources of power and privilege in the university or Australian society, but it's a start. This can only be to the good of students, teachers, writers, or, dare one say it, other communities outside the university.

What is at issue in such debates—Riemer's most recent offerings notwithstanding—is not the loss of 'richness' and 'accuracy' in our (whose?) culture, but the demise of the meagre and mean-minded gruel that has fed much teaching of canonical texts.

Gerard Goggin
Marrickville, NSW



Stick with the One and the Many

I HAVE A CONFESSION TO MAKE. *If I could rewrite the Australian constitution, I am not sure that I would want to abolish the states or even strip them of much power.* I am far from sure that doing so would make Australians better off. This is notwithstanding the fact that I am a centrist who has taken pleasure at seeing one nation develop at the expense of state sovereignties, and the fact that I think a lot of things might be better organised at a national rather than a state level.

Britain is a unitary state with parliamentary sovereignty: there are few limits to what a determined executive with a parliamentary majority can do to interfere with the lives of individuals. British judges are independent, but since there is no written constitution they have no power to strike out laws enacted by Parliament. The Australian system has two restraints on executive government not present in Britain. Power is divided between the Commonwealth and the states, and the judiciary can strike out laws that constitutions do not authorise.

The United States has a third layer of protection in its Bill of Rights, which withholds some powers from any level of government. It is curious that many Australians who yearn for a bill of rights also seek to abolish another protection against arbitrary government.

If one were drawing up state boundaries today, one might draw them differently. And it is true that several levels of government can produce inefficiency and a duplication of services. Many state politicians, and not a few of premiers, are a rum lot. In many spheres in which the states exercise primary responsibility—environmental protection, law and order, health, education and welfare, for example—they have often failed in their responsibilities and the Commonwealth has had to fill the gap. But would a single entity do any better?

Would a national administration be more responsive to community feeling? Would those given the extra powers and discretions behave with more or less respect for individual and group rights and sensitivities? In a unitary state in which the overwhelming proportion of people live in the south-east, would it pay politicians to be attentive to the needs of people who live in the north or the west?

Getting rid of the states has been an article of faith among those on the left in Australian politics. But the parrot cries belong to an age where the existence of the states, and of the senate, was seen as a reactionary conspiracy to frustrate government intervention in the economy. Even those who still believe in the power of government to achieve social change, however, recognise that a more significant need today is the protection of the individual from the all-encompassing state. It may seem a paradox that this is more likely to be gained from more rather than fewer governments, but there it is.

This melancholy avowal of the need for federalism is prompted by two concerns. First, it now seems to be

recognised that the shift to a republic cannot be achieved simply by crossing out the words 'queen' and 'governor-general' in the constitution and substituting the word 'president'. The so-called minimalist position was put by those who did not want to burden their case with other issues of contention. As minimalism unravels, however, there comes the cry for a fundamental constitutional rewrite, including the abolition of the states.

Even if a rationale could be invented for doing so, there would be snags. State chauvinism is actually increasing, not decreasing. Does any New South Welshperson imagine that a Queenslander could forget the state-of-origin match, or cease to be tantalised by the Sheffield Shield? Could any Northern Territorian suppress a natural detestation of Victorians? If Western Australians and Tasmanians did not have outsiders to hate and blame for all their mismanagements, would not their very societies collapse?

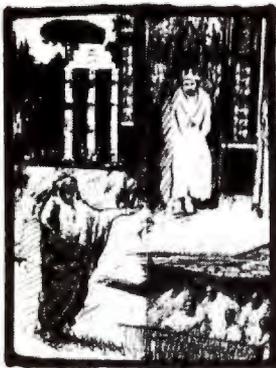
Second is the imminent likelihood of the collapse of another base of state revenue. One of the long-running problems of current federation is what the economists call vertical fiscal imbalance: the Commonwealth raises far more money than it needs and the states far less than they need, and the states must go to the Commonwealth with a begging bowl. In every \$10 of state revenue, \$4 comes from the Commonwealth; and, the states complain, it increasingly comes with strings attached.

ONE REVENUE BASE the states have, however, has been with business franchise fees: disguised sales taxes over things such as cigarettes, alcohol, petrol and, in the ACT at least, pornography. Such taxes now raise more than \$6 billion a year—more than 10 per cent of total revenue for most states. The legality of these taxes has always been in doubt—the constitution explicitly forbids the imposition of state excise duties. In 1960 the High Court let through a contrived way around the ban and the states have gone to town with it ever since. But the signs are that the latest in a long line of challenges will succeed: no member of the present High Court bench believes in the legal basis for such taxes.

The states will be in a pretty situation if they lose; it's off to the Commonwealth to beg for more money. The Commonwealth could agree to collect the money for them, but in return for what? Only a referendum, of the sort former Chief Justice Harry Gibbs now advocates, could give the states the power—and that would probably also involve a *quid pro quo* deal with the Commonwealth.

If Paul Keating really wants to get rid of the states, or at least to reduce them to complete financial subservience, this could be his big opportunity. ■

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



States of mind

Abolishing the states may be psychologically, and therefore politically, impossible. But Australia is moving towards a unified system of national government, whether or not it remains formally a federation.

THE ADELAIDE CROWS' FULL FORWARD marks high above the pack. A beauty! 45,000 South Australians scream and gesticulate at the point of ecstasy: the Crows against the World. Observing the hysteria, I wonder whether this 45,000 would vote to abolish their state government. I doubt it.

Our sense of an Australian national identity is growing firmer, but our state identities remain pervasive, subtle and overlooked. They are not just political

state communities. This pattern of organisation has become a 'natural' way to do things.

I admit to a personal dilemma. I have read *The Age* for many years. But it is a regional newspaper, addressed to a readership organised politically as a state. More and more I am tempted to buy *The Australian*, because its priorities reflect my own. Macroeconomic analysis will be on the front page, rather than the confessions of a murderer. Yet I worry that *The Australian* is a Sydney product masquerading as a national one (like the ABC, perhaps). If I give up *The Age* I may begin to lose touch with what is happening in the place where I live. In the family caucus at present, the pro-*Age* vote is 4-1. In reforming national governance, we do not inherit a *terra nullius*.

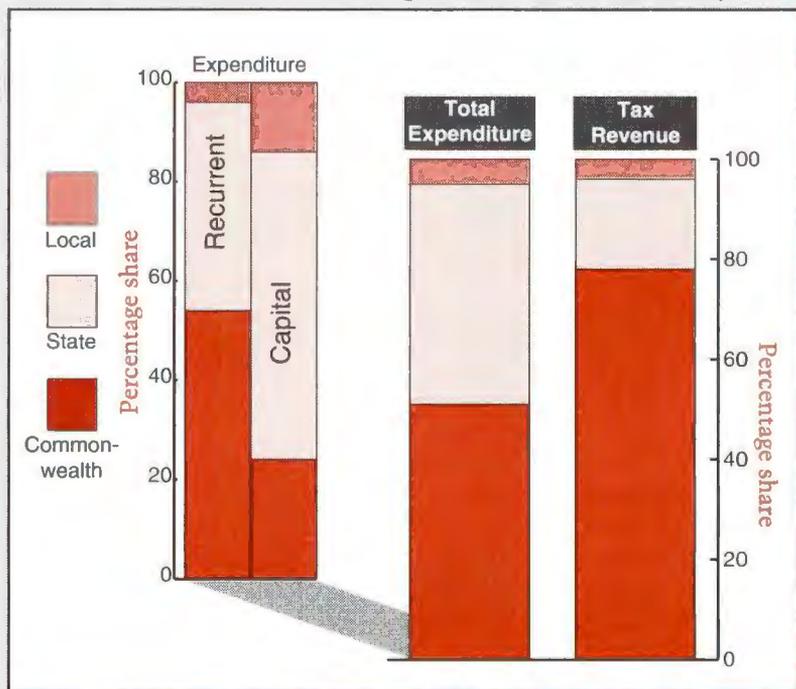
The sense of economic crisis in Australia is making us ask whether our structure of government can continue to work. Conflicts among the states, and between the states and the Commonwealth—over Mabo, industrial relations, educational curricula and other issues—have made us question the relationship between the tiers of government. Federal ministers and a former prime minister, trade unionists and prominent business people, have called for abolition of the states. Prime Minister Keating and Treasurer Dawkins are eroding the fiscal autonomy of the states, and the financial debacles presided over by various state governments have undermined the credibility of the second tier.

One wonders which issue will trigger a brawl of such magnitude as to rearrange the fundamental pattern of government. Labor and the coalition have always differed on questions of centralism and federalism, and at a time when a majority of states have Liberal governments while Labor holds the Commonwealth, such differences are likely to grow sharper.

The debate

Yet there has also been a reversal of the usual roles in Australian politics. Those on the right who want to re-

Share of Total Public Sector Expenditure & Taxation '91/'92



arrangements but are enmeshed in our cultural, social and sporting lives: almost every organisation through which we express ourselves is patterned to match our

tain the states now use a democratic rhetoric, arguing that government should be close to the people, and that central government would become too powerful if its authority were not checked by the need to negotiate with the states.

Abolitionists cite the cost of maintaining three tiers, contend that complexity impedes efficiency, and believe that the states are involved in mischievous sabotage of national objectives—especially in macroeconomic strategy.

The debate pays too little attention to an unacknowledged fourth tier of government. Overtly Australia has three tiers of government but, ironically, to make the three work efficiently we have invented a fourth. Ministerial councils, bringing together federal and state health ministers or education ministers, for example, operate as an extra-constitutional tier.

These councils make executive decisions and are easily manipulated by government officials; but they are invisible to the Australian people. The councils have grown as an extra-constitutional device because of our reluctance to reform the pattern of governance. But this pragmatic solution in fact compounds our problems.

Strength of the states

The battle between the states and the Commonwealth has developed an unusual ferocity. What are the relative political strengths of the tiers? The constitution leaves to the states all functions not specifically allocated to the Commonwealth; and traditionally, of course, the states make alliances with each other.

But there is a belief that they are more powerful than ever. They are now called 'Australian' governments, and deal with the Commonwealth and the territories through the 'Council of Australian Governments'. The name change effectively signifies that all the governments are entitled to be involved in decision-making on issues affecting the national political community. There is an implicit claim that the legitimacy of state governments does not come from a sovereignty conferred by acts of the British Parliament, but by their service to the Australian people.

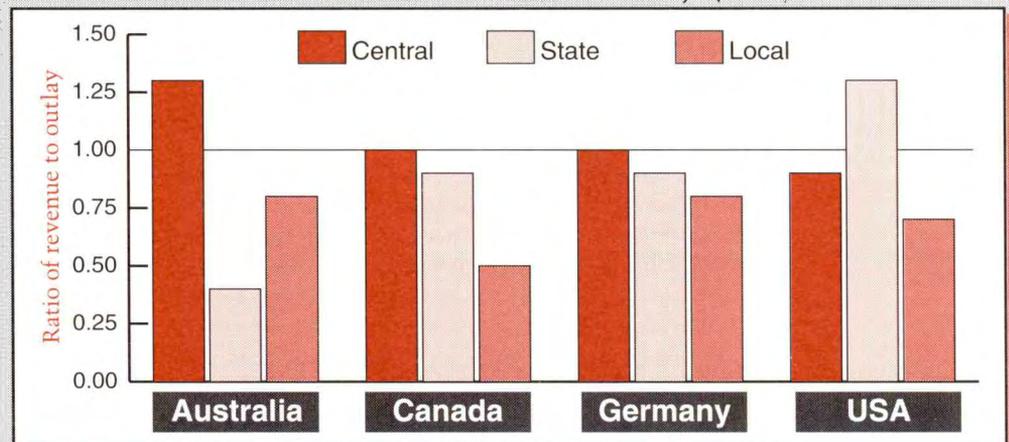
Perhaps the calls for the abolition of the state tier of government are getting louder because the states are getting stronger. Although their new position accepts Commonwealth leadership, they also insist on being consulted on all issues. There is a tacit acceptance that the division of functions specified in the constitution can be ignored.

Commonwealth advantage

The Commonwealth, however, retains significant advantages in its power struggle with the states. The Commonwealth makes appointments to the High Court,

which must adjudicate any dispute between the states and the Commonwealth over the interpretation of the constitution. The size of the Commonwealth's purse gives it a capacity to make the states conform to its will in specific areas. And it can bypass the states by directly funding local governments and service providers.

Other federations: Comparisons of imbalance between tiers of government
—Ratios of own source revenues to own source outlays (1986)



Source: table 1.2 from the Report of Working Party on Tax Powers (1991) Canberra: Commonwealth, State and Territory Treasuries.

Design: Paul Fyfe SJ

The Commonwealth is able to use the external affairs power granted to it by the constitution to legislate in areas once regarded as preserves of the states. And the fact that Australia is part of a global economy creates an expectation that the Commonwealth's leadership will prevail in most areas of national life. The Commonwealth has already won the agreement of the states to the development of a 'national fiscal outlook', which in practice means that all governments will take part in one national budget process.

I believe that the abolition of the states is politically impossible, but that nonetheless we are moving rapidly towards an effectively unified system of national government. The emerging model is that of head office and branch office; but until the battle is fully resolved we can expect a tumultuous period in relations between the tiers of government.

Debate immature

The abolitionists have not provided working details of a two-tier system. It is assumed that local authorities could easily be expanded to form a network of regional governments, but what would we gain? If we had 12 or 20 regions instead of eight states and territories, wouldn't Canberra be even more powerful? The states are big enough and coherent enough to offer a counterweight, but the regions might not be. And could it not be argued that those natural historical communities, the states, are already regional governments?

Regional governments of the kind advocated by abolitionists could be even more parochial than the present state governments, and easily dominated by one employer or one industry. The Wollongong region might



be run in the interests of BHP, and the North Queensland region could become a political battleground between the sugar industry and the tourism industry.

If we had 20 regions, wouldn't we still have problems with artificial boundaries and the unequal distribution of population and resources? Wouldn't there still be constant bickering among the regional governments, and constant carping at Canberra? The problems are the same, though the players might be more cantankerous.

The problems

There are, however, grave problems in our system of government, which sabotage our economic efficiency. Reform is imperative.

In December last year the union for which I work, the State Public Services Federation, was contacted by an officer of the Department of Employment, Education and Training. His mission was to win our co-operation in the hiring into our industry of unemployed people, with the help of subsidies from his department's labour-market programs. There were two conditions: the new jobs must not replace any existing jobs, and there must be a clause in the award to govern the arrangement. To fund this and similar labour-market programs, the Commonwealth was prepared to run a large deficit. To us, this seemed absurd in circumstances where the Kennett government in Victoria was borrowing money to lay off 30,000 workers, where awards were being abolished, and where reactionary new taxes, such as the poll tax, were being imposed.

Here was the national government pump-priming the economy to relieve unemployment while the 'regional' government sought to undermine the same strategy. And *both* strategies were imposing extra public debt on taxpayers. The two tiers of government were acting as though they were existing in different economies—yet when those 30,000 re-trenched in Victoria eventually find themselves on the dole or on a pension, the burden will merely have been transferred from the state to the Commonwealth; from our right to our left pocket. Australia should have only one economy, and one national budget.

The states' poverty trap

The second major problem with the present system is the progressive impoverishment of the states. Existing methods of tax collection leave the states poor and the Commonwealth comparatively rich, but the states continue to be responsible for huge areas of community

spending.

The figures below establish that the states carry far heavier responsibilities for government activity than their sources of income allow them to sustain. The states' dependence on the Commonwealth for financial

survival enables the Commonwealth to dictate what policies the states must pursue.

The states' financial position declined sharply during the 1980s and continues to decline in the '90s. Keating, believing that the states were slow to restructure, attempted to starve them into consuming their own body fat. But the recession caused the states' independent sources of income to dry up and forced them to borrow money at high interest rates. At the same time, the demand for their services increased markedly as the recession hit more and more companies and more and more people.

Several states, notably Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia, suddenly acquired massive extra debts because of the failure of loosely supervised public-sector banks. These banks had become involved in private-sector entrepreneurial activities that were scuttled partly because the Commonwealth pursued a severely contractionary monetary policy. The states are heavily dependent on contractionary taxes such as pay roll tax or stamp duty, which makes it difficult for them to raise the funds necessary to pay for public services—especially during a recession. This poverty trap gives rise to such inequitable taxes as Kennett's poll tax and to increased charges for gas, electricity and water.

Thrice is better

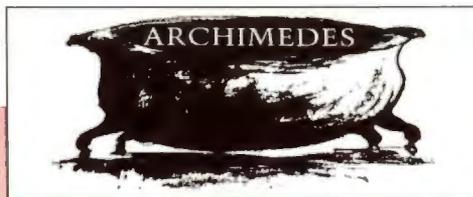
The third major problem in the present system is that everything is done in triplicate. The constitution attempted to separate the functions of federal and state governments, but the division it laid down has in practice been discarded. Many areas of public policy are influenced by each tier of government: health, education, roads, Aboriginal issues, water supply, public transport, taxation, borrowings, industry development, unemployment, conservation, power generation. And the costs of doing business in Australia are compounded by the rules and regulations applied by each tier. The same piece of money, for a single program, will often pass through each tier of government. This means that its passage will be examined by three auditors-general and three agency auditors, that the state will employ officials to monitor the use of the money by local authorities, that the Commonwealth will employ officials to monitor the state officials, and that they will all write submissions and reports to each other.

Prospects for abolition

These problems explain the motivation of the abolitionists. But is abolition politically possible? Abolitionists would need to convince a majority of people and a majority of states. What role will state politicians take in a referendum that seeks to abolish them? One can imagine them dusting off television footage of the last emotional state-of-origin win for their 'no' campaign.

Would Tasmanians, for example, vote to abolish Tasmania and replace it by four regions, each with the same status as Sydney, Melbourne or the ACT? That can only be a rhetorical question. There *might* perhaps

The constitution attempted to separate the functions of federal and state governments, but the division it laid down has in practice been discarded ... The same piece of money, for a single program, will often pass through each tier of government.



At last, Fermat's Last Theorem

PIERRE DE FERMAT was a member of the local parliament in 17th century Toulouse. Like parliamentarians today, he was a numbers man; unlike them, was also a visionary mathematician.

Fermat had the dubious habit of scribbling comments in the margins of his books. In one of his marginalia he wrote that the equation $X^n + Y^n = Z^n$ has no whole number solutions for X, Y, Z , when n is a whole number greater than 2. He then said: 'I have found a remarkable proof of this, but the margin is too narrow to contain it.' His proof was never found. The ultra brainteaser became known as 'Fermat's Last Theorem'. Mathematicians great and small have tried for three centuries to discover a replacement proof, but without success.

For $n = 2$ the equation has many solutions. Archimedes and Pythagoras knew that when they worked on right-angled triangles. For example, $3^2 + 4^2 = 5^2$, and $5^2 + 12^2 = 13^2$ and so on. But when $n = 3$ or 4 or 5 or whatever, no whole number solution has ever been found, nor is one expected. A computer recently tested all possibilities for whole numbers up to $n = 4,000,000$, but found no solutions. Fermat seems to be correct, but how can his theorem be proved? It doesn't look very complicated—a bit of an advance on Pythagoras' theorem, perhaps—but the task has proved very frustrating.

On the one hand, many failed attempts at proofs of Fermat's Last Theorem have led to important concepts in abstract algebra, which in turn have found applications in contemporary theoretical physics. On the other, the theorem's simplicity has attracted the attention of countless amateurs whose unassailable proofs are regularly inflicted on long-suffering mathematicians. E.T. Bell wrote in one of his books on mathematics, after dealing with Fermat's last theorem, 'In passing, may I request any reader of this section who imagines he has a proof not to send it to me. I have examined well over a hundred fallacious attempts, and I feel that I have done my share.' The German mathematician Edmund Landau minimised the inconvenience by having a form letter ready: 'Dear Sir/Madam, your proof of Fermat's Last Theorem has been received. The first mistake is on page ... , line ... '. He gave his students the task of filling in the blanks.

But, like most good stories, this one also may have a happy ending. On 23 June this year Princeton mathematician Andrew Wiles set a conference at Cambridge abuzz by outlining a proof of a result that includes Fermat's Last Theorem as a special case. (see *Eureka Street*, August 1993, p5). Wiles' proof, about 1000 pages long and drawing from a variety of fields, will take months to be checked thoroughly. His audience, however, were convinced of the soundness of his method. ■
—Graeme Honner, Archimedes' nephew, is a research student in mathematics at La Trobe University.

be four regions in South Australia, and the people in those regions might start to wonder whether they had the muscle to match it with Sydney, Melbourne or the ACT. And that perspective could persuade South Australians to vote 'no'.

I believe that Tasmania, Western Australia and Queensland would vote against. If NSW and Victoria were to vote in support of abolition—even if they did so decisively as to ensure that a majority of people voted in favour—the referendum might still go down by four states to two.

Solutions

The Council of Australian Governments has established a working party to investigate ways of rationalising the functions of the three tiers of government. What seems to be practicable is that we examine each function of public administration and then attempt to describe, on a case-by-case basis, which part of each function should be handled by each tier.

For example, there should perhaps be a national code of criminal law, with community policing functions being allocated to the states and subsidiary functions, such as serving notices for traffic infringements, being local-government responsibilities. This division would need to be paralleled by a division of national revenues.

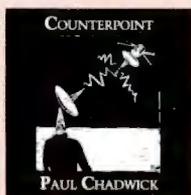
The states need a more reliable means of raising revenue, such as a guaranteed share of income tax. This could take the form of a percentage increment on overall assessed income tax liabilities—it would not be an increment on the marginal tax rates or a separate state income tax. All states would face the same tax base and marginal tax rates, being able to choose only the size of the surcharge.

Such a revenue source would have many benefits for the states: greater control over their own spending, an income less subject to cyclical downturns, and a greater capacity to address local and regional needs. The surcharge would contribute to, or at least not hinder, the economic objectives of the Commonwealth. It would not create inequalities across the states, it would be cheap and easy to administer, and it would allow the abolition of inflationary taxes that are also impediments to growth.

Conclusions

As a nation, it is likely that we will insist, contrarily, *both* that every issue be dealt with efficiently as a national issue *and* that our residual state identities be retained. The onus is principally on the Prime Minister and the federal Treasurer to co-ordinate the rationalisation of state and federal powers—and no dramatic new solutions are likely. But there must be a national budget process, and the separate tiers of government must negotiate a settlement on revenue-raising. ■

Terry Monagle is a research officer for the State Public Services Federation.



A chance to state your case

THE SENATE IS INQUIRING INTO the 'rights and obligations of the media', and now is the time for those who have been smouldering to erupt. Take this chance to chide or support, or to hint, demand or grizzle.

In a tepid report presented in March last year, the House of Representatives select committee into the print media (the Lee inquiry) effectively accepted that high levels of concentration of ownership are with us for the long term. So much for the will of the legislature to tackle questions about the *structure* of Australia's media. But what of that far more sensitive area, the *content* of our newspapers, magazines, and radio and TV broadcasts? The questions that arise here affect the great principle of freedom of the press.

The media might have been expected to show considerable interest in the announcement last June that the Senate standing committee on legal and constitutional affairs, chaired by Victorian Labor Senator Barney Cooney, had decided to inquire into several 'content' issues. But, although the announcement itself was reported, there has been little published interest from editorial writers and columnists.

Ordinarily, if an industry of comparable size and influence were to be the subject of a Senate inquiry there would be a rash of articles probing the reasons for the decision. So why the uncharacteristic quiet? Those who have power in the media ought to hope that the public will seize the chance to analyse the performance of the media—especially since submissions made to a parliamentary committee attract absolute privilege against actions for defamation. The inquiry is a marvellous opportunity for market research among an audience that, surveys consistently show, has a low regard for the credibility of journalists. *Eureka Street* wishes to help ensure that as many people as possible make submissions to the Cooney inquiry. The terms of reference require the committee to refer to:

The right to privacy and the right to know.

Tension between these two values is common in journalism (see *Eureka Street*, April and May 1993). But it arises also in the context of defamation and freedom of information. Is it time for a tort of invasion of privacy?

The need for journalists to protect the identity of their sources of information.

More tension between journalists and the law (*Eureka Street*, June-July). The Western Australian Law Reform Commission has recommended statutory reform to ensure that judges exercising their discretion to excuse a witness from answering a question should consider 'the public interest in the preservation of confidences between persons in the relative positions of the confidant and the witness'. According to the commission, when making their decision judges should take account 'of the ethical, moral or religious dictates of those professions or vocations which unequivocally demand non-disclosure'. Do you trust journalists sufficiently to grant them such a partial privilege? Tell Senator Cooney.

The right of access to the media by members of the public.

This notion is reminiscent of proposals by American legal scholars about 20 years ago for statutory 'access rights'. The argument went: the constitution guarantees freedom of speech, but that can't be a freedom only for those who own the media. Ownership has become heavily concentrated, limiting access, so it would be consistent with the constitution if the Congress were to enact laws compelling the media to grant access to competing viewpoints.

In Australia, the Cooney inquiry might ask whether Parliament should legislate to confer a right of reply on a named individual who is the subject of media comment. Have you been criticised in print and then struggled to get your defence published on the letters page? What do you think of a statutory right of access?

Courts and tribunals and the media.

A puzzling term, particularly because the same Senate committee is already inquiring into 'whether recent publicity surrounding judicial comment in sexual offence cases is a proper reflection of a failure to understand gender issues by the judiciary. It invites discussion of the 'cameras in the courtroom' issue, the tension between 'open justice' and 'trial by media' and contempt law generally.

Journalistic ethics and disciplinary processes for journalists.

The Australian Journalists' Association section of the Media Alliance has begun a review of its code of ethics and of procedures for enforcing the code. The Press Council, despite criticism from both Kerry Packer (a proprietor member) and the Lee inquiry, has so far resisted pressure for reform. All complainants to the council or the AJA judiciary committees, whether satisfied or disappointed, should tell Senator Cooney of their experiences.

The issue of self-regulation may be the core of this inquiry. If the media cannot demonstrate that they are accountable as well as powerful, the senators will be tempted to recommend a statutory scheme, such as those that already exist for lawyers and doctors. Certainly, reforms such as better protection for sources are unlikely unless journalists themselves develop better, and more open, procedures for self-regulation.

Any other matters relevant to the question of journalistic ethics and standards and the quality of reporting.

A catch-all clause, so speak now or forever hold your peace. ■

Paul Chadwick is Victorian co-ordinator of the Communications Law Centre.

• Submissions can be sent to: The secretary, Senate standing committee on legal and constitutional affairs, Parliament House, Canberra, ACT 2600



The ideal of the republic

The call for an Australian republic not only provides an occasion for discussing constitutional change, it provides an occasion to ask what it means to be a citizen.

THE CLASSICAL ROMANS are rightly and nearly unanimously acknowledged as the first republicans: as the first people to think out the principles of republicanism and as the first people to organise their polity about those principles. If we are to understand what the notion of the republic involves then we must make a connection with that Roman tradition, and in particular with the work of the greatest theorist of the tradition: Cicero.

The Roman republican tradition is not isolated from us in time; it is not something alien and antiquarian, like the priestly practices of ancient Babylon. For when the founders and theorists and critics of the first modern states sought out principles for the right ordering of their polities, they drew in good part on that tradition. Roman republicanism was as important as Roman law in the formation of the political culture that began to emerge in Europe at the end of the Middle Ages and which culminated in the American and French revolutions. So at least I shall assume, following an influential group of historians.

So what are the themes that characterise republicanism? Three apparently distinct themes stand out. The most salient, at least since the French Revolution, is the anti-monarchical motif: the idea that a republic is a state without hereditary rulers, in particular a state without royalty. But this idea is perhaps nothing more than an expression of the deeper idea that republics are meant to be governed by laws, as it used to be put, and not by individuals: that they require the rule of law, in which there is no room for the caprice of the autocrat. It would have been natural for republicans at many periods, and in particular for republicans in 18th century France, to think that monarchy must go, since they would have seen monarchy as inconsistent with the rule of law.

The notion of the rule of law goes back explicitly to Roman sources, though many legal commentators speak as if it were a byproduct of English common law. A second theme that is associated with republicanism also has explicit Roman antecedents. This is the idea

that the republic not only requires a rule of law, it also requires an order of checks and balances. Where there is a rule of law, there is no one who stands above the law. Where there is an order of checks and balances, the authorities who hold power under the law are institutionally constrained so that they cannot easily abuse their position. They hold office for short periods, they are subject to public selection, scrutiny and accountability, they are forced to share power with parties who may be of a different mind, and they are liable to impeachment for any failures of duty. Involved also in this second theme is the familiar, republican emphasis on the need for democratic debate: a form of deliberative debate in which differences of interest are thrashed out by those who represent them, as the collective decision-making body seeks to determine what is in the common good.

The third and last theme that stands out in the weave of republican ideas is that not only does the republic require a rule of law, and an order of checks and balances, it also needs a regime of virtue. Republics need citizens who can be relied on to take a part in public life, to stand for public office, and to do their very best in execution of any official duties that are allotted to them. They need people who are free from the lethargy that disables the masses, and the ambition that diverts the



Perhaps the most important bequest of republicanism is this notion of personal freedom as citizenship in a free or well-ordered society. One good term for such a social concept of freedom might be 'franchise'—franchise in the old sense in which the franchise of a community involves a much richer array of powers than the right to vote.

few. They need people who can stand against the tide of corruption which is always ready to wash over the affairs of state. Such civic virtue involves reliable beneficence on people's part—their beneficence must not be just a fact predictable in current circumstances—but it does not require a pure, uncoerced love of the good. The general, republican supposition is that virtue will only be maintained by an arrangement in which checks and balances make virtue the best policy and in which the attitudes of the populace make it necessary for the enjoyment of regard or honour.

Why a rule of law? Why an order of checks and balances? Why a regime of virtue? What unifies the republican web of ideas? My suggestion is: a distinctive, republican notion of liberty or freedom. The Roman republicans contrasted the *liber*, or free person, with the *servus*, or slave. To be free meant not having to live at the mercy of another, even another who might be well disposed towards you: it was to be at the other end of the spectrum from slavery. Thus the *servus sine domino*, the slave without a master, did not count as free. The slave without a master might succeed in enjoying a high degree of non-interference from others, whether through good luck or native cunning. But freedom required more than a fortuitous absence of interference; it required being secured, and manifestly secured, against interference. It required being incorporated within a protective law and empowered, equally with the best, against any interference that others might attempt. Such freedom was clearly not enjoyed by the slave without a master but only by the full *civis*, or citizen. *Civitas*, as the commentators tell us, was coterminous with *libertas* in this republican way of thinking.

WE CAN SEE WHY republicans emphasise a rule of law, an order of checks and balance, and a regime of virtue, once we realise that their main concern is the promotion of freedom in this social sense. The usual, liberal way of thinking about freedom—essentially Hobbesian in origin—is as the absence of interference, without any need for security in this absence. If we think of freedom in this way, then any connections with the republican themes will look artificial

and contingent. Any rule of law, and any order of check and balance, will be themselves an invasion of liberty, as 19th century liberals recognised, even if those invasions do more good than harm. And any regime of virtue—any regime of reliable beneficence as distinct from beneficence predictable in the circumstances—will be surplus to the needs of liberty. But things take on a dif-

ferent complexion when we think of freedom as the sort of social and political and legal status which provides a due security against interference.

IF PEOPLE ARE TO BE FREE in this richer sense, then they must not be at the mercy of an autocrat who stands above the law; they must have the fortune to live under a rule of law which gives them each the best that can be offered by way of protection. If people are to be free in this sense, then again they must not be at the mercy of any individuals or groups which can abuse a position attained under the law to serve their own particular ends; they must enjoy the fruits of an arrangement where those in power are subject to an order of check and balance. And, finally, if people are to be free in this republican sense, then it is clear that they must be able to rely on fair treatment at the hands of their fellow citizens, especially when those citizens occupy official roles; they must be able to benefit from the security associated with a regime of virtue: a regime of reliable beneficence.

Republicanism is rightly praised for the legacy of thinking which it has given us on the proper shape of law, on the most effective checks and balances to impose on public officials, and on the role of civic virtue in sustaining political life. But perhaps the most important bequest of republicanism is this distinctively social notion of personal freedom, this notion of personal free-

PEOPLE OF AUSTRALIA— DO YOU WANT TO BE ABLE TO GLORY IN REAL FREEDOM, AND EXERCISE THE VIRTUES OF THE CITIZEN OF A REPUBLIC— OR DO YOU WANT TO CONTINUE TO SUFFER THE IGNOMINY OF A SERVILE SUBJECT IN A MONARCHY?



dom as citizenship in a free or well-ordered society. One good term for such a social concept of freedom might be 'franchise'—franchise in the old sense in which the franchise of a community involves a much richer array of powers than the right to vote. Another, which John Braithwaite and I have used elsewhere, is 'dominion': dominion in the sense of the power of an individual to control a certain sphere of his or her life, without having to fear or defer to others.

The republican ideal of promoting franchise offers a nice perspective on what our polity and society should be doing for its members. First, it is an ideal that ought to attract people on the same, neutralist basis that makes the liberal notion of liberty attractive to so many. After

all, franchise or dominion is something that everyone in a pluralist society is going to need, no matter what their conception of the way they want to carry on in their lives. And, besides, it is something that should be deeply attractive to almost any psychology, representing an ideal of personal independence in which fear and deference are minimised.

But, second, the republican ideal fits better than the liberal alternative with standard intuitions about possibilities of fruitful state intervention in social life. Left-liberals honour those intuitions by postulating that some other value besides their notion of liberty is crucial to the goals of the state: say, the relief of poverty, or the promotion of equality. Republicans have no need to invoke further values, for the ideal of promoting franchise or dominion already requires an intuitively plausible range of state activity: it offers the prospect of a more or less left-wing agenda, legitimated on grounds to which even those on the right must feel some allegiance.

NOT ONLY WOULD the republican ideal support the protection of the populace, the regulation of officials, and the mobilisation of the citizenry, as in the received tradition. It would direct us also towards the possibility of empowering those whose franchise we want to promote: empowering them, for example, in areas of social security, medical provision, legal aid, access to information, educational opportunity and gender and ethnic equality. If people are not empowered in such areas, then it is going to be nigh impossible for them to be secure in the enjoyment of non-interference, by the measure of security that will prevail among more privileged members of the community. They will be vulnerable to exploitation, manipulation, and coercion in a way that is inconsistent with the ideal of a society that maximises the franchise or dominion of its citizens.

The crucial contrast between the liberal and the republican ideals of liberty emerges in the different attitudes they engender towards a life in which some people are vulnerable to others, because of their lack of power, but happen to enjoy non-interference and even decent treatment at the hands of those others. The liberal must think that such people enjoy perfect liberty, since they are not actually interfered with. The republican cannot agree, since he will see them as suffering a relevant insecurity in their non-interference: they will be insecure, so far as the more powerful could interfere in their lives with relative impunity, even if they choose not to do so. The republican sees issues of freedom as inevitably tied up with issues of power, where the devotee of freedom in the liberal sense tries to isolate these questions from one another. ■

Philip Pettit is professor of social and political theory at the Australian National University. He is the author of *The Common Mind* (OUP 1993), and co-author with John Braithwaite of *Not Just Deserts: A Republican Theory of Criminal Justice* (OUP 1991).



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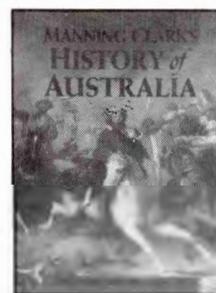
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LAST DECEMBER the Prime Minister, Paul Keating, launched the International Year of Indigenous People with one of the most powerful speeches ever made by a national leader on the need for reconciliation with native people.

Keating's speech was the first by an Australian government representative in which the injustices of the past 200 years were explicitly acknowledged. '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 ...' and so on through the now famous cadences.

Keating said it was unthinkable that, in this year, we should fail the test of offering black Australians dignity, hope and opportunity. 'This is a fundamental test of our social goals, and our national will: our ability to say to ourselves and to the rest of the world that Australia is a first rate social democracy, that we are what we should be—truly the land of the fair go and the better chance.'

Ten months later, the International Year of Indigenous People is almost over. There have been conferences, art shows and grants. But it is not these events which have shaped the year. Although the hysteria over the Mabo decision means that black issues have a higher profile than ever before, Aboriginal leaders have mixed feelings about what has actually been achieved.

Keating's speech to launch the year was splashed all over the local media, and also received international coverage. Messages of congratulation were received from all over the world. But even though the rhetoric sounds better than it has ever done before, there is still a gap between it and reality. Other, less publicised speeches are likely to make the international community more cautious in its congratulations.

Mick Dodson, a highly regarded leader among Aborigines who was formerly director of the Northern Land



Mr Fogarty, of Cherbourg Mission Station, father of Aboriginal activist Lionel Fogarty. When photographer Emmanuel Santos admired the freshly painted weathboard facades of houses at Cherbourg, he was told 'we are not even allowed to choose the kind of colour we could paint our own house with.'

ar of living expectantly

Council, was this year made a social justice commissioner with the Human Rights Commission, with special responsibilities to look at the rights of indigenous Australians.

In July, he went to Geneva to address the United Nations working group on indigenous populations. He spoke about the Northern Territory's recently passed legislation to legitimise mineral leases on Gudanji land at McArthur River. According to Dodson, this legislation infringed article two of the international covenant on civil and political rights, in which the signatories undertake to treat citizens equally, without regard to race.

Dodson said the Territory's legislation effectively eliminated the Gudanji people's right to hold any form of enduring title. It made their ability to own land less than that of non-Aboriginal Australians. 'The impact of the grant by the Northern Territory Act falls uniquely on Aboriginal native title holders,' he said. Dodson lamented the fact that his powers as a Human Rights Commissioner did not extend to reviewing state legislation for breaches of Australia's international obligations, and he appealed to the federal government to exercise 'its clear constitutional power' to make this a possibility.

In a climate of hysteria about Mabo, Australia, far from righting past wrongs in the Year of Indigenous Peoples, is still passing legislation that discriminates on the grounds of race.

Meanwhile, Aborigines themselves are divided over fundamental questions: does the future lie in reconciliation with white Australia, or is that selling out? There are tensions between government-funded organisations like the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) and those who believe Aborigines should retain a voice independent of government, and between the traditional Aboriginal landholders who may benefit from Mabo and those who live in cities and have little to gain. Should Aborigines be compro-

promising, and looking for the best deal they can get from Australian politicians, or should they pursue recognition in international forums as an independent, sovereign people?

Below, four Aboriginal leaders give their views about what, if anything, has been achieved in the International Year of Indigenous People, and what remains to be achieved.

Michael Mansell, head of the Aboriginal provisional government:

'Nothing special has been achieved this year. There was a conference for Aboriginal youth, that was about it. The main event this year has been Mabo, and the public hate campaign that has it triggered off.

'If white Australians were against Aboriginal people, then that campaign has hardened their attitudes. Whether there has been a change in the overall numbers of anti-Aboriginal Australians is hard to say.

'What should have been achieved this year, and what needs to be done, is a thorough discussion about the political relationship between Aborigines and Australia. Until that happens, and people are exposed to and discuss the issues concerned, we will continue to be involved in one ad hoc campaign after another.

'As I see it there are three options. Firstly, Aboriginal people can be entirely part of Australia, and continue to campaign, as they have done for 200 years now, as a minority group with special interests.

'Secondly, they could be part of Australia, but with more independence, and a right to self-government. They would have complete power to look after their own affairs, similar to the powers of a local government, but not have any foreign relations powers.

'The third option is for a separate Aboriginal government to run on all of the Crown land areas, and raise its own resources and be entirely independent of Australia. I don't know which way the Aboriginal communi-

ty wants to go. There is a very strong undercurrent of Aboriginal opinion that we want to run our own lives, but so far there is no clear view of how the community wants to achieve that.'

Ian Delaney, ATSIC commissioner and head of the International Year of Indigenous People committee:

'The single greatest thing in terms of raising awareness was the Prime Minister's Redfern speech launching the year. It was an excellent speech. For the leader of any country to speak that strongly on an issue of this sort is significant.

'Apart from that, a great deal has been achieved. One of the best things was the conference of youth in Darwin in July.

'In the future the priority still has to be to raise awareness. Prejudice against Aboriginal people is largely a matter of ignorance. We need to get the two peoples mixing more together, and white Australians need to become more aware of our culture and our plight.'

Marcia Langton, research officer for the Cape York Land Council:

'Awareness has been raised because of Mabo, but also because of that, attitudes to Aboriginal people have plummeted, and the tendency to racism in Australia has been whipped up. At the moment I think Australians have been polarised and there doesn't seem to be much of a good basis for reconciliation or any negotiated settlement.

'In spite of that gloomy outlook, you would have to say that we are in a better position now than we were before 1992, because our rights have been asserted by the High Court. I think Keating has been doing his best, but the opposition to his views is enormous. He has all the states against him. They won't even sit down and talk about it.

'The problem is they want to deny Aboriginal people any rights to the sub-surface of the land. The risk is that the lowest common denomina-

Talking terms

I would like to begin by citing an editorial published in my own newspaper 45 years ago. It has the title:

NOT THE CHOSEN PEOPLE FOR AUSTRALIA

Widespread public misgivings in Australia at the entry of Jewish refugees into this country are not without a justification that should command a more conservative attitude from the Ministry of Immigration ... In the large metropolitan areas of Sydney and Melbourne, Australians are finding themselves being brought into a state resembling economic servitude to Jewish interests. Where black markets and illegalities flourish, the experience is that Jewish refugees are plentifully in evidence. Australians, particularly ex-servicemen, are finding themselves elbowed away by the money power which the refugee class exercises, and Australians find themselves being exploited by all manner and class of snide business tricks which have been introduced to this country. Moreover, the historically proven experience that Jews are incapable of governing others and unwilling themselves to be governed is being repeated in the lack of Australian sentiment by this class of immigrant.

I THINK ANYONE WOULD FIND these words offensive today. Even those who might believe that the author had a right to say them would agree, I hope, that his opinions should be repudiated. I have chosen this appalling specimen because it may be relevant to a modern debate about what can and cannot be said.

In an article published in *The Australian* in July, P.P. McGuinness defended the right of Henry Bosch to say what he thought about Aborigines. McGuinness characterised Bosch's views as 'objectionable and repellent', but defended Bosch's right to say what he did, and disapproved of the federal government's dismissal of Bosch from an advisory position.

The government's action, according to McGuinness, was effectively an assault on free speech. To my mind, his argument was weakest here: I do not see why the government should accept as its representative, in a grace and favour position, someone whose social outlook it finds objectionable.

Six months ago, at a conference on the media and Aboriginal affairs, I spoke about how the media had reported Aboriginal issues over the years. Most of the conference was, as I had expected, the usual sort of finger-pointing by Aborigines and the usual sort of breast-beating by the media. I am sick of such nonsense. I have worked for Aboriginal organisations

and I make no secret of my sympathy for Aborigines and their aspirations. But I think that many trends in Aboriginal affairs are disastrous.

In that speech I cited a number of issues that no one was willing to discuss. I said that Aboriginal concepts of religion and social organisation were often treated, even by avowed sceptics, with a degree of reverence not accorded to fundamental ideas in western society, and which went well beyond what is required by the notion of respect for other cultures. I spoke of a tendency to romanticise Aboriginal life, denying any Aboriginal responsibility for things that had gone wrong.

I spoke of how we were sustaining communities in which there was no real work to be had and no prospect of it, but where we had created expectations that someone would pay the bill indefinitely. I spoke of the addiction of welfare bureaucrats to petty cooperatives and participatory structures that had always failed to work, and of how the system discouraged personal initiative and a pride in personal possession.

My argument was not that my views were necessarily correct but that issues of this sort ought to be discussed. Many Aborigines have made it clear that they agree with me. I believe that the interests of Aboriginal Australians are best promoted by open debate, but there are many peo-

tor will rule, and many Aboriginal people will end up with fewer rights than they have now.

'The way ahead is hard to see. The simple fact is there can't be any reconciliation process until the Mabo issue is resolved, and obviously if they deny us our common law rights, then reconciliation is at an end. That is obvious. How can there be reconciliation if the injustices of the past are being perpetuated?

'Otherwise, the way forward lies in what Aboriginal people have always done: negotiating, litigating, fighting for our rights.'

Christine Wilson, coordinator of the *Aboriginal Catholic Mission* and chairperson of the *National Aboriginal Day organising committee*:

'There have been some good things happening this year. A lot of programs, films and festivals have been funded which have helped to lift awareness of Aboriginal people in the general population.

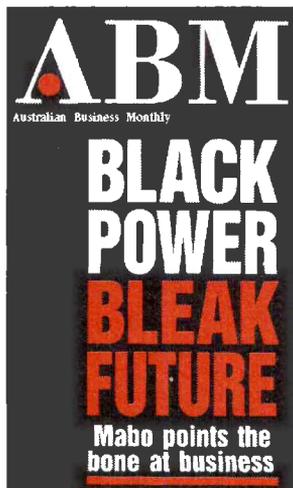
'I think we were making significant inroads until the Mabo decision. The Mabo decision is a good decision for those who still have links with the land, but for people like myself in an urban situation, it is of no benefit whatsoever. What it has done is kick off a whole propaganda war against Aboriginal people.

'We notice it when we go into schools, which I spend a lot of my time on. We were becoming quite effective there, talking about Aboriginal history and culture. Now the sorts of questions we get from the children have changed. They are asking "Are Aboriginal people going to come and take away our houses?"

'I have never had any faith in the reconciliation process. To have reconciliation you have to have had a war. We have never had the war, and we have not got a treaty.

'I think what Aboriginal people need most is recognition. We want a national holiday in the second week of July to mark Aboriginal Day, so that the significance of our people in this country can be recognised by everyone, and all Aborigines can benefit.' ■

Margaret Simons is a freelance journalist.



ple who disagree with that. Some say that it is for Aborigines themselves to decide what the problems are and what should be done. Yet the public is involved because public money and resources are involved, and all citizens have an interest in ensuring that they are well used.

Other people resist the idea of an open debate because they fear it would stir up a deeply ingrained racism in Australia. There is a very elitist notion at the root of such fears: those who hold them do not trust the good sense of the population at large, or do not believe that we live in a society where arguments are won on their merits.

It is not as if Australia lacks a tradition of vigorous debate that could incorporate a discussion of Aboriginal affairs. But some things fall outside the limits, and the two gravest sins are fairly clear. The first involves ascribing inferior status to groups of people on the basis of some secondary characteristic such as race. Racism is out, and I think most people agree about this, even if they cannot quite agree on what is or is not racist.

The second sin arises in connection with one's attitude to cultures other than one's own. Holding an optimistic view of each person's potential does not mean that one has to accept as worthy or reasonable everything that they may think or believe. And it certainly does not mean that one has to accept that things can only be judged from within their own lights.

Ideas are fair game, but there is a difference between attacking the idea and attacking the sense of self-worth of the person who, however foolishly, believes in the idea. The moral obligation to respect other people often simply comes down to good manners.

We have all had our fun with political correctness, but it would be silly to be too intolerant about it. It was once enough to destroy enemies by calling them witches, and we have lived through times when it was almost enough to destroy them by calling them Bolsheviks. That the commonplace ignorances or stupidities of a generation ago are no longer regarded as acceptable is not a bad thing.

How does this apply to Aboriginal affairs? It is too much to demand that every person who wants to take part in

the debate should be motivated only by a sincere desire to advance Aboriginal interests. Even by my good manners test, there is nothing wrong with anyone joining in to defend their own interests. It does not follow from that, however, that their contribution must focus on demeaning or belittling Aborigines.

It has been argued that the Mabo issue is the perfect opportunity for redressing all the wrongs that have been done to Aborigines. I do not believe that Mabo has any great capacity to upset settled legal relations between citizens, or to create uncertainties about the ownership of private property. Clearly, the High Court rejected the idea that the overwhelming majority of Aboriginal Australians had any continuing claim, based on law, to land.

Paul Keating showed no interest in Aboriginal affairs until he became Prime Minister. He now wants, however, to make a personal mark on Australian history—to be seen as statesmanlike, to harness some common ideals that fit in with his understanding of our nationhood. But the nature of Australian politics is not such that change occurs once a Prime Minister becomes morally convinced that it is necessary. Change has to be sold, which means there has to be a debate—but Keating has resented any suggestion of a debate, and attacked anyone who has put their head up. The Tim Fischers, Marshall Perrons, Richard Courts and Hugh Morgans—even the Henry Boschs—of the world can look after themselves, but Keating has also attacked ordinary citizens who have expressed concern or alarm.

I mention Tim Fischer, Marshall Perron, Richard Court and Hugh Morgan because I also believe that many of their contributions have been unhelpful to a real debate on directions in Aboriginal affairs. First, because they often posit an Aunt Sally to attack—the idea that most Aborigines are pushing for separatism or sovereignty, or that granting Aboriginal demands will undermine our own civilisation. Allied with this seems to be an assumption that the moral claim which Aborigines make is based upon history, and that, if one can upset their version of that history, the claim disappears.

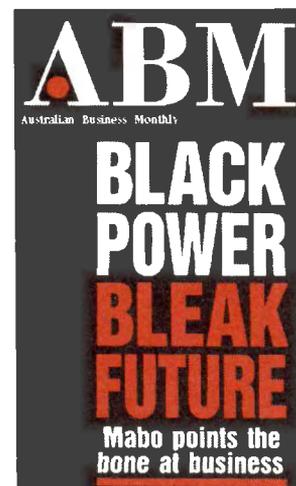
I do not see the intersection of

cultures either as a competition for supremacy in which there can only be one winner, yet the kinds of argument that I'm referring to sometimes are presented this way. Take the phrase 'Stone Age', for example. It is true that pre-contact Aborigines *did* have a Stone Age culture, but people who wince when they hear the phrase do so not because it refers to a level of material culture or social organisation, but because they take it to imply that those who come from such a culture have some diminished cranial capacity. I do not accuse the four men I have mentioned of holding that view, but I think such an implication actually was contained in the words which Henry Bosch used in referring to Aboriginal people.

I think that any attempt to demean Aboriginal spirituality is doomed to be counter-productive, not least because it will be seen as an attack on one of the few assets that Aborigines have. When Aborigines spiritual values are posited to conflict with something like mining development, the automatic support that the Aboriginal claim will get in some quarters does not necessarily flow from nature worship, or some kind of cultural relativism. It sometimes comes from a condition of our own society—a feeling of yearning and spiritual emptiness that, for one reason or another, our society fails to satisfy.

I think that all Australian citizens have a right to aspire to enjoy the goods and services, material and spiritual, that this society is capable of producing. And the state has a role to play in ensuring that those who are disadvantaged can compete on fair terms. But the state cannot liberate Aborigines. They can only do that for themselves. A lot of well-meaning sympathy has in fact helped many Aborigines to think of themselves simply as passive victims of oppression. It is right for the media to point out the systematic disadvantages suffered by Aborigines, but it is frankly racist to deny that Aborigines are themselves actors in their own history. ■

Jack Waterford is deputy editor of *The Canberra Times* and *Eureka Street's* Capital Letter columnist. This article is an edited text of a lecture he gave to the Samuel Griffiths Society in July.



How some Australians insist on seeing the debate: Australian Business Monthly's cover for August 1993.

Notes of difference

We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet ... We were travelling in the night of first ages..

—Joseph Conrad, HEART OF DARKNESS

*Primitives are our untamed selves ... are mystics ... are free.
The primitive does what we ask it to do.*

—Marianna Torgovnick, GONE PRIMITIVE

ON THE TABLE, STARING AT ME AS I TYPE, is a wooden statue from the Upper Sepik, of a man with a cormorant's head standing plaintively on a carved rock. He is mirrored in a luminous Chagall print on the wall above, in which animals and people are linked in lively dance. Hints, in a suburban home, of things beyond. The search for the Other is a compulsion felt powerfully by many people. They may go on to seek new worlds—imaginatively, as in science fiction; physically, through travel (perhaps with a touch of the Indiana Joneses); through changing their way of life; or through meditation.

Or they may flirt with a new design paradigm to set off—nicely, as Barry Humphries would say—the Year of Indigenous People. In August, the Home supplement to *The Age* featured 'Tribal Instincts', the 'best trend of 1993', described by a 'leading style futurologist' as 'urban primitive', complete with designer hurricane lamps, unbleached cottons and rough weaves. 'The ecological movement has increased the influence of indigenous culture,' declares the futurologist. And so it has, of course. David Suzuki, that Savonarola among environmentalists, has co-written *The Wisdom of the Elders* to

demonstrate how tribal people have marvellous ecological manners (though one wonders, in unmannerly moments, just where the moa went).

A world apart from the relentless Suzuki, at the quietist end of academe—so quiet he even resiles from recommending his own books to his students—is the distinguished art historian, sinologist and novelist Pierre Ryckmans (aka Simon Leys), professor at Sydney University, who first visited China as an 18-year-old Belgian student. His wife, Hanfang, is from Taiwan. His 'Other' is Chinese, not tribal; but he speaks as eloquently of his journey as of its goal.

He says, 'An encounter with China is the ultimate questioning of all you, as a European, know. China is the other, the one who helps you realise who you are.' Psychologists, Ryckmans notes, observe how young children do not know how to use the first-person pronoun. Instead they use the words 'he' or 'she', or their names, when talking about themselves. Only after addressing the 'you' does the child notice the 'I'.

Chineseculture—alive, independent, elaborate and complete—is 'the other pole of human experience',





Ryckmans says. A keen sailor, he cites a story by G.K. Chesterton: a yachtsman, lost at sea, who is washed up on his native shore but, believing he is in a foreign country, finds everything new, strange, marvellous. 'You reach the point you started from, and see it complete with other eyes.'

It is both to find themselves as individuals, and to seek an excitement that village life, with its circular, predictable, controlled world of subsistence and ritual, cannot provide, that some tribal people 'escape' to city life. Others run in the opposite direction, fleeing the mundanity of the global village, with its technological marvels, and seeking to lose and find themselves in 'the true village' by adoption into a simulacrum of tribal life.

PROFESSOR MARIANNA TORGOVNICK, of Duke University, North Carolina, in her enthrallingly sardonic book *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives*, writes, 'The city produces the alienation and crises in identity that fuel the work of many modernists and make them turn their imagination (in some cases move their bodies) to

the alternate space of the primitive—that last, desperate, remaining, endangered model for alternative social organisations ... In the person of the primitives, we air fears and hopes for ourselves—caught on a rollercoaster of change that we like to believe can be stopped, safely, at will ...'

What a burden to place on our shrinking tribal world. But it is a dream that surrounds us. It is in our museums and homes, in our hearts and minds. Today, it is on all our television screens and in our newspapers, in the incantatory word 'Mabo'. The Western sensibility needs to expropriate the Other—the tribal, the primitive—as a precondition or supplement to its own sense of self. Paul Keating and other politicians have lately said as much. Australia needs to redefine itself through its relationship with its Aboriginal population, which in turn will help Australia redefine itself as an Asian nation, etc.

Yet ironically, such positions reinforce the view of a world centred, in a profoundly secular sense, on us urban Westerners; of a world in which the future of indigenous peoples is for us to dispense. The world has

An Arnhem Land didgeridoo player performing the bird dance at the Laura Festival, Cape York. The weeklong festival, held to celebrate the Year of Indigenous Peoples, was attended by members of Aboriginal communities from all parts of northern Australia. The Aurukun community invited Emmanuel Santos to photograph their body painting, and was introduced to some of the sacred initiation rites by the elders.

A tribal culture and spirituality cannot extend beyond the tribe. In most such societies, the word for 'people' is that for the tribe. Outsiders are not human beings in the same manner.

its fashions in sympathies as well as in clothes and music. In the 18th century, it became fashionable in Europe to look on the Pacific islands as a paradise (a word with which the region has been cursed ever since, as if it were wholly inhabited by mythical beings or tourists), free of the constraints of 'society'.

A century ago, only the fittest were presumed to survive, and the indigenous people of settler nations in Australasia and North America seemed doomed to extinction. Salvation was available only through assimilation. In the Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma stands James Earle Fraser's six-metre high statue, *The End of the Trail*. Created in 1915, it portrays a native American on horseback, with rider and horse equally drained of hope and energy, if not of dignity. The end of this trail, the viewer might be led to feel, was also the end of an era, that of the 'noble savage'.

At the other end of the world, Trollope wrote of the Maori after a visit to New Zealand: 'There is scope for poetry in their past history. There is room for philanthropy as to their present condition. But in regard to their future—there is hardly a place for hope.' *The Australian Handbook* of 1888 states that in 'settled parts' Aborigines are now 'few and inoffensive and are fast passing away.'

In fact, at least in numerical terms, they have not only survived but flourished. And there are some today, in both indigenous and Western communities, who would invert the old white racist hierarchy of cultures, exalting tribal values and thereby creating a new notional hierarchy of land and of blood—themes of the right now adopted by the postmodern vestiges of the left.

Almost as we cherish notions of childhood innocence, we yearn with Rousseau for the integrity of the noble savage. And, informed dimly by the covers of books by Malinowski and Mead, we are excited by the apparent sexual openness of folk societies (though a Papua New Guinean friend from the Trobriand Islands once described the genesis of Malinowski's *The Sexual Life of Savages* this way: quickly aware that the anthropologist was especially eager to describe sexual behaviour, as good hosts they obliged him with the sort of stories he liked).

Hearts leaped as we read recently of a 'lost tribe' in Papua New Guinea. Could these people somehow be kept pure, free of materialist Western taint, the letter-writers to newspapers asked rhetorically (and perhaps unconsciously asked of themselves). The truth—that these people were mere victims of the national disgrace of the erosion of services in rural areas, forced to return reluctantly to a raw, nomadic life—was of considerably less interest to the new Western sensibility.

Cultures have never been static, or 'pure'. Few native peoples are homogeneous. Most have constantly intermarried with neighbours, invaded rivals' territory,

or been driven out. In our region, there have been countless movements of peoples, with the Polynesian migrations to Hawaii and New Zealand (now called by some Maoris 'the land of the wrong white crowd') perhaps the most dramatic. The Tongans created vassal, slave states on islands far from the centre of their military empire. Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, proud Fijian and Prime Minister for 20 years, is also a cousin of the Tongan royal family. A former prime minister of PNG, Rabbie Namaliu, is a member of the Tolai tribe which invaded the area around Rabaul not much more than 100 years ago, driving the then inhabitants, the Baining, up into the hills. Who there is 'indigenous'?

I AM AN INDIGENOUS ENGLISHMAN, a migrant to Australia. As far as I am aware, my ancestors have lived in England for many hundreds of years. Yet in those Robin Hood legends recently reborn in film, great play was made about the difference between the Anglo-Saxons (indigenous goodies) and the Normans (invaders, so baddies). At what point did the Norman element of English culture cease to be oppressive and invasive? I confess to finding it hard to work up much excitement on the issue.

There is an element of racism, of guilt-ridden racism, in the Western perspective on indigenism commonly encountered in academe and the media. This perspective is formed by a dominant culture in which discrimination, in any sense, is viewed as wrong. The indigenous person in such a construct is almost inevitably a victim. In Vancouver recently, at the spectacular Museum of Anthropology, I came across a 'cultural amnesty' box, a sin bin, in which visitors expiate their racial guilt by depositing items such as red plastic model warriors, fluorescent cowboy and Indian key-rings, and Edmonton Eskimos football team bumper stickers.

Oddly, though, it was only after contact with the West had diminished warfare between tribes, and had provided the technology that increased both leisure time and the intricacy of carvings that could now be fashioned—that many indigenous cultures reached their highest achievements. This was certainly the case for the Maori, and the native people of north-west America. And today, new technologies are capable of hugely enhancing tribal lives. Who would see a water pump as an unaesthetic intrusion in the lives of those countless Papua New Guinean women who continue to rise at four, walk a couple of kilometres to a creek, carry water in a bowl on their heads, light a fire and cook breakfast—all before daylight?

But if new technology has improved lives, what of new values, religions? Has Christianity, for instance, not inevitably arrived in European clothes? If so, what can be done about it? Change the clothes? Change the gospel? The message of the Christian gospel for this Year of Indigenous People, is the message for those who have suffered all kinds of loss due to the greed of others: theirs is the kingdom of God. But this does not mean their cultures are *per se* divine. In the mid 1970s I attended a

conference, run by a British Anglican organisation, about the cultural revolution in China. Such was Mao's achievement in persuading the Chinese to live by sheer altruism, we were told, that the gospel was now superfluous.

There are some who would take a similar sanctimonious attitude towards indigenous cultures today. Something of this awe of indigenous people's spirituality, perversely common among those who are otherwise profound sceptics, emerged during the Coronation Hill debate. Bob Hawke famously told a Catholic girls' school in Sydney, immediately after announcing that mining was to be banned because of the Jawoyn people's belief that the site was inhabited by the spirit Bula, that such beliefs were equivalent to Christian belief in the Trinity.

A World Council of Churches congress that I attended in Canberra a couple of years ago focused heavily on indigenous beliefs. Its opening liturgy began: 'With grateful hearts we gather as the churches in this meeting place of an ancient people. God was with them before we came'. This echoed the theme of a painting I saw in a Solomon Islands church—Christ standing on the shore with the islanders, welcoming the first missionaries as they landed.

But despite the exotic attraction for Westerners, which perhaps reached its zenith in the SBS TV series *Millennium*, tribal life has never been a Shangri-La. Cannibalism and infanticide were widespread in the South Pacific region. The wives of Fijian chiefs once wore around their necks the cords with which they would be strangled once their husbands died. George Ambo, an Anglican bishop in Papua New Guinea whose life has spanned the conversion of his tribe from animism, says: 'The worst enemy of my people is fear.' And Christianity, he says, helped keep fear at bay: fear of sorcery, of enemy attack, of early death by disease.

The Maori hunted the moa to extinction. Many species of marsupial suffered similar fates in Australia. People have been limited, in their impact on the environment, chiefly by the technology available to them. In the past, near mortal blows have been struck to indigenous peoples, by measles, by intermarriage, by military assaults and by a new materialism. Yet the greatest challenges have been wrought by ideas, by an awareness of a world wider than the hermetic native universe, rendering redundant the mechanics of sorcery.

THOSE WHO BELIEVE it is possible to reconstruct an Arcadian age of indigenous life are deluded or mischievous. The region's indigenous people deserve a bigger role, but in a future that lies in competing and communicating more effectively in a wider world, not in retreating from it. Stephen Hawke, intriguingly echoing his father, has written: 'I believe that not only the spiritual heart of Australia, but to a large extent the cultural strength of the country, lies in the Aboriginal people.' Yet a tribal culture and spirituality cannot extend beyond the tribe. In most such societies, the word for 'peo-

ple' is that for the tribe. Outsiders are not human beings in the same manner at all. Strangers can never share in a dreaming that is linked intimately with the land, the 'second skin'. Tribal religions, commonly animistic, assume a mechanistic, mostly hostile universe in which guilt or shame can prove fatal. Death, sickness or special success must be attributed to ritual manipulations. Only recently, a man was burned to death in Fiji because angry villagers accused him of sorcery.

The significant elements that indigenous people have to teach, are not in 'world music' or fabrics, or attitudes to the environment, but in such unfashionable areas as their sense of the reality of the spiritual world; their respect for their elders, which grows with age rather than diminishes; and their self-sacrifice on behalf of their extended families.

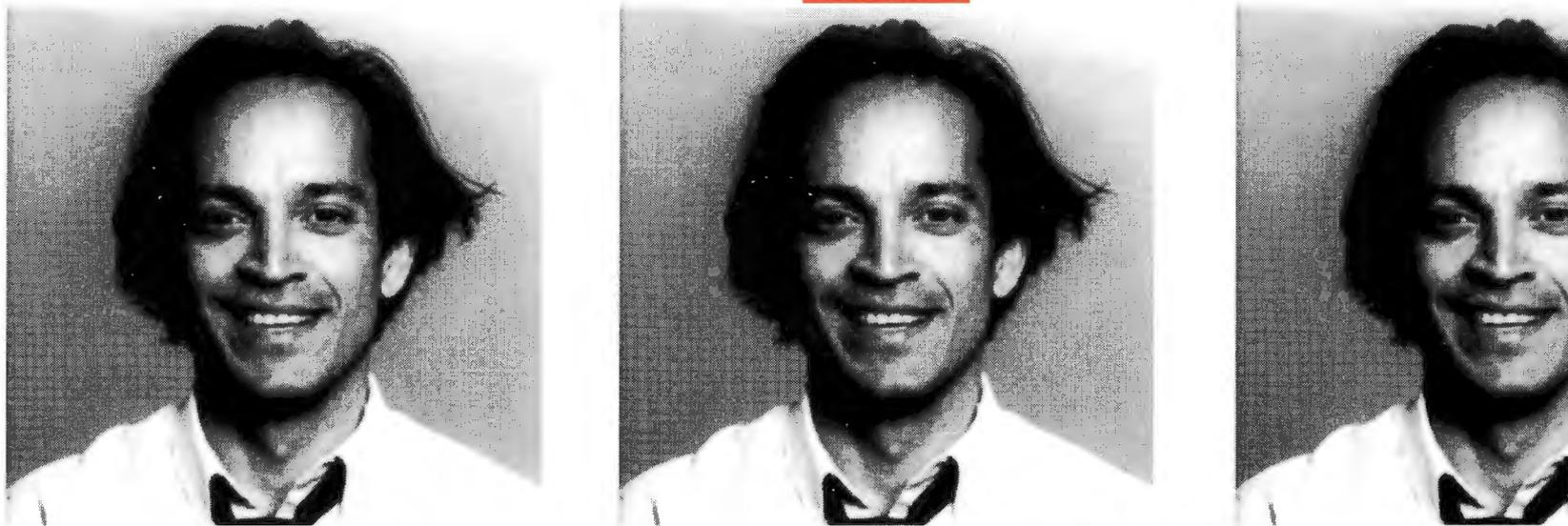
Georg Lukacs described the condition of the modern Western mind as 'transcendental homelessness'—in which Westerners yearn for tribal 'homes' and harmony. Robert Edgerton, professor of psychology and anthropology at the University of California Los Angeles, spoils this party of complementarity, however. In his implacably unfashionable new book, *Sick Societies: Challenging the Myth of Primitive Harmony*, he cudgels the cultural relativists, who contend that cultures can only be evaluated on their own terms, and for whom a person from a different culture must remain for ever Other, exotic and—as distinct from Ryckmans' China, or even my own Papua New Guinea—unapproachable.

Edgerton writes, 'We know that drug use, gang violence, child abuse, poor prenatal health care, rage and hopelessness are not good for the impoverished and embattled people of our inner cities. Why should cultural relativism prevent us from evaluating the feuding, wife battering, inadequate diets and inefficient medical knowledge of many folk societies?'

Such enervating if honest considerations appear remote from the exotic worlds of Indiana Jones and of designer tribalism—and of Conrad, who filled his Kurtz, a hollow man, with his version of the primitive as the brutish, yet potentially the sacred. But the tramlines of 'safe' intellectual debate in Australia have largely prevented the clear-eyed exploration, even—perhaps especially—in this Year of Indigenous People, of either the inflated and distorted expectations that many Westerners have of folk societies, or the often harsh realities of tribal lives today. Tribal people and westerners remain yoked in a pact of mystification and exploitation. ■

Rowan Callick, a journalist with *The Australian Financial Review*, worked in Papua New Guinea from 1976-87

Those who believe it is possible to reconstruct an Arcadian age of indigenous life are deluded or mischievous. The region's indigenous people deserve a bigger role, but in a future that lies in competing and communicating more effectively in a wider world, not in retreating from it.



A writer of many

Vikram Seth is visiting Australia for the Melbourne International Writers' Festival. Peter Craven examines his work in its various modes and moods.

I DON'T KNOW any other writer like Vikram Seth, abundant though the comparisons have been in recent months. He achieved fame of a kind from writing a novel in verse, and has now complicated and transfigured his success by pulling off something like the same trick—though on an infinitely larger scale—in prose. In each case there is a hovering enigma about the quality of the work in question but no doubt about the skill of the performance and the charm of the result.

Vikram Seth is a writer steeped in literary tradition who tries his hand at revivifying the kind of popular success once associated with particular literary forms. And for some time no one has believed that these forms could accommodate the sort of narrative propulsion that makes for bestsellers which are also works of art.

The verse novel is the most obvious case in point although there are other recent examples, such as Alan Weame's long poem *The Nightmarkets*, which is almost exactly contemporary with Seth's *The Golden Gate*, although started earlier, and Derek Walcott's *Omeros*. There is a sense, though that of the three writers only Seth was capable of investing the form with the readability which makes it essentially novel-like; whereas the other works inherit the title by virtue of being unclassifiable and long. And

A Suitable Boy is not simply another superior piece of storytelling that is difficult to put down; it is a conscious attempt to write a crowded large-scale novel in the manner of the 19th-century giants, with a rattling and multi-tier plot, in a way that is virtually dead except in airport fiction.

Perhaps the Russian precedents have something to do with it. *The Golden Gate* is an elaborate *homage* to Charles Johnston's translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, much praised by John Bayley and available as a Penguin classic. *A Suitable Boy* has reminded everybody of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* not simply because Seth's constantly changing narrative rhythms are ideal in a spot of aerial turbulence, as Tolstoy's were for the chuffing and jolting of steam trains, but because the interrelation of domestic comedy with semi-documentary historical writing irresistibly recalls the Russian novelist. When Seth brings Nehru onto the stage of the novel the precedent of Tolstoy's Napoleon cannot have been too far from his mind. Nor when he begins with a massive party of operatic vigour and complexity. (I should add that Seth admitted the Pushkin model, whereas he seems to think of Tolstoy as just one more instructive example.)

Vikram Seth is a writer who fiddles with old literary forms not be-

cause he wishes to seem arty (he genuinely does not) but because he wants to make them work for him as they did for the old timers. He wants to tell a story in verse that rhymes, that thumps along as surely as Dryden's or Byron's did, because he needs a form as open and shut as the sonnet in tetrameter in order to tell a story which would otherwise melt into sopiness.

He needs the serial style, the 'and then what?' form of the Tolstoyan saga because it's a necessary model for a huge suitcase of a story which would otherwise tend either to be hackwork of the cinema-of-the-mind variety or to issue into a series of Narayan-like novelistic vignettes, realistic and wry, but without any sense of panorama. In other words, Vikram Seth uses literary precedent without an echo chamber. He's not remotely interested in appearing literary; the only self-consciousness he possesses is of the schoolboy kind. He in fact uses literary precedent 'naively', as if it were possible to pretend that the Chinese Wall of Dead Masterpieces, of precedents declared verboten by the march of literary history, meant nothing at all.

WORLD SPIRITS MAY NOT BE SO easily mocked: he who tries to write a song like Schubert will look like a composer of the late 20th century

When I was writing The Golden Gate the satisfactions I got were the technical satisfactions of watching it all click: the top spins and then it comes to an end. And there is a kind of rightness you get with that. With prose you don't get those sorts of satisfactions. It's the movement of much larger masses of material, sentences and paragraphs of irregular length. And then character and plot. And different levels of shifting structure. You are never faced with the fact that it really could only have been this way. Of course it's not true of verse either ... With verse you might say it's more difficult because you have to work more slowly, you have to balance rhythm and metre, masculine endings and feminine endings ... with prose you don't have those problems. But the argument there is that you don't get the pleasures of subjectivity. So there's the constraint versus the independent source of inspiration.

—Vikram Seth



parts

voicing his time's misconstruction of Schubert. But that fact, even if it is borne out in Seth's case, may be more confounding for Seth's interpreters than it is for him. A bit of Pushkin here, a bit of Tolstoy there—who cares if it works in the same way as it did for them, so long as it works? Through the smokescreen of a couple of literary classics of the very highest reputation—each of them known unintimately in translation—he has succeeded in liberating old-fashioned impulses in himself. By ignoring sophisticated literary fashion he has hit on the perennially fashionable form of two 'open' classics. More pertinently he has found a way, at once serio-comic and straightforward, of disciplining his own tendency to write trash.

In 1986, when a critic in *The New York Times Book Review* wrote disparagingly of *The Golden Gate*, Susan Sontag broke the practice of a lifetime and wrote a letter to the editor, saying why he was wrong. (And within a month or two she was advising the Indian versifier on what he should read—*The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. Now there's fiction for you.)

It's hard to imagine a less probable assignment for a young Indian, late of Oxford, who has been writing a Ph.D. on economics at Stanford: a verse novel in tetrameters about a group of

young professionals in California. The plot is like something by Woody Allen if seriousness and a warm softening of the brain had fallen on him when he was 30, rather than much later. *The Golden Gate* weaves a complex spell, not easily explained either by the story line or poetic technique; it sometimes sounds like a work that deserves to be set to music by Andrew Lloyd Webber. Yet Seth seems to have known precisely what he was doing. The work itself has a clarity of design niftier than any of its elements in isolation might suggest. At one point the coy narrator of *The Golden Gate*—who is certainly not to be identified with Kim Tarvesh, the author's acronym who shares his academic history—suggests that anyone who has persisted so far with him must have 'an iron ear'.

This is a long poem written with the utmost deliberation, as well as delight, in a verse form—and with a nimble meretriciousness that is likely to prove soothing to the average literate person who no longer reads much poetry, and boggling to anyone who does. Vikram Seth, the poet, not only writes as though Ezra Pound had never lived; he writes as though Ogden Nash and Dorothy Parker had enjoyed the eminence and influence of T.S. Eliot and as though he had a licence to cut corners they would have been too

scrupulous for. A representative passage looks like this:

*Soothed by such counterfactual reason
Phil's thoughts turn from his homely face
To the crisp features of the season:
The straw-gold hill, this oak-strewn place,
With here the flutter of a dusty Sparrow,
and there the encroaching rusty
Lichen upon the rock where Paul
Sits singing to himself, and all
The hillsides burred with skeletal thistles
And thornbush, and the clear cool air
Presaging winter rain, and there
A mockingbird with chacks and whistles
Liquidly aviating through
A sky of Californian blue.*

It's a good deal more skilful than it looks. Part of Seth's trick with his clunking rhymes is to make the whole exercise as seem much like a parlour game as possible. In part this is Pushkin's strategy modernised to the point of parody. The verse scheme as a kind of machine for containing and deflating any potential pomposity that might lurk in the lyrical impulse which feeds it. The creative interplay of such cross purposes gives *The Golden Gate* its



delicious comedy (often through deliberate corniness), as well as unexpected depths of feeling that might so easily be troughs of sentiment. It is almost as though a quite sophisticated literary rhetoric—realist and urbane, easily sliding from allusion to originality of observation and back again—were deliberately playing games with itself in order to insinuate that its bland late century traditionalism was actually a secret collaborator with Joycean parody and Peralian constraint.

SETH'S REPRESENTATION OF an anti-nuclear priest shows the method at its clearest because his speech at a rally is necessarily rhetorical. The way in which it is squeezed into the concertina form of Seth's sonnet is almost like a prose summary in reverse. The bathos of the verse is like the crib of a linguistic action which is happening nearby but offstage, in a language we can just imagine though we cannot hear:

*Quo warranto? By what authority,
I ask you in the wounds of Christ,
Does strength confer superiority
Over God's earth? What has enticed
Mere things like us into believing
The world may be left charred and
grieving
In man-made doom at the behest
Of patriotic interest?
It's come that close. A Russian freighter
—In Autumn 1962—
Halted before the line we drew
To cut off Cuba. Minutes later,
And our own manly president would
Have finished off mankind for good.*

Perhaps I am needlessly complicating what happens in this jack-in-the-box West Coast epic about the small upheavals in the heart but I doubt it. Robert Lowell speaks somewhere of the way translators of poetry who translate meaning by scrupulous meaning into traditional metres produce poems which are like stuffed owls.

When Johnston's versions of *Onegin* appeared in the 1970s it seemed like a very superior stuffed owl indeed, one perhaps with real eyes that sparkled. John Bayley who was more sympathetic to it than most

modern, especially non-British, readers, was strong in isolating its beauties. Its overall effect was actually very like *The Golden Gate*. It was written in a metre which it was impossible to take seriously—and which in part, though only in part, did not want to be taken seriously—and yet it had lines within the grid of its perpetual galloping smile that seemed to belong to a different universe.

I suspect that Vikram Seth wanted to sneak up on something as intimate and yet as foreign as the Californian Sex Comedy by exploiting a set of conventions—as available to a cosmopolitan Indian as anyone—which would be so traditionally 'British' they would frighten the life out of any local idiom that tried to get in their way. He has said that the Indians speak as good English as anyone in the world, albeit with an Edwardian twist, and it is precisely that Edwardian jokiness and self-deflation that gives *The Golden Gate* its power. It is a long work full of the sudden shifts of tone that characterise the poetic, yet you would understand a latter-day Arnold who said that it had been written by 'a master of our prose'.

A Suitable Boy is an attempt to write a comprehensive novel: of adventure, politics, romance and family life. It is a book that puts all its money on lateral sweep, a novel that shows a lack of interest in its own style which is almost shocking. No sentence bows to the reader. No sentence turns around and looks at itself in the mirror in the approved modernist manner yet there is nothing here, either, of deliberate postmodern pastiche, no wilful coarsening of narrative texture in order to make a point.

A Suitable Boy is a novel of the aftermath of India's independence, and in it Seth is concerned to write an epic of more or less heroic dimensions that will seize the mind as a set of images (not as a form of words) which will draw the reader on with a series of inventions entirely life-like, though beglamoured by time and coloured by the palette of historical memory, and yet which is made of sterner stuff than the cardboard of large scale popular fiction.

Again the technique involves a reversal in time, though to opposite effect. *The Golden Gate* is so up to the

minute that aspects of its storyline are already dated: AIDS is mentioned but never considered, the Cold War looks like being there forever, nuclear war is at the back of everybody's mind. What preserves yesterday's topicality (why not in amber?) is the ageless stuffed owl of the verse. (The 'no' language derived from Johnston's Pushkin which gives a form like a steel trap to all the Californian yapping.)

In contrast, *A Suitable Boy*, requires the India of the early '50s, the tumultuous drama of the transition from feudal landholdings to a modern state, and in it Seth wants a novelistic displacement of the world of his own immediate family. For *that* recipe—the dual history of his creation (via a province like the one in which he grew up) and of himself (via the kind of family that brought him into being) there must be the fullest recreated sense of time past and what he needs to protect that and make it credible is precisely the Tolstoyan sense of popular style with its high Victorian efficiency and lack of fuss.

He needs a style that will draw no attention to itself, which will seem to have no features but which will, at the same time, have an implicit Victorian restraint (an absence of explicit sex and psychologising) as well as a Victorian licence to use rhetoric and cliché. There should also, in contrast to *The Golden Gate*, be no intrusive narrative voice: the eye of God, unseen by any, is the condition of invisibility he covets and attains.

In practice, the effect is a good deal less psychologically underwritten than Tolstoy or the other great Victorians (who had the advantage of using their own constraints with a considerable power of implication) but it certainly does appropriate most of the tonal variety, at least within the different strands of the narrative.

PART OF SETH'S PROBLEM IS TO ensure that we believe in one world as we jump from Maan's hunting with Firoz to the who'll-get-the-girl carry-on with Lata Mehra. He has what may be his deepest affinity for this feminised world of familial intrigue and marital anxiety but his technique as a novelist who can use a large canvas is most evident in the scenes of bloodiness

between Hindu and Muslim and in the parliamentary confrontations which have a dramatic dash and power implicit through all the tightrope rhyming of *The Golden Gate*—though in that case serio-comically. There is also a power of summary which is a direct appropriation of the Victorians and is more like Tolstoy than anybody else.

'Whenever he thought of his mother, tears came to Rasheed's eyes. She had loved him and his brother almost to excess, and she had been adored in return. His brother had delighted in the pomegranate tree and he in the lemon. Now as he looked around the courtyard, freshened and washed by the rain, he seemed to see everywhere the tangible marks of her love.

The death of her elder son had certainly hastened her own. And before dying she had made Rasheed, heartbroken as he was by his brother's death and her own impending one, promise her something that he had wanted desperately to refuse but did not have the heart or will to do: a promise that was no doubt good in itself, but that had tied his life down even before he had begun to taste freedom.'

This is not to reduce Seth's novel to the bare bones of technique when the sustaining impulse behind *A Suitable Boy* seems to be an attempt to circumvent the constraints of technical diminution—in particular the dominant orthodoxy that no serious writer can take on the world as a set of dynamic actions in a closely observed society.

Magical realism, with its inheritance of Borgesian abracadabra and its politically *engagé* licence, was one attempt to circumvent that limitation, but Vikram Seth is at the furthest possible remove from Gabriel García Márquez or, more particularly, Salman Rushdie. Where *Midnight's Children* is a dream of Indian history from before Independence until Mrs Gandhi's state of emergency, with a huge admixture of childhood pangs and smells, of leftest fabulism and cartoonery, *A Suitable Boy* is a classically straightforward racketing yarn that really will appeal to all those lovers of *Gone With the Wind* and *War and Peace*.

What it lacks that Tolstoy has in

abundance is a depth of inner life and an intellectual architecture. Certain kinds of things cannot happen in *A Suitable Boy*. Lata, for instance, could not run off with Maan, midstream, as Natasha runs off with Kuragin. And it's also true that Seth, in his shrewd way, has achieved his contemporary status by being a rather more old-fashioned novelist than Tolstoy. (Not the least extraordinary thing about *War and Peace* is that it is not only the best middlebrow novel of all time it also includes those disquisitions on history that are as bewildering structurally and as forbidding as anything in Proust or Thomas Mann.)

IT'S NOT HARD TO SEE why Vikram Seth with his astute agnosticism about literature should have decided not to go down that path. It scarcely matters and it ensures that *A Suitable Boy* is, in its totality, an even more readable book than *War and Peace*. It represents, as *The Golden Gate* did, but on an immeasurably bigger scale, the triumph of one creative mind over the orthodoxies that dictate how a writer should write.

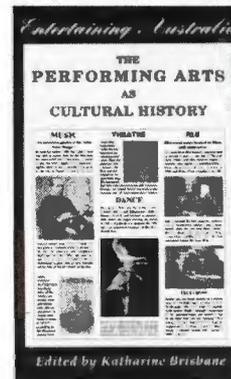
We have no pigeon holes for Vikram Seth. If he is part of an international movement, it is not visible yet. The only analogies to his work seem the nearly postmodern fageydom of people like Peter Ackroyd but there is a difference of scale as well as achievement in Seth's case and he is not remotely interested in literary attitudes or literary politics.

In any institutional terms he is not interested in literature at all—infinite less so than his critics. The one thing in his behaviour, the one thing apart from the work itself, that looks serious is the constant decision to change his choice of weapons: poems, travel, a verse novel, a real novel, now—we're told—a play. That suggests an uncannily moody artist, with an intense pride in his powers, who won't be pinned down.

But then I seem to hear him say in that self-mocking voice of his *Ah, but perhaps I'm just a dilettante who always gets bored!* ■

Peter Craven is a Melbourne critic. His *The Arts Racket* will be published in 1994 by Pan Macmillan.

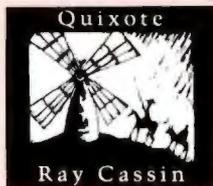
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Saturday-morning constitutionals

A HERD OF REEBOK-CLAD FEET pads dully past, leaving a cloud of powdered gravel suspended in the air behind it. As the cloud drifts across the street and some of it begins to settle on the newspaper I am reading, I marvel at the lengths to which people will go to appear desirable. Jogging is bad enough, it involves a degree of masochism. But power walking, the activity of the Reebok-clad herd, requires one to look absurd as well, in the perhaps vain hope of looking less absurd later on. A solitary jogger on the track appears to share this view of power walking. Instead of overtaking the herd on one side, he ploughs through the middle of the ungainly beasts, scattering them right and left. The yuppie equivalent, I suppose, of kicking sand in someone's face at the beach.

I am in another herd, of Saturday-morning newspaper readers, contentedly chewing the things that such herds chew in street cafés. It is a fine clear day, the coffee smells good and tastes not bad either, so why do I feel so annoyed? Why do I feel such disdain for the power walkers? For after all, how they choose to look is their business, not mine.

I have begun to read an article of the sort that unlocks one's prejudices, and which is all the more galling because it is written in aid of a cause that one shares. It is the text of a speech by a renowned speechmaker and speechwriter. He is in fact the Prime Minister's speechwriter, and his subject is the forthcoming republic. Fine, let us have such speeches, and may the republic come sooner rather than later. But does the republic need friends like this man? The speech annoys me because it runs together things that are not the same; because it jumps between misty-eyed appeals to our noble instincts and bleary-eyed appeals to our desire to be comfortable; and because orators are never so smug, so infuriatingly patronising, as when they tell their audience, 'You're all right, y'know?'

Running together things that are not the same? How about this: *It [the republic] is of immense psychological importance: as it helped restore the faith of the Labor Party in the last 12 months, I think it will revive our faith in Australia and ourselves.* Hmm ... so the sort of faith we have, or ought to have, 'in Australia and ourselves' is analogous to 'the faith of the Labor Party in the last 12 months'. Pretty flimsy sort of faith, then. I voted for the Labor Party (and would again), but cannot imagine circumstances in which I would want to identify the ties that bind me to a political party with the ties that bind me to 'Australia and ourselves'. I suppose that Prime Ministers' speechwriters are paid to suggest that the two loyalties are the same. But they are not the same.

Running together appeals to noble instincts with appeals to our desire to be comfortable? Try this one: *Somewhere along the way I was told the story of the*

refugee who sailed into Melbourne at the end of the 1940s, and he saw our wharfies and he said that he knew at once that he had found freedom because it was plain from their demeanour that nothing would get them to goose step. Twenty years later, of course, he knew that nothing would get them to do a lot of other things. Clever sting in the tail of that one. I hope the Prime Minister pays his speechwriter well for articulating 'the faith of the Labor Party in the past 12 months'. Did someone leave a container of Reeboks lying on the docks for too long?

Smug, and infuriatingly patronising? Switch on the gibberish meters for this lot: *I imagine it [the republic] as aleatory, impressionistic, figurative, eclectic, bebop. I'm only just game enough to say it: it might be the first postmodern republic, and I mean that in the nicest possible way. I mean a republic that exalts the nation less than the way of life. Whose principal value is tolerance rather than conformity, difference rather than uniformity. Whose outlook is unambiguously Australian, and yet is more worldly and international than republics like the United States or France or Germany or Ireland. With humanist and even some romantic traditions, but not schmalz, false sentiment and fascism.*

The 'nation' or the 'way of life'? There is more than a contingent relationship between the two, one would have thought. But perhaps this is just a verbal quibble on my part, and the speechwriter simply means that the basis of the national identity should not be a racial one. Fair enough. But 'tolerance' and 'difference'? It has been the experience of most modern states, republican or otherwise, that the greater the emphasis on 'difference', the more difficult 'tolerance' becomes. The first two republics cited by the speechwriter have been (in very different ways) more successful than most societies in reconciling tolerance and difference. But the history of the United States, or of modern France, has hardly been conflict-free.

We, however, will presumably be free from such troubles because we are not afflicted by 'schmalz' and 'false sentiment'. We're not? Behold once more the words of the master: *... you find yourself in an RSL club in Adelaide or a hall in Whyalla, or a picnic in Perth, or a tent by the ethanol factory near Nowra. Or a pie shop. And you fly from one to the other, and you happen to look up from your stir-fried chilli new-fashioned pork served with a West Australian chardonnay by the men and women of the RAAF, and out the window the sun is setting on Uluru—and all you can say is 'What a bloody great rock!'*

No schmalz there, mate, oh no. Not a helluva lot of 'difference', either. Just a speechwriter's vision of a great bland land, fit for power walkers to live in. ■

Ray Cassin is production editor of *Eureka Street*.

Straining to see the light

I WAS STANDING in the queue in McDonald's on Manila's Taft Avenue when the lights went out. For 30, maybe 40, seconds the buzz of conversation stopped, the customers and staff frozen like mannequins in the gloom. Then, somewhere in a back room, the generator chugged to life and the lights, tills and machinery came back on. Conversations restarted. Business resumed. Just another brownout.

No one is quite sure how many people live in the sprawl of Metro Manila, estimates range between six and ten million. What is certain is that every home, shop, factory or office is without electricity for up to 10 hours a day, every day. Power cuts—'brownouts' in local parlance—have ceased to be an emergency, a sudden crisis. They have become part of the culture. One of the Tagalog movies playing in the central Manila cinema strip is simply called *Gagay: Princess of the Brownout*.

Not everyone is affected equally. For the squatters in their cardboard shacks, huddling under bridges and along railway tracks, the idea of an electricity supply has always been as remote as gold-plated taps that gush hot water. And the rich in the gated 'villages' of Forbes Park and Dasmariñas have private generators.

For the bulk of the urban population, however, brownouts mean inconvenience, waste, extra cost—even financial disaster. Every shopkeeper, every restaurant owner, who hopes to stay in business has a generator chained to the footpath outside their front door. Some shops lack the funds to compete; their owners stand disconsolately by the door, forlornly hoping to entice customers into the shadows. For big business, lamplight is not an option. The government has been forced to drop import duties on generators, and in the first seven months of this year imports to the Philippines jumped six per cent. The increase is almost entirely accounted for by generators. For a country as poor as the Philippines, this 'investment' represents a tremendous waste. If the power crisis is ever solved, the

machines simply become so much expensive scrap metal. In the meantime, they cannot prevent enormous damage being done to the economy. In the first quarter of this year, manufacturing output, which contributes one quarter of GDP, fell by five per cent compared to the same quarter in 1992.

Some employers have been driven to the wall. For workers, brownouts add further misery to subsistence lives. Manny Sarmiento, president of the Drug, Food and Allied Workers Federation, spends much of his time dealing with scheduling grievances, as employers try to match production times to power availability, leading to wildly varying work hours. The problems are worst in the labour-intensive textile and garments sector—tens of thousands have been laid off, swelling the official unemployment rate past 18 per cent.

A solution seems some years away, for the brownouts are not the result of a sudden collapse of the power industry, but of long-term decline. When Corazon Aquino came to office in 1986 she mothballed the Bataan nuclear power station, a Ferdinand Marcos-World Bank-International Monetary Fund extravaganza built with 4000 defects at the foot of a volcano 70 kilometres from Manila. The station had never generated power, but it did generate millions of dollars in graft and a \$US2.3 billion tab for the Philippines' national debt. The problem, according to Sarmiento, was that no one would take responsibility for filling the gap.

OTHER ELEMENTS OF THE CRISIS lay, according to Maria Rodriguez, managing editor of the Philippine News and Features agency, in the lack of long-term research into geothermal or solar power. Hydroelectric power generation has been ineffective because of

siltation, a product of illegal deforestation. And on top of this, corruption has meant that parts are stolen and maintenance is skimped. The National Power Corporation admits that up to 15 of its 40 generating units on Luzon, the island that includes Manila, have been out of action at the same time.

The cost of the energy crisis cannot just be measured in pesos or jobs. It also constitutes part of the national humiliation that is keenly felt, especially by the urban intelligentsia. Everyone in the Philippines knows that after World War II the country was number two in Asia; and every-



one knows that now it is falling way behind its neighbours.

I was asked to dinner by an academic who lives on the Diliman campus of the University of the Philippines, on the outskirts of Metro Manila. After we'd eaten, she invited me to witness a neighbourhood meeting. There, in the undercroft of a block of flats, several dozen residents, mostly academics, sat in the lamplight (the power was off, of course) and debated how to ensure four hours' supply of water to their homes daily.

If the Ramos government cannot deliver the basics of life to academics on the premier campus of the country's premier university, why should garment workers, fisherfolk or peasants have the slightest faith in it? ■ David Glanz, a freelance journalist, is researching a Ph.D thesis on Philippines politics.

It's not Jurassic Park, it's Rizal Park in Manila. Playing on dinosaur sculptures in daylight is one of the few brownout-proof children's activities.

Photo: David Glanz

Fair games and game fare

WE ALL HAVE OUR SPECIAL PLACE. Chillagoe, 150km inland from Cairns, with its huge granite rocks and the ruins of its historic smelters, is my white man's dreaming. For my Balinese-Hindu friend Made Sugiarta in his home village of Ubud, where he owns and runs Miro's restaurant, his special place is old Glenferrie Oval, once truly the home ground of the Hawthorn Football Club, in the days when Aussie Rules was still based on tribes.

Love brought Made to Melbourne. His heart was won by Joy, an Australian nurse visiting Bali, and, undaunted by freezing weather and the lack of suitable work, he followed her to Melbourne in 1986. He stayed for six freezing winters until after the 1992 finals, when he and Joy got married and returned to Ubud. The only thing that made his life in Melbourne worthwhile was obsessively following Hawthorn, whose Tuesday and Thursday

practices he ritually attended, as well as every home-and-away game and the finals. Now his great dream is to bring Aussie Rules to Bali, which is quite a brilliant idea for Australian-Indonesian good relations.

Made, a fine soccer player and a practising Balinese-Hindu, ritualistically tunes into Radio Australia at noon, Bali time, on every Saturday and Sunday during the footy season, to absorb 3LO's *Match of the Day*. Being with Made in his restaurant gives one a deep sense of being with someone both in kilter with the cosmos and passionately committed to Aussie Rules.

Joy told me that when she asked Made why he never once complained, despite Melbourne's bitter cold and the jealous enmity of his Anglo-Celtic workmates at Unilever's margarine factory in Port Melbourne, where he toiled as a machinist he replied: 'This is my consequence'.

A deep believer in oval dreams and magic, Made understood with his heart and his head when I recounted how, at Victoria Park in April, I had watched Peter Daicos, in what may have been his last great moment, kick a goal with his left foot through a paper-thin space. At the time, my 70-year-old, Magpie-following friend Ian Guthrie had said: 'It's enough to bring tears to a grown man's eyes.' As I told Made the story, there were tears trickling down his face.

Made understood the interconnections between football, religion, philosophy and food. In the past two decades, the tucker available in Bali has changed considerably. Tourists can eat just about anything from Kentucky Fried to sophisticated, Asianified haute cuisine in the five star hotels. But the most common fare in Bali is still familiar Indonesian dishes such as nasi goreng and sate, and more traditional Balinese dishes are still not seen regularly on menus.

One of the most spectacular of the latter is Balinese duck which requires at least 24 hours notice. Traditional

Balinese duck coupled with conversation about Aussie Rules is Made Sugiarta's culinary speciality.

To get to Miro's, just off the main road in Ubud, one walks up terraces and steps that in the evening are lit by oil lamps. The restaurant, open on all sides under a thatched pavilion, is surrounded by fish ponds and there is a spectacular view over the rice fields to the soccer ground where Made hopes that next year an Aussie Rules coaching clinic can be established. In this idyllic setting one can also order fabulous grilled fish and the best chunky chips in Indonesia—but my advice is to go for the duck, which is usually prepared for important celebrations such as tooth filing and weddings.

Wrapped in palm leaves with stuffing and spices, the duck is placed in a big clay pot and covered with rice husks, and cooked for eight hours. It is served with numerous other dishes, including a large bowl of green vegetables called lawar and a delicious coconut mixture. All the juices from the duck are then made into a rich soup.

The duck, vegetables, coconut and soup are presented with a bowl of white rice and sates, which are made from local chicken minced into a paste. It is an unforgettable feast, and visiting gourmets and Aussie Rules supporters are flocking to Made's to try it.

Made hopes that fellow Hawthorn supporter Senator Gareth Evans, and Australia's Sports Minister Ros Kelly, will arrange for an Aussie Rules exhibition game to be played at Denpasar in 1994. If that magic moment occurs I want to be, if not coach, translator or spiritual counsellor, then food advisor.

For a failed attender of Weight Watchers and a deeply dispirited Collingwood supporter, that's not a bad alternative. ■

Ross Fitzgerald, associate professor of history and politics at Griffith University, is the editor of *The Greatest Game: Writings on Australian Football*.

Remembering shared meat pies in the outer: Made Sugiarta and Ross Fitzgerald

Photo: Lyndal Moor.



Teasing out the texts

Robin Gerster goes to the 1993 Association for the Study of Australian Literature conference.

LITERATURE CONFERENCES always make me think of Rodney Wainright, the character in David Lodge's satire *Small World* who agonises fruitlessly over a paper called 'The Future of Criticism'. It is hardly surprising that the Englishman Lodge, in a novel of stereotypes, should make the academic no-hoper an Australian—in Britain Australian literary scholars are often regarded as more boozy than brainy.

The annual conference of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL) used to be notorious for its bibulous bonhomie. Although that reputation was always somewhat exaggerated, ASAL did tend to be dominated by male academics intent on celebrating (both in their papers and general demeanour) a fundamentally masculinist literary tradition. Their chauvinism was understandable, a product of the fight for the recognition of the national literature in departments of English that interpreted their name in the narrowest sense.

On the evidence of the fifteenth ASAL conference held in early July in Perth, Australian literary nationalism of the pugnacious, cocky, male sort, is dead and unlamented. On a bus shelter near the beautiful University of Western Australia where the conference was held, someone had scrawled 'Australia I Love U 4 Ever', an inscription, perhaps, from the heady days of the doomed America's Cup defence. This, in a week of revisioning, reimagining and reinscribing, was the only sign of chauvinism I saw in Perth.

The old nationalist orthodoxy has been thoroughly dismantled, only to be replaced by another of a different kind. Or 'Others'. So many margins are enthusiastically embraced in Australian cultural studies these days that the despised 'patriarchal centre' has all but disappeared off the cultural map, to be rediscovered, no doubt, at some future conference. 'Just how other,' the critic S.P. Mohanty has asked,



'is the Other?' For a concept supposed to encompass the culturally colonised and marginalised, 'Otherness' pervades contemporary criticism. Above a replica of the Endeavour being constructed down at Fremantle harbour, a banner enjoins people to 'Be Excellent to Each *Other*' (my italics)—this was a message taken to heart at the ASAL conference of 1993.

Like theologians, literary academics are obsessed with dualities. Of all the so-called 'binary oppositions' critically 'negotiated' during the conference, the most insistent was the male/female dichotomy—in particular, masculine/feminine oppositions in the construction of the Australian cultural landscape and the casting of Woman as Other in the 'master discourse' which has shaped the national identity. Gender issues permeated the conference: there were papers on imperialism and gender, ethnicity and gender, language and gender, 'space' and gender, war and gender, the literary canon and gender, film and gender, even gender and gender.

FEMINIST THEORY DOMINATED, in particular Julia Kristeva's theories of female prohibition and abjection. Taken individually, the papers in themselves were persuasive; but the cumu-

lative effect was that of a chorus of complaint, the sense of an all-encompassing masculine conspiracy, and a sort of intellectual plagiarism. Continual reference to Kristeva's 'abject' had a somewhat dispiriting effect on the delegates—towards the end, even the paper-givers were mentioning it apologetically. The phallus reared its ugly head time and time again, popping up in all manner of feminist argument and analysis, as in the proposition that the male enjoys a 'privileged phallic position in relation to language'.

The theoretical jargon was hard going, it must be said. At the ASAL in Sydney in 1988, a delegate (not, I believe, an academic) indignantly queried the continual use of the rather inoffensive term, 'trope'. She would not have been happy with the critical discourse of 1993, in which issues became 'relativised' and history 'allegorised', the self became 'self-reflexive' and indeed turned into the 'self-reflexive self', a self engaged, perhaps, in 'self-narrativisation' when not subjected to 'hierarchisation' or 'the marginalising and resemanticising of master narratives'. If bemused by 'alterity' the listener could contemplate 'slippage' or grapple with something called 'a repressed uncanny'.

The problem with the jargon is not so much its aural hideousness, nor its semantic obtuseness, but that it can mystify ideas of an often mind-bending banality. The pressure to parade theoretical savoir faire was evident in the several papers given by post-graduates. While these were often substantial and delivered with style and spunk, they nonetheless tended to be joylessly doctrinaire in language and dispiritingly predictable in argument. For the pessimists, here, perhaps, is the future face of Australian academe.

During the course of the conference, it was sometimes hard to distinguish parody from the real thing. I say this somewhat unwillingly, given that

the academy's contemporary engagement with the various theories that go by the umbrella term 'postmodernism' has provided new impetus to the old Australian pastime of academic bashing.

Literary academics have long been despised in Australia as self-indulgent, effete inhabitants of the Ivory Tower. Public abuse was once the special province of the talk-back radio host; recently the antagonism has surfaced in the press. Complaints about the direction of contemporary intellectual life have been given weight by the published anxieties of academics themselves, such as Andrew Riemer in his article 'Canonically Speaking' (*Eureka Street*, June/July 1993).

Riemer sees impending catastrophe in the purported breakdown of the pedagogical insistence on the canon of great works in our universities. His article, while a specific response to radical curriculum changes within his own institution, contained some telling points. As he remarks, many of those writers who had been marginalised by the canon ('women, blacks, working-class and regional writers',

according to Riemer) derived much of their artistic impulse from canonical texts.

The problem with Riemer's position, as I see it, is its intransigence. He worries at venerable works of 'literary value' being left to 'wither on the vine'—in order to be saved from courses called 'Postcolonial Fiction' students need to be led towards *Paradise Lost*. He may be right, but he mounts no substantial argument why, except that a 'free-for-all' would serve to confirm the 'narrow prejudices' of students.

At least Riemer doesn't fall for the trap of blaming the state of the world on something called 'theory'. Some dismiss literary theory as a fad (see for example the recent debate in the Higher Education pages of *The Australian*); but it will not disappear. As with its critical language, what is arguable is how it should be used. Interestingly, some of the more convincing and 'scholarly' papers at ASAL '93 were heavily theoretical (and uncompromisingly feminist)—for example

Rose Lucas on Peter Weir's *Gallipoli*.

CERTAINLY ASAL, as the annual showpiece of the state of play in Australian literary studies, induced some real misgivings. In particular, the postmodern breakdown of the former distinctions between 'high' and 'popular' cultures has become increasingly problematic in critical practice. Paradoxically, the contemporary academy's eschewal of this divide has led to the encasement of the analysis of popular culture in language the general reader has no hope of understanding. That is hardly a reason not to provide a sophisticated analysis of the production, consumption and reception of texts, and the political or 'cultural' implications therein. But it does suggest the outbreak of a new, pernicious elitism—ironic, given the healthy impulse to question entrenched notions of what constitutes 'art'.

Moreover, although the rhetoric of postmodernism celebrates difference, marginality and plurality, those who dare question theory are liable, as Riemer says, to be made to appear 'retrograde and reactionary', to be derided as neanderthal realists or historicists. They, in turn, tend in a wound-

ed fashion to view the jargon of theorists as a form of intellectual thuggery when a more sensible view of its excessive use is to see it as a sign of defensiveness, a register of insecurity, the cry of someone who has won the prize but doesn't know what to do with it.

These concerns aside, ASAL '93 contained a breadth, diversity and comforting conventionality of papers to placate the Jeremiahs. Among them, a discussion of the 'canonical anxiety' of Australian literary culture in the 1930s and 1940s, before there was an academic apparatus to judge literary 'greatness'; papers on explorer narratives; the semiotics of domestic architecture; children's literature; detective fiction; specific studies of significant authors; papers on biography and autobiography; on anthropological stereotyping in the nineteenth-century; and—appropriately for a conference held in a city very much on the fringe—on regionalism, an often overlooked aspect of Australian writing. Hazel Rowley's paper on Christina Stead's critical banishment as 'un-Australian' (because she spent so long overseas) was a timely reminder of just how small-minded the Australian literary scene used to be.

While most concentrated on either prose or film narrative, the papers on poetry were among the most enjoyable, especially in terms of engagement with audience. Lyn McCredden's discussion of the 'fairy godmothers of Australian poetry', Gwen Harwood and Dorothy Hewett, was no less erudite for being accessible. McCredden argued that differing critical responses to the two poets—Harwood as the severe, ascetic 'proper poet', Hewett as the voluptuous, ageing *femme fatale*—reveal what Australian culture values and devalues in its literary women and the power of image-making in determining the female reputation. This paper, however, drew the most pithy audience response of the conference: 'Harwood is *thin*; Hewett is *fat*!' With this kind of characteristic scepticism, Australian literary studies should be able to negotiate its postnationalist, postcanonical, post-postmodern future. ■

Robin Gerster is an academic and author.

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Nukes 'n tutes

Nuclear Criticism, Ken Ruthven, MUP, 1993 ISBN 0 522 84491 X RRP \$19.95. **Cultural Materialism**, Andrew Milner, MUP, 1993 ISBN 0 522 84493 6 RRP \$19.95. **Metafiction: Reflexivity in Contemporary Texts**, Wenche Ommundsen, MUP, 1993 ISBN 0 522 84524 X RRP \$19.95

SOME WEEKS AGO, the Melbourne University Drama Festival featured the communal building of a book sculpture. A local publisher donated 26,000 books, otherwise destined for the pulp mill. Passersby were invited to open a book face upwards on the university lawn and to hit a nail through the front and back covers respectively.

Eventually, row upon row of books were fluttering their pages in the breeze. It was an impressive sight. I thought at the time that such a merry and chaotic gathering was a far cry from the solemnity that must at one time have attended the burning of books in universities. I also thought that the occasion could surely inspire further books and articles and that these, in turn, might fuel further sculptures.

Each of these three short monographs from Melbourne University Press is about the troubled art of reading. They are about books and language and where these fit into our troubled times. In their own way, they allow the reader a good deal of autonomy. So let's take up their offer and put each to the trouble of shedding a little light on the book sculpture.

Ken Ruthven might be inclined to see the endless rows of anonymous white pages as a textual rendition of a war cemetery. For him, 'nuclear criticism', in a broad sense, 'concerns itself with the inventions, applications and reception of nuclear science as cultural events'. He looks beyond the recent proliferation of popular films and novels that detail the destruction of the world, to the manner in which the nuclear age has come to inhabit our language and habits of thought. He is most engaging when reporting on ironies such as those whereby atomic weapons can be codenamed 'Trinity' or 'Little Boy'.

But there are parallel histories running in Ruthven's book. The first is the whole history of international relations in the past 50 years or so, the milestones of which have affected billions. The second is a paper history whose milestones are such arcane events as a lecture that Jacques Derrida gave in 1966, which became 'the inaugural moment of poststructuralism', and another Derrida gave in 1984, at 'the inauguration of a new nuclear criticism'. Ruthven is desperate to forge relations between these two histories, but he finds it difficult without coming close to a type of humanism that he has marked as enemy territory. He might find the idea of undergraduates working together to build a sculpture as attractive as the camaraderie of the Greenham Common women. But I suspect that the swarm of sculptors who tried secretly to pocket a book for themselves would also tempt Ken Ruthven as an image of the reader trying to scavenge a few mouthfuls of meaning from the remainders of a civilisation that has been metaphorically nuked.

Andrew Milner might be taken by the material excesses of a culture which produces books in such abundance that they can be used for building sculptures. Or possibly by the sight of readers lunging for books like patrons of a winter sellout. He tries to resolve a 'fundamental ambiguity' in our understanding of culture: whether we see culture as 'art' or 'idealist' on the one hand or whether we see it as 'social', 'utilitarian' or 'materialist' on the other. Drawing on Raymond Williams, the patron saint of *Cultural Materialism*, he comes up with a kind of compromise: culture is both a productive process in itself, and also any social use of the material means of production. There is more than a whiff of Marx in this, but Marx is only one



of the names, great and small, that are churned out of the book at such a rate that they threaten to stifle Milner's own concerns which, given breathing space, are probably quite vital.

Wenche Ommundsen's *Metafiction* is far and away the most entertaining excursion of the three. 'Metafiction' is self-reflexive fiction, the fiction about writing fiction. It is the type of story that might be told of a student who read the first page of every book in the book sculpture and thereby created an unlikely story of his own. It is the narrative of a passerby, such as myself, who sifted through the pile of books until he found a biography of someone he didn't like, then enjoyed hitting a nail through the portrait on the cover but was then haunted by that celebrity for the rest of the day. But Ommundsen's real concern is reality. She wants 'to challenge the perceived incompatibility between reflexivity and involvement with reality'. She does this by situating reflexive reading within a much broader context than that of a narrow band of literary theories.

The MUP series attempts more than making theoretical ideas accessible to a wider audience. The writers want to put their ideas at the service of ordinary people leading ordinary lives. I just feel, as the Irishman said giving directions, that if I wanted to get there, I wouldn't start from here. That is, I wouldn't start from theory. The gossip in me still wants to know what these three writers do with themselves after work, on the weekend, at the end of the day, in the hour of death. ■

Michael McGirr SJ is a regular contributor to *Eureka Street*.

Hammering home a point: the book sculpture at Melbourne University.

Photo: Norman Wodetzki

Surfaces and interiors

*Australia makes writers refashion their notions of paradise. Margaret Simons discovered as much when she went bush to write *The Ruthless Garden*, the novel that has just won her the inaugural Angus and Robertson Bookworld Prize.*

ON HER KITCHEN WALL there is a satellite photograph of the Murray Riverland. As you walk down the Federation gloom of the hall it shimmers, like a Western Desert painting—patches of chrome and interlocking ochres, bisected by a ruffle of lizard blue. But in her bright kitchen you can see the science of it in glossy, high resolution. She will beckon you forward and trace the line of improbable blue, inserting herself into it: ‘There, at that bend—that’s my cliff.’

Something akin to this happens in *The Ruthless Garden*, written while Margaret Simons was living in a house high on the cliff in the South Australian river town of Waikerie. The area around Waikerie has a long and eccentric history, much of which Simons explores in the novel. She describes it as having been Aboriginal land—Ngawait country. Later on, Captain Charles Sturt came through, with seven companions. She notes that ‘When his exploring days were over, Sturt became almost completely blind; a result, the doctors told him, of his journeys in the interior’.

It became settler land, the site of early socialist experiments; then, through irrigation, a citrus grove—Eden in dry country. But with irrigation came salt. The water table, the vascular system of the underground, shifted, and the salt rose.

In the novel the explorer, Sturt, is ‘a man capable of wonder, though not of irony’. Simons is capable of both.

She is adept at rendering the surface, the skin condition of the coun-

‘Before we left England in 1968 I had a teacher who used to take us for nature walks, which was a strange thing to do. We’d all put on our macs and track down to the local park. But what was good about it was that she didn’t just show us birds and leaves; she showed us things like oil on a puddle—all the beautiful colours. I thought she was wonderful.’

try. In fact she revels in it. There is a sharp, recording mind at work here, but one that does more than just record. Simons dramatises, in her characters and their life in the land, an awareness of the difficulty of understanding more than the surface. She and her characters are implicated in the life of the land. They are in it even when they don’t understand it, even when they abuse it. The systems that govern the organic life of land and people don’t just run in parallel—in the metaphorical language of the novel they are overlaid.

The Ruthless Garden opens with its often monstrous central character, Athena Masters, delighting in her own biological processes: ‘At the age of twelve, Athena learned about the digestive system. The teacher drew blackboard diagrams of the body’s orifices and the pipes that connected them. The mouth was done in red chalk and fringed with blue salivary glands, looking like little rain clouds ... Athena was fascinated. She drew arteries and veins in red and blue, and bile ducts in green. Afterwards, sitting lumpishly in the playground by the ant hill, she placed her fingers on her neck and felt the steady wriggling animal of her pulse. She was thrilled.’

The wonder coexists with the adult

Athena’s bungling attempts to love her dour man, Sam, and to repair the ruined, salinated country around her. She fails in both. In the depiction of Athena’s failure Simons exercises the skills of scientist and ironist. There is also a bone-sharp wit in the writing.

The setting for the novel is New Era, an early utopian settlement. By the time Athena arrives in the town, hope has eroded with the name: ‘now the locals pronounced it as though it was “Nearer”, with only a faint slurred suggestion of the “w” in the middle.’ Simons is English, precise in utterance, with an ear for Australian speech, for its way of blurring meaning, wearing out distinctions. ‘When she first learned about the name’s origins, Athena was surprised that it had been so quickly corrupted, its meaning so totally lost. Even some of the locals assumed the town’s name was Aboriginal, yet it was only a few years since the last of the original pioneers who had named the place had died.’

But if the high ideals of the original settlers have dried out in the local air, Newera is still a lively place. The novel is harsh but it is also very funny, with its tumble of characters, and village closeness. It is odd to read about a crowd in the bush—we are set so solid in our own stereotypes.

Simons lived and worked in Waikerie. She wrote for the local newspaper, did her share of municipal tasks, went to civic 'occasions', was careful about regional sensitivities, watched that she didn't offend local dignitaries; she hung around while local boys bashed cars to smithereens, she went to yabbie races.

If you have spent years as an investigative journalist, as Simons has, you don't waste material. *The Ruthless Garden* is fiction, make no mistake. And *Athena Masters* is *not* Margaret Simons. (It shouldn't be necessary to say that, but read the press reports that followed the announcement of Simons' award.) 'I notice a lot of things,' she says. 'I used to walk into Waikerie to collect the mail. It was thinking time and I noticed things. There is a description of a fence post in the book. That was on the walk.'

'Thinking time': Simons often talks about the contemplative habits that fiction demands. 'I keep a journal and how much I write is a measure of how much contemplative time I've got in my life.'

The word 'contemplation' juts out, suggestive of a tradition of reflection. Simons' grandfather was Jewish. 'But I was brought up with no real awareness of it. I was only aware of having a Jewish surname when I came to Melbourne because there is no real Jewish community in Adelaide. So the stress on contemplative habits is almost certainly not a Jewish thing. Dad is a reader and writer and thinker—quite self-sufficient. I have the same ways.

I see my father in me and his father in him.'

SIMONS' PARENTS ARE clearly very important to her, and in her childhood you can trace the addiction to fact, to the intricacy of *things*, that characterises the language of her novel. She was an inquisitive child, encouraged to be so. *The Ruthless Garden* is dedicated to her family and it was with them that she had her first sight of Australian dry country. 'At the top of the Adelaide Ranges, at a place called Accommodation Hill, you can see a huge plain stretching out all the way to the Simpson Desert. I'd never before seen anything so big that wasn't sea.'

She found it fascinating rather than

frightening. Maybe because the memory includes her father standing beside her wearing a mac. 'But he couldn't possibly have been; that's just an English carry over.' Soon after he took up gliding, and his daughter followed him. She remains a keen glider. The sport and writing intersect: 'I've seen more of Australia than most Australians—right up to the Torres Strait Islands. I've been to remote places in just about every state, retrieving gliders, pulling them out of paddocks.' Sometimes the English 'nature walks' continued in Australia. While her father went gliding, she and her moth-

er and sister went walking through orange orchards and bush. 'There weren't oak leaves or chestnuts or conkers. There was red sand and bits of bark and wombat holes that were probably rabbit holes. I like to think they were wombat holes.'

The bark and sand reappear in *The Ruthless Garden*. In one extended passage about the tending of gardens and the familiar tending of lovers (again the human and natural landscapes plait together) the memories find form. It is a splendid movement. Simons says it is one of the sections of the novel that 'wrote itself'. The words 'just came



Photo of Margaret Simons
by Bill Thomas

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out of nowhere.' She doesn't know why, and won't be drawn. But the contemplative time, the time in which words form, and coalesce, is important.

Simons is avowedly untheoretical. An English analytical tradition gives the bone structure to her language. She claims, perhaps a little disingenuously, that 'I don't even know what "postmodernism" means. It seemed to have happened when I was at Waikerie. I've used the word "deconstruct" but "postmodernism"? I went away to write a novel and when I came back people were talking about the death of the author. I thought—that was a badly timed move!'

In *The Ruthless Garden* Aboriginal history and myth are crucial. The novel pivots on them. Simons makes small claim to intimate knowledge but nonetheless she put in the groundwork at the Museum of South Australia, reading diaries, archaeology and anthropology. The novel is more subtle in consequence, in ways that have to do with shifting perspectives rather than the simple insertion of information. They are Simons' own, not Aboriginal perspectives, but it is hard to believe that she would have arrived at them without the work. They shift the novel around as surely as the view from a glider alters the way you come to know a river.

The research was part of a broad undertaking—not just background for a novel in progress. 'I always intended to do it because I wanted to see the landscape as they saw it.' Did she succeed? 'I don't think so. It told me how they lived but not how they saw things.'

IT WAS AFTER COVERING the 1988 Goondiwindi race riots, as a journalist, that Simons made the decision to become an Australian citizen. Driving back to Brisbane after a series of harrowing interviews she says she 'heard Howard on the radio saying that he didn't want a treaty because he didn't want Australia to become two countries. It was a statement that no one who had seen what I had seen could have made.' (Australia, she argues, already is two countries.)

'It was out of that that I decided to become an Australian citizen. If this country's problems upset me so much

then it was my country.'

One of her present preoccupations is to build links between the very short period of white-settlement history in Australia and the millennia of Aboriginal history. Part of the impetus comes from a conviction about the way in which her English heritage and identity are grounded in place. 'My mother comes from Kent. You could call her "a Kentish lass", with all the identifying reverberations of that phrase. My father comes from Derbyshire, near the plague village.'

The naming of place gives a part of the history. These people came from here. This is what they meant. These were their traditions. Non-Aboriginal Australians are shallow-rooted by comparison. Simons is searching for ways to connect, to gain knowledge of the communities that have lived here. 'It is us in this land,' she says. 'How are we to be?'

In her own fiction one of the answers to the question comes through metaphor. 'Metaphor is what it is all about, for us, for Aborigines,' she says. In *The Ruthless Garden* the small victories, the occasional easings are achieved by metaphorical sleight of hand, as profound as it is tricky. Characters who stand askew on the red sand begin to learn that their rhythms and shapes and textures can find echoes in the land, be accommodated in it, then take it into themselves.

What Simons asserts most powerfully is that there are precedents, if only we can learn them: 'Athens grew older... As an adult she came to the Riverland and the farmhouse on the cliff, which (although she didn't know it) overlooked the spot where not so long before the Ngawait had come silently at dusk in their canoes of tree-skin, a little fire burning in the bow on a hearth of clay. They knew that pitted cliff. It turned golden in the afternoon sun. A man dived down at that exact spot. There, the Ngawait knew, was the underwater hole where the fish lived. The man placed a springy net, made from bark and rushes, over the hole and poked in with a spear. Out swam the fish into the net, as they knew it would.'

Morag Fraser is the editor of *Eureka Street*.

What survives of Larkin

Philip Larkin, *A Writer's Life*, Andrew Motion, Faber & Faber, London, 1993. ISBN 0 571 15174 4 RRP \$39.95

BEST TO BEGIN WITH THE POETRY. What comes later is not so appealing. When I came back to the poems in the course of reading this life and the *Selected Letters*—never having admired Larkin much before—I was struck simply by how *well-made* they are, how necessary their craft. Here are the last lines of *Friday Night in the Station Hotel*:

... all the salesmen have gone back
to Leeds
Leaving full ashtrays in the
Conference Room

In shoeless corridors, the lights
burn. How
Isolated, like a fort it is—
The headed paper, made for writ-
ing home
(If home existed) letters of exile:
Now
Night comes on. Waves fold be-
hind villages.

But it was not for these things alone that Larkin was loved. Rather, a gift for beginning with the most lapidary ordinariness,

I work all day, and get half drunk at
night

leading us into finely wrought structures of argument and observation: what we all might say, if only we could.

Andrew Motion has done an impressive job in bringing us the creator of these poems. Although his book hasn't the flair, the narrative drive of, say, Marr's *Patrick White, A Life*, it remains a judicious and well-written account of Larkin's life. An awful life, really. Not spectacularly so, like Genet's or Christina Stead's, but in an entirely mundane, rather tacky way: work, drinking, unhappy love affairs. It is also not a career that Larkin himself comes out of particularly well, especially in his relationships with



women. (It is for this and not for the rancour in the letters that whoever judges these things will make up his or her mind.)

But also terrifying, all the more so for being so commonplace: the transformation of a flamboyant, 'unmistakable' dandy, an aesthete and worshipper of Lawrence, to someone of whom Motion remarks 'As his 50th birthday approached, colleagues in the university could have been forgiven for thinking he was lumbering towards his 60th: heavily jowled, bald, cut off from the world by thick black-framed glasses and one—sometimes two—hearing aids.' Deeply provincial, as well: not merely Hull, the city in which Larkin spent most of his life and became a kind of trademark for him, but Wellington, Leicester, Belfast. London was Lords, and the theatre and, later, ceremonial dinners and awards. When at one stage Larkin thought to leave Hull he applied for a job at Reading University Library.

Larkin was born in Coventry, where his father was City Treasurer. His father was a difficult, rather strange man: aloof, impatient, a Nazi sympathiser even during the war. Motion tells us 'As late as 1939, Sydney had Nazi regalia decorating his office in City Hall, and when war was declared he was ordered by the Town Clerk to remove it.' Larkin's mother was pas-

sive, diffident. It was an image of married life that appalled Larkin and stayed with him all his life: in 1946 he wrote 'At 1.45 p.m. let me remember that the only married state I intimately know (i.e. that of my parents) is bloody hell. Never must it be forgotten.' And, most famously:

They fuck you up, your mum and
dad.

But Sydney was also a great reader, holding rather advanced tastes for his time: the house was full of books by Bennett and Wells and Lawrence. This early familiarity with books perhaps in part encouraged Larkin in his later view that 'the only qualification required for reading poetry [is]... the understanding of the language it is written in, and a feeling heart'. It is, after all, easy to believe in the naturalness of what comes most naturally to you. Literature was his only very successful subject at school, and he had a poem accepted by *The Listener* in his first term at St John's College, Oxford.

He did not much enjoy his time at Oxford. Short-sightedness kept him out of the war, and the university was empty and dreary. Beneath his flamboyant manner of dress he was deeply shy. Girls terrified him, and their absence unusually prolonged the usual adolescent homosexual phase.

This is not speculation on my part or on Motion's: the details—dreams, and a fragment of a short story—were recorded by Larkin himself. (While the outward facts are dreary enough, the book remains compelling simply because Larkin keenly recorded his inner life; his diaries were destroyed but he left other autobiographical traces, and of course, the letters.)

It was at Oxford that Larkin met Kingsley Amis, his great friend and—sort of—enemy. Their friendship was founded at first on a similar debunking view of the world. Part of their revulsion from sentimentality includ-

ed a pretty coarse attitude to the relations between the sexes. Which is putting it mildly:

'Don't you think it's ABSOLUTELY SHAMEFUL that men have to pay for women without BEING ABLE TO SHAG the women afterwards AS A MATTER OF COURSE?'

Unpleasant, of course, but in context also pathetic. With their complicity was also competitiveness. In some ways Kingsley was everything Larkin wanted to be: handsome, very successful with women, with an acclaimed and lucrative career as a novelist. In later life Larkin had only to hear Amis' voice on the radio, talking about jazz (his own speciality) to think himself 'a corpse eaten out with envy, impotence, inefficiency, laziness, lechery, envy, fear, baldness, bad circulation, bitterness, bittiness, envy, sycophancy, deceit, nostalgia, etc.'

The pattern of Larkin's life was established virtually as soon as he left Oxford in 1943. Knocked back by the civil service, he applied for and got a job at the library in the small Midlands town of Wellington, got engaged to and broke off with a regular borrower from the library, Ruth Bowman. After similar jobs at Belfast and Leicester University College libraries, he arrived in Hull in 1954, with two moderately successful novels and two books of verse under his belt.

The poetry written up to this time shows only in flashes the qualities later to be identified as Larkinesque. He had not entirely shaken off the influence of Yeats and Auden; and he had not let the influence of Hardy's attachment to the everyday fully into his language. But from the start his poetry attracted attention. His third attempt at a novel, on the other hand, failed dismally after three drafts. Larkin was, I think, in the end simply too self-absorbed to be a very good novelist, and what remained of his gift for fiction was eventually wholly subsumed in the poetry. (Think how *The Whitsun Weddings*, and *Dockery and Son* are rather like the short story of small incident or epiphany—one of his favourite authors when young was Katherine Mansfield—and on those terms alone put most prose examples of this manner to shame.)

Larkin's early fear of marriage resurfaced in his relationship with Mon-

ica Jones, a lecturer in English he met while working in Leicester. They spent the rest of their life together, but only at the very end lived in the same house, and then only on the pretext of Monica's illness. They had a no-nonsense, companionable relationship. (When Larkin was first pointed out to Monica in the senior common room at Leicester her first remark was, 'He looks like a snorer.')

They enjoyed private games: one winter holiday they spent changing every single sentence in an Iris Murdoch novel to filthy *double-entendres*. But on Larkin's side there was an ambivalence that never lessened (he seemed not to mind very much Kingsley Amis' spiteful, misogynistic portrait of Monica in *Lucky Jim*) and that resulted finally in much suffering all round.

It is interesting to learn how deeply committed to his work as a librarian Larkin was. From the poetry, one half-assumed that it was just another job. But in fact Larkin was extraordinarily assiduous and active in his time at Hull University. He set up a poetry fellowship whose recipients included Peter Porter and Douglas Dunn, helped to set up a *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, and almost immediately after taking on the job set himself the task of overseeing an extensive new building program. A colleague, 'while recognising that Larkin exploited his own innocence of matters architectural in order to get what he wanted, was "astonished" by the amount of expert knowledge he quickly acquired'.

HULL ALSO BROUGHT HIM INTO CONTACT with Maeve Brennan, a junior colleague at the library. For the next 20-odd years his relationship with her waxed and waned alongside that with Monica. Maeve was a Catholic, and refused to sleep with him until late on in the piece. But outside that—in part because of it—their relationship gave Larkin the romantic thrill his affair with Monica could not. Possibly, and rather paradoxically—Motion doesn't raise this himself—her day-to-day proximity in the library gave him also some of the regularity he so feared in actual marriage.

Larkin did pretty well out of these two women. Maeve remarked rather bitterly to Motion that Larkin had the

best years of her life, curiously repeating a warning made to Larkin's fiancée by her disapproving parents. His letters to Monica at one of the first crises after the arrival of Maeve are not pleasant reading: lots of explaining and hand-wringing, not much prospect of action. Larkin seems in some ways to have been a to-understand-all-is-to-forgive-all kind of person: a rather novelistic view of the moral life, one might say.

The letters quoted here are far worse in their way than the racism and pornophilia that caused such a fuss in the *Selected Letters* (and apparently led to calls for Larkin's poetry to be taken off the school syllabus, with that weak-minded Hegelianism that gets poetry and ideology and their psychosocial effects all mixed up together. As if Proust's love of Wagner turned him into a pan-Germanic anti-Semite!) Motion here rather loses his patience with Larkin, calling him at one point 'not so much a reformed character, as a more self-tormenting liar'. He is also, more tendentiously, sharply disapproving of Larkin's pro-Thatcher sentiments—though if you actually had to live surrounded by the horrors inflicted by that government, objectivity might be harder to call upon.

The last 15 or so years of Larkin's life were increasingly sombre. He was by now famous and acclaimed, a national monument, involved more in awards and competitions, the public face of literature. But as the '70s went on, he became less and less interested in his work, drank more, and, most crushingly of all, found it harder and harder to write. His last book, *High Windows*, collected poems up to 10 years old. His last great poem, *Aubade* is a moving record of his fear of death. He lived in an enormous, ugly house. Larkin finally broke off with Maeve as Monica's health deteriorated and she gave up her own house outside Leicester to stay with him. They lived on booze and tomato sandwiches. His death was piteous and slightly tacky, in the modern manner. He was 63, the same age as the father whose character he had increasingly come to share.

Owen Richardson is a co-editor of *Scripta*.

Hope without promise

An Unpromised Land: Australia's North-West—A New Homeland, Leon Gettler, Fremantle Arts Centre Press (paperback) 1993. ISBN 1 86368 033 0 RRP \$16.95

TODAY IT WOULD BE CALLED ethnic cleansing, but in 1881, when Russian anti-Semites launched a wave of attacks on 160 Jewish communities, the word was 'pogrom'.

How to react to the threat of the pogromists became the central question for European Jewry. Many took the practical way out and joined the millions embarking for the United States. Some, especially the more affluent, became ever more adamant that they should assimilate into gentile society.

Among the remainder, fierce debate raged. On the left, the Bolsheviks and Bundists maintained that the response to anti-Semitism was to stand and fight; that the struggle against racism was linked with that against capitalism itself. The Bundists, with their policy of Jewish cultural autonomy, commanded majority support among Polish Jews as late as 1939. Their main opposition came from the Zionists, an initially small minority of Jewish activists who argued that anti-Semitism could not be overcome. The solution for Jews lay in leaving Europe to establish a Jewish national state in Palestine.

Between the two wings lay the Territorialists. Like the Zionists, they believed Jews had no option but to leave Europe. However, they rejected the nationalism implicit in state-building and, like the Bundists, looked to cultural autonomy within an otherwise mixed society.

Before their movement was rendered redundant by the establishment of Israel in 1948, they came tantalisingly close to fulfilling their hopes in, of all places, the Kimberleys region of Western Australia. It is with this footnote of Jewish, and Australian, history that Leon Gettler's book, *An Unpromised Land*, is concerned.

Difficult to reach overland, remote from the main population centres and markets, the Kimberleys by the 1930s were still (in white terms) woefully

underdeveloped. For Australian governments this posed a double problem—a region with rich economic prospects was going unexploited, and the resultant underpopulation fed White Australia paranoia that an empty north would open the country up to invasion by the 'Asian hordes'.

Into this vacuum strode Dr Isaac Steinberg, Russian revolutionary turned Territorialist leader. Gettler paints a portrait of a remarkable man, a playwright, politician, philosopher and jurist who by sheer force of personality and willpower came surprisingly close to turning Australian migration policy in his favour. Steinberg arrived in WA in 1939 and, once convinced that the Kimberleys did indeed have the potential to sustain a Jewish settlement, set out to win those with influence to his cause.

Within weeks, he had made allies of *The West Australian newspaper*, trade union leaders, State politicians, the Anglican leader, Archbishop Le Fanu, and more. The Labor paper, the *Westralian Worker*, summed up an increasingly popular sentiment when it wrote: 'The presence of Dr Steinberg in Australia brings closer to us the persecutions now being suffered by the Jews in totalitarian countries and his mission is one to which it is impossible to remain indifferent.'

There were, of course, opponents. Some expressed practical concerns about the viability of such a project in such an isolated area. Many more were motivated by anti-Semitic notions that 'aliens' would undermine homogeneous Anglo-Celtic culture. The outbreak of World War II made little difference; indeed, anti-Jewish propagandists now argued against immigration on the grounds that the Nazis could infiltrate agents among the refugees. Gettler notes one bizarre report, appropriately published in *Truth*, that Jews in a Carlton factory had gloated over German victories.

But the nature of Australian rac-



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ism, based on the notion of Australia as a bastion of white civilisation on the edge of Asia, contained an ambiguity that worked in Steinberg's favour. For many, if people of Anglo-Celtic stock could not be persuaded to populate the north, a second-best proposition was to consider Jews as 'honorary whites' and allow them to secure the frontier on whites' behalf. As one letter in *The West Australian* put it: 'Would it not be better to have had a Palestine in Western Australia to help us defend the empty north against invaders.'

The challenge for Steinberg was to mobilise the friendly element of Australian conservatism against the hostile. It was a challenge that failed. Despite support from the WA state government and a considerable body of allies, he fell at the hurdle that mattered—approval by the federal government. In 1944, after much prevarication, Canberra gave its final decision. Prime Minister Curtin wrote that his government could not 'see its way to depart from the long-established policy in regard to alien settlement in Australia'.

The project could never have been a solution to the horrors of the Holocaust; at most, Steinberg hoped to take 75,000 refugees. But considering the federal government's miserly ap-

proach to prewar Jewish immigration, even that figure 'would have been a substantial improvement'.

Gettler clearly regrets the project's failure. Apportioning blame is more difficult. Suspicions raised by Steinberg's radical background, the role of key public servants, the hostility of Australian Zionists who resented the competition the plan represented—all played their part. But the single biggest factor was probably the reluctance of Australian governments to

open the doors to non-Anglo-Celtic refugees. Cambodian boat people, sitting in compounds not so very far from where Steinberg would have founded his settlement, may feel that Canberra has yet to learn the lesson. ■

David Glanz is a freelance journalist.

• *An Unpromised Land* won the 1993 Lysbeth Cohen award for contributions by a Jewish writer to the Australian way of life.

BOOKS

LEON GETTLER

The melody lingers

The New Left, The Jews and The Vietnam War, 1965-1972,
Philip Mendes, Lazare Press, 1993. ISBN 0 646 13389 6 RRP \$20.00

I LIKE TO THINK OF 1 May 1973 as a night to remember. That was when I played *Solidarity Forever* on the piano at SKIF for Frank Crean. I was inspired, attacking the union hymn with more gusto than finesse; Crean's presence was an act of communion, a celebration of hope for the future.

SKIF was the youth wing of the Jewish Bund, a democratic socialist organisation established in the 1890s to represent Jewish workers in revolutionary Eastern Europe. A member of the Socialist International, the Bund had ties to the ALP. But it was also fiercely anti-communist. So when we marched against the Vietnam War as Jewish socialists, our elders accused us of naiveté. The New Left, they said, was just the Old Left in drag.

Such are the complexities of Jewish radicalism, a tradition which for nearly two centuries has provided theorists and activists such as Marx, Trotsky, Lassalle and Goldman.

Philip Mendes' book *The New Left, The Jews and The Vietnam War 1965-1972*, examines these and similar issues that confronted Jewish students in Melbourne's anti-Vietnam War movement during the late '60s and early '70s. They ranged from Maoists like Albert Langer to the conservative

commentator Robert Manne, who was briefly with the left in the mid-60s. Whatever convictions they had, their involvement was disproportionate to the numbers on campus. At Monash University alone, about one in five left-wing activists were said to be Jewish, and most of them were in the hardline Left. As one historian later commented: 'There were enough Jews in the Labour Club to give (League of Rights leader) Eric Butler nightmares.'

Mendes identifies this experience as one of the first examples of large-scale involvement in the political process by an ethnic group during the pre-multicultural era.

In a case study of 28 former student radicals, he finds that the majority had come from left-wing immigrant backgrounds. The key political issues that defined their involvement were in many cases inseparable from their Jewish culture. Melbourne University Labour Club activist Doug Kirsner challenged the moral conscience of Australians: 'How different is our silence on Vietnam with the complicity of many German people during the Nazi regime?'

Another dissident, Elliot Gingold, condemned the South African government as 'only one step better than

the Nazis'. And Tom Wolkenberg, who has been active on Aboriginal issues, said: 'The Jewish heritage of oppression led me to identify closely with the Aborigines. It continues to disgust me that not more Jews are involved.'

The Arab-Israeli conflict and left-wing hostility towards Israel created inevitable tensions. Most of the activists in Mendes' case study were either Socialist Zionist ('Jews have to emigrate to Israel to guarantee the survival of the Jewish people and that survival should be on as egalitarian a basis as possible') or supporters of a two-state solution ('I've always believed that the Israeli people have a right to exist and a right to their country. So have the Palestinians.'). But a significant number of their peers were uninterested or even opposed. ('It's impossible to be both a Zionist and left-wing,' said Albert Langer).

The rise of anti-Zionism on the left, and with it signs of anti-semitism, saw the emergence of specifically Jewish radical groups such as the Radical Zionist Alliance and the magazine 'Survival'. Mendes identifies these as 'early multicultural trends in the monocultural left'.

Jewish student radicalism seems to have been more pronounced in Melbourne than in Sydney. Melbourne had more Jewish migrants from the radical environment of Eastern Europe, and Sydney got more Hungarians and Germans. Although Jews were involved in Sydney's new left, their peers came from less ideologically-charged traditions than those who settled in Melbourne.

Student radicalism of any sort is now dead. And the trend towards middle-class status, the waning influence of an immigrant left tradition, and the anti-Zionist expressions by the left have seen Australia's Jewish community become more conservative. During the past two decades, its political activity has focused largely on issues affecting Jews and in particular, Israel.

I hope that Mendes' study will be the first step towards questioning this reluctance to find common cause with broader society. ■

Leon Gettler is a journalist and reviewer.

Life on the junk pile

Highly Confident: The Crime and Punishment of Michael Milken, Jesse Kornbluth, Bookman Press, Melbourne 1992, ISBN 1 86395 004 4

MICHAEL MILKEN is a Californian financier who wore a fairly obvious toupee and earned more than \$US714 million in 1986, easily topping Al Capone's record for gross income in a single year. Milken again made history in 1990 when he was fined \$200 million, the biggest fine imposed on an individual. His employer, Drexel Burnham Lambert, was fined \$650 million.

In the beginning, Milken was a middle-class nerd from Los Angeles, a mathematics wizard who was obsessed by the bond market—the IOUs that governments and firms issue to raise money. US finance markets traditionally focused on bonds issued by the 1000 biggest companies, but Milken twigged that the right choice of 'junk bonds' issued by medium-size businesses outperformed bonds with better investment ratings. Junk bonds also paid higher interest to investors and a fatter commission to agents, because they were perceived as a higher-risk investment.

The young Milken wrote an unpublished article for *The New York Times*: 'Unlike other crusaders from Berkeley, I have chosen Wall Street as my battle ground for improving society. It is here that governments, institutions and industries are financed.' This avowal of crusader status sits uneasily with Milken's 1986 take-home pay of \$550 million.

Junk bonds no doubt helped many legitimate businesses, with limited equity but plenty of cash flow and ambition, to expand. But they also funded 'arbitrageurs' like Ivan Boesky, who bought into companies lined up for takeover offers, or made nuisance offers of his own and had to be paid to go away. The bonds helped fund hostile takeovers, such as the \$US25 billion bid for R.J.R. Nabisco in 1988, in which old companies were saddled with new debt. In Australia, junk bonds raised \$A400 million towards Warwick Fairfax's ill-fated bid for John

Fairfax. The minnow could now swallow the whale, and Drexel Burnham Lambert's standard letter to banks that it was 'highly confident' of raising money for another improbable takeover struck fear into America's boardrooms.

Highly Confident suggests the US establishment—Wall Street, the legislators and the regulators—were out to get Milken and that is probably true. An insider trader who had been caught by chance dobbed in Ivan Boesky, who then dobbed in Milken to get a better deal for himself, secretly taping his talks with the junk-bond king. The US government filed a criminal racketeering and fraud suit against Milken in 1986, but he pleaded guilty three-and-a-half years later to civil charges on comparatively minor secu-

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rities offences that did *not* include insider trading. He was fined \$200 million and sentenced to 10 years' jail.

I can accept the book's suggestion that the media were often manipulated by the prosecution. Some hacks were clearly biased against Milken and his \$200 million fine and 10 years' jail is out of proportion with the judge's ruling that Milken caused only \$308,000 damage in the matters before the court. But, under pressure or not, he pleaded guilty and read an admission in open court. Many's the crim who has been convicted on true charges and false evidence: rule number one is to not claim you've been set up because the judge and jury won't believe it and it'll count against you.

Milken is painted as a clean-living, loving husband and father who sincerely gave time and money to charity. He 'looks like an economics professor who will never be a panelist on a Sunday morning talk show. Everything about him screams off-the-rack. There's a second button on the cuff of his blue Oxford shirt, a sure sign that it was bought at a department store ...' In contrast, Boesky sits behind a console of 300 direct-dial buttons in an office built for the Shah of Iran. 'Talk about a Faustian scene ... what really mesmerised visitors was what they saw as they faced Boesky. There through the cast window and seeming almost to frame his vulpine profile, were three giant numerals on the next building—666 the Satanic number.'

The author, Jesse Kornbluth, is a contributing editor of *Vanity Fair* who got a break on other journalists by being a neighbour of Milken's press mouthpiece. Kornbluth is more sympathetic than the authors of two previous books on Milken (*The Predator's Ball* and *Den of Thieves*), but writes in the style of the celebrity interviews in *Vanity Fair* under the editorship of Tina Brown, in which the subjects' view of their own importance is generally swallowed whole and regurgitated by the reader. You read about a few warts, but the image is bigger than Ben Hur. Kornbluth makes improbable claims, as when he suggests that a prosecutor was more ambitious than Madonna.

The book is hard to follow because it does not give a simple list of the

major players at the front. It has limited footnotes and does not give detailed sources at the back as in Bob Woodward's recent investigative works. Kornbluth also makes big assumptions, such as when he claims that Milken exposes his bald pate during an interview in jail in a 'thoughtful, obviously premeditated gesture ... Milken's decision to remove the baseball cap strikes me as a way of announcing that he has nothing to hide. After years of evasive conversation and unenlightening interviews, he wants to be heard ...' Maybe, but maybe Milken just wanted to take his cap off—the jailers did take away his toupee, after all. Kornbluth also reckons that Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* is the 'best explication of the human dimension of securities crime' he has encountered; To me, this is like saying *The Magic Pudding* is a good five-year plan for food production. Maybe he should have spoken to more ordinary people trapped at the other end of the financial food chain.

Drexel Burnham Lambert collapsed soon after it copped the \$650 million fine, as did many other businesses and deals financed by junk bonds. The bonds themselves have since recovered and the Milken family is convinced that Michael was a misunderstood genius whose time will come. Kornbluth reckons that Milken's responsibility is more cultural than criminal: he let himself be turned into a cult by people who were making money off his back. 'Milken is a tragic figure ... because it never worried him that he might be breaking the law. In his heyday, he threw off great ideas all day long. It was the ideas he lived for. Goony as it sounds, the mental excitement those ideas generated—and, of course, their ability to bring him hundreds of millions of legitimately earned dollars—blinded him to such mundane considerations as bookkeeping and disclosure regulations and other, seemingly trivial securities laws.'

Kornbluth seems amazed that John Kenneth Galbraith dispatched Milken in a single paragraph in a shortish book about 'financial euphoria' as an example of the financial schemers who appear, almost on cue, every 20 years. 'Milken's competence and superior diligence as a salesman, sometimes

called promoter, is not in doubt,' wrote Galbraith, 'but the discovery that high-risk bonds leveraged on limited assets should have a higher interest rate hardly stands on a par as an invention with the electric light.'

The higher circles of US government, business and law enforcement, as portrayed by Kornbluth, show disturbing signs of egomania, sexism, and anti-Semitism; mentally they seem to be in the Skull and Bones Club at Yale, or its equivalents elsewhere. There's also a blurred line between fiction and reality: an accused financier appears at a conference with prosecutor's wearing a cap saying 'Shit Happens' and a T-shirt calling for the release of Sherman McCoy, the hero of Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*. Milken's wife sees the movie *Reversal of Fortune* about Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz defending Claus von Bulow, and Dershowitz is hired by Milken. Reagan Attorney-General Ed Meese suggests that Ebenezer Scrooge suffered from bad press because 'if you really look at the facts, he didn't exploit Bob Cratchit'.

The trial judge, Kimba Wood, is the only explicit link to Australia, being named after the obscure South Australian town rather than the white lion of cartoon fame. Judge Wood later ruled herself out as Attorney-General in the Clinton administration after revealing that she, too, had used illegal aliens, as baby sitters.

The book has other interesting trivia, such as Milken meeting Mikhail Gorbachev and musing that Reagan and Bush would make very good leaders of the Soviet Union, while Gorbachev might make a better-than-average President of the United States. And Kornbluth reports that Michael Jackson sat in on maths classes taught by Milken.

But Kornbluth's biggest mistake is believing that it would have been more appropriate to fine Milken rather than send him to jail. In the US, as in Australia, too many people think that someone who holds up a service station is a 'real' criminal, but someone who rorts the stock market is not. ■

Mark Skulley is a former business reporter for the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

Seize the Dae

'W E'RE ON THE BRINK of a brand new day.' So the song goes in the musical play by Jimmy Chi and Kuckles, *Bran Nu Dae*, which uses country music, soul, rap, Christian hymns, '60s psychedelia, and Aboriginal and Asian motifs to tell a story of racism and exile.

The setting is Broome, which has always been an ethnic meltingpot: Aborigines, Melanesians, Indonesians, Malays, Chinese, Japanese and Europeans were all drawn to the town's lucrative pearling industry. When everybody is a member of a minority group, it is sometimes easier to create an atmosphere of freedom and tolerance.

Jimmy Chi is a survivor of the mission system established in the Kimberleys a century ago. Like many Aborigines, he was taken from his family as a child and placed on a mission station; later, having been expelled from the mission for 'nicking a couple of things', he was sent to Perth to be educated. Eventually, Chi found himself homeless on the streets.

His search for his Aboriginality is the basis of *Bran Nu Dae*, which has continued to enjoy critical and audience acclaim since its premiere at the 1990 Festival of Perth. At first sponsored by the WA Theatre Company, the play has been taken on tour round Australia by a separate company, Bran Nu Dae Productions. The tour is soon to move overseas—to Singapore in May next year, and later to the United States, Hong Kong and Japan.

Chi, a graduate of Adelaide's Centre for Aboriginal Studies in Music, wrote most of the music in *Bran Nu Dae* 10 years ago. It is a 'message' play, about oppression and resistance, but the politics are conveyed through a

personal story and an upbeat score that leaves its audience successively confused, distressed, appalled, and—finally—euphoric.

Alice Haines, who plays the part of Rosie, is originally from Tasmania. She moved to Sydney to sing with the Aboriginal band Mixed Relations, and came across *Bran Nu Dae* at the second Black Playwrights' Conference in 1989.

ALICE HOPES *Bran Nu Dae* will inspire other Aborigines to get involved in the performing arts—to show them that there's a career out there that we can tap into, and a career that doesn't sacrifice our culture. 'When I told my mum I wanted to be a singer, she didn't know what to say. It was like it was too far from reality—a dream that could never come true'.

Haines' determination expresses not only her passion for music and a pride in Aboriginal culture, but an

acknowledgment of what she's up against. 'I've got the double discrimination of being black and female, so that disciplines me because I know

Makers of *Bran Nu Dae*, from left: Jimmy Chi, Trevor Jamieson, Alice Haines and Heath Burgeson.

I have to work a lot harder to get what I want.' It pays to be a dreamer: when the season closes, Haines will start work on an album about black women.

Trevor Jamieson, who plays Willie, the character based on Jimmy Chi, was greatly encouraged by family and friends in Esperance. His aunt raised money among the community to send him to Perth for the *Bran Nu Dae* auditions, and Jamieson became a local hero. 'Wow, mate,' his friends told him, 'you're better than Ernie Dingo.'

Heath Burgeson, from Derby, is Jamieson's understudy. Burgeson's approach to Willie is a deeply personal one. He too was adopted into a white

family, and is still looking for his Aboriginal relatives. Burgeson sees *Bran Nu Dae* as important not just to set the record straight, but because it is a bridge between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia. 'It's to educate white audiences and inspire minorities', he says. 'Aboriginal people are pretty shy, so when they see us performing they feel stronger and start doing things.'

Heath Burgeson has been building bridges for years. He used to go busking in Perth's Hay Street Mall, playing the didgeridoo, and was invited to teach the didgeridoo in primary schools. 'I'd play them a tune, and show them how it works. It's good to teach young kids about Aboriginal culture before they learn that Captain Cook came here to tame a bunch of savages.'

So *Bran Nu Dae*, its writers and its cast are a success, as are other black performers like Yothu Yindi, Archie Roach and Kev Carmody. But it's been a hard slog. Why is white Australia only now beginning to listen to black artists? Alice Haines believes it's because 'the industry has conned on to the fact that there's money to be made. Some people want to understand Aboriginal history, but it's basically money. That's a bit sad, but it's also good for us because we're getting a chance to come through.'

Donna Sue Robson is a freelance journalist.

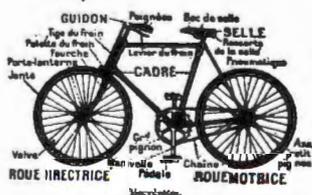
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Stages on life's way

Recollections at Play: a Life in Australian Theatre, John Sumner, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne 1993. ISBN 0 522 84494 4. RRP \$29.95

AS A THEATRE REVIEWER grappling with the Melbourne Theatre Company's 40th anniversary season at Russell Street Theatre and the Playhouse, I was hardly surprised when this extraordinary memoir from that company's founder, John Sumner, crossed my desk.

As a former employee of this most disciplined of taskmasters, I also knew of his exemplary sense of timing and feel for occasion. Sumner always expected things to be done to his standards, on time and to the tightest of budgets. But he could also always be relied upon to deliver the goods himself—and to have sniffed out the best time and place at which to deliver them. Thus it is with *Recollections at Play*.

And thus it was that he arrived in Australia to take up a humble job as manager of Melbourne University's Union Theatre in 1952, at a time when commercial productions of overseas hits were the principal source of entertainment for the city's theatre-going public. Reading this chronicle of the development of Australian professional theatre from the perspective of 1993, when commercial productions of overseas hits (by the Andrew Lloyd-Webbers and Cameron Mackintoshes) once more dominate Melbourne's theatrical landscape, one might be tempted to observe that little has changed.

But Sumner's readable (though over-long) and informative (if largely anecdotal) account of those years reminds us of how much really has changed in Australian (and not just Melbourne) theatre in the four decades since his arrival.

In 376 pages of dense text (illus-

trated with some marvellous black-and-white archival photographs, cast lists, repertoire lists and facsimiles of old posters, tickets and box-office records), Sumner painstakingly details the gradual development of the pioneering Union Theatre Repertory Company and its successor, the MTC. Along the way, he also tells of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust, the National Institute of Dramatic Art, the Victorian Arts Centre and a host of other organisations, playwrights, 'artists' (as he was wont to call actors when he wasn't calling them 'boy'), directors, designers and administrators.

Sumner reveals a lot about his great loves in the theatre, especially lighting and other technical aspects of the craft, and favoured playwrights like G.B. Shaw; the burgeoning Australian drama that Sumner did so much to nurture; his obsession with 'standards' and 'professionalism', some of his pet hates (especially in his struggles with the media and bureaucracies of all kinds); and many of his personal joys and disappointments. On the latter subject, though, much of the private man remains as private now as it was on the day he delayed the resumption of a rehearsal by a couple of minutes because of a lunch-time marriage ceremony.

John Sumner's career was remarkable, and his *Recollections* are at times compelling reading. Next month, I shall return to the 40th anniversary season of the company over which he presided for so long.

Geoffrey Milne is head of the division of drama at La Trobe University and a drama critic for the ABC.

**This is not
a picture of
a dinosaur.
We thought
you might
like a break.**

FLASH IN THE PAN

Monster attraction

Jurassic Park, dir. Steven Spielberg (Greater Union). Spielberg, the director or producer of six of the top 20 movies of all time (judging by financial criteria, of course) has never won an Oscar. Will this be his year, as record crowds pack cinemas the world over to view his latest spectacular, *Jurassic Park*?

And make no mistake, spectacular it is. In what is really a cross between *Jaws* (with claws) and *Indiana Jones*, the dinosaurs are the stars. Sam Neill and Laura Dern can do little to impose their presence on the film, and neither can Richard Attenborough and the amusing Jeff Goldblum. If it's axiomatic that actors should never work with animals or kids, dinosaurs are definitely out. These creatures are remarkable models, the result of two years' research and development by a 60-strong team of designers, engineers, puppeteers and computer animators; they will terrify, or win the hearts of, most viewers.

The story, in case you have lived in seclusion for the past couple of months, is based on Michael Crichton's best-selling novel about a wealthy eccentric who succeeds in 're-creating' several species of extinct dinosaur by means of DNA extracted from a 130 million-year-old fossilised mosquito. Predictably, however, human greed enters the picture, things go wrong, and the plot builds into a classic humans v. animals battle.

Minimal intellectual energy is needed to stay with all of this,

although, to be fair to Crichton and Spielberg, *Jurassic Park* does attempt a warning of sorts about the perils of scientific adventurism in genetic engineering.

So will this stunning piece of entertainment win Spielberg that elusive Oscar? I doubt it, although Tyrannosaurus Rex might get a best-actor nomination, and the two child actors, Ariana Richards and Joseph Mazzello, are also great.

A note of caution to parents: very young children will probably be frightened by a couple of scenes in the film.

—Brad Halse

Not on your life

This Is My Life, dir. Nora Ephron (independent cinemas). Nora Ephron wrote the screenplay for *Silkwood*, and this is her first attempt at direct-

**Eureka Street
Film Competition**

In the face of the great reptilian onslaught, *Eureka Street* wishes to stress one thing: *they're* all dead, and we're not. So there. But, lest we seem churlish, this month we invite you to send us your worst dinosaur joke. The one we like best (i.e. least) wins two tickets to the film of your choice (and you're not allowed to use the jokes from the film). The winner of June-July's competition was Melissa Eaton, of



Glebe, NSW, who thought that the tender Western dialogue went like this:

Tom: Ah guess you're wondrin' what ah got under ma hat.

Patsy: It ain't the hat ah'm worried about.

ing. Together with Delia Ephron, she has adapted a novel about a single mother, Dottie Ingels (Julie Kavner), who progresses from the cosmetics

sales counter at Macy's to a glamorous career as a stand-up comic. In the process Dottie teaches her two daughters a series of 'life lessons', among them the fact 'that you're only ever two phone calls away from anyone in the world'.

The characters and comedy are of the residual Jewish-American sort, endlessly deprecating and hopeful at the same time. Dan Aykroyd plays a small part, which I could only find funny when I reflected on the amazing ubiquity of paper tissues in America. Perhaps cultural differences explain why I wasn't especially amused by the stand-up routines of Dottie's stage career.

I went to see *This Is My Life* with the cries of children in my ears ('Will you be home late?'), and on the way read a newspaper columnist's account of her son's congenital untidiness (why did I bother, and why did she bother writing it?), so I was already deep in the business of mothers and children by the time the opening credits were rolling. The problem is that in life there is no resolution, just tragi-comedy, whereas in films one expects the tragi-comedy to be resolved in either or both aspects. *This Is My Life* has no resolution, and revolves round moments (the elder daughter's first sexual encounter) and individuals (a cardboard cutout father) that are, simply, comic clichés.

—Margaret Coffey

Icemen cometh

Children of Nature, dir. Fridrik Thor Fridriksson (independent cinemas), is a treat for the jaded—a reminder that it is still possible to experience delighted *surprise* in the cinema, and that in film-making, as in any art, the highest achievements are often also the simplest. The film tells the story of an old farmer from northern Iceland (Gisli Halldorsson), who decides to spend his remaining years with his daughter and her family in Reykjavik. But his ways irritate them, and they find a place for him in a nursing home instead.

Up to this point, *Children of Nature* could be any film about being old and unwanted, except that the actors speak Icelandic and Halldors-

son does a better job than most who have had such roles. But in the nursing home the old man meets his first love (Sigridur Hagalin), and the pair decide to run away together, seeking their childhood village among the country's remote western fjords.

They steal a jeep and what follows is a kind of old people's road movie, which sounds funny and sometimes is, but it is a gentle humour. In keeping with the road-movie genre, the physical journey becomes a metaphor for a psychological one, and as the old couple travel through a bewitchingly beautiful Icelandic wilderness they are gradually taken back by the land that gave them birth.

What began as a piece of gritty cinematic realism ends as a piece of pagan spiritual awareness, overlaid with some Christian ritual. In the hands of a lesser director, such a mixture would be a piece of New Age silliness. From Fridriksson, it is sublime.

—Ray Cassin

Damn witty chaps

Peter's Friends, dir. Kenneth Branagh (Greater Union), begs comparison with that other bitter-sweet movie about reunions, *The Big Chill*. The soundtrack is to the '80s what that of *The Big Chill* was to the '60s, and the theme—youthful promise and intimacy turned to middle-aged doubts—

is the same. But this is first and foremost an English film, part of the fitful revival of English cinema.

Those whose memory of Kenneth Branagh is of Henry V striding round a Shakespearean battlefield might get a shock to see him dressed in suspenders and a tutu in the opening scene. And Stephen Fry does what he does best—plays the effete Englishman, Peter, who brings the group together. 'I can think of no fluffier, shinier people to see in the new year with,' he says. No one in *The Big Chill* could have got away with a line like that.

This is good English comedy mixed with a sort of public-schoolboy sentiment. People stare at the toes of their boots as they deliver lines like 'You all mean a frightful lot to me, of course.' There are other stock English characters—kindhearted Maggie (why is she always called Maggie?) who dresses in cardigans and sacklike dresses, and the kindly servant who, of course, turns out to be the most together person in the movie.

The acting is good enough to make all this a very funny mix, and there are some good lines as well. In a dig at Hollywood, Branagh's character says of his fading starlet wife: 'If we stay together for five years, I get a free hair transplant and she gets a new set of breasts.' Fry replies: 'So she'll have four?' Branagh: 'Yes, but her agent gets one.'

I suspect you have to be a bit of a Pom to enjoy thoroughly this movie. I am, and I thought it was spiffing good fun.

—Margaret Simons

Beware of the dogs

Reservoir Dogs, dir. Quentin Tarantino (independent cinemas), reworks a familiar vein of American hardboiled crime fiction: honour among thieves and the heist gone wrong. It has had something of a *succès de scandale* because of its obsessive, relentlessly detailed, portrayal of violence. Or, more precisely, because of its obsession with that byproduct of violence, blood.

The sticky crimson fluid wells up constantly in *Reservoir Dogs*. People cradle their dying friends in deep pools of it, shoot other people and conduct

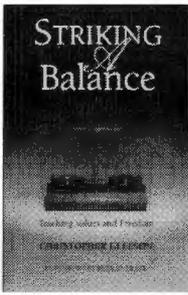
earnest conversations while lying in even deeper pools of it, and advertise their (or Tarantino's) tough-guy status by walking around smeared with it. But that's OK because the red stains look pretty good as they seep across the front of the white shirts and black ties that everyone wears, and it's all pumped out to the addictive beat of early '70s rock'n'roll.

On the basis of this musical blood-letting, and some tedious film-school exercises (the narrative is composed of flashbacks, including an imagined flashback within a flashback), Tarantino has been hailed as a new Scorsese. Nonsense. Apart from a great sound track and a key role for Harvey Keitel, there is little here that is reminiscent of the master.

The violence in films such as *Mean Streets*, *Raging Bull* and *GoodFellas* is an integral part of scenes that trace the development of character; it has a moral context, something that is only dimly present in *Reservoir Dogs*. Tarantino knows that not all his thieves can be equally honourable: there is the good bad guy (Keitel), the mean-spirited bad guy (Steve Buscemi) and the psychopath (Michael Madsen). But they are never much more than ciphers, remaining almost as opaque to us as their fake names—Mr White, Mr Pink, Mr Blue—proclaim that they are to each other.

Given their lack of substance, the film's ludicrous final shootout, in which (almost) everyone kills (almost) everyone else, so that they all collapse together like deflated dummies, amounts to an ironic deflation of Tarantino's showy, insubstantial movie.

—Ray Cassin



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Shock of the real

Passion Fish, dir. John Sayles (independent cinemas) could have been awful. As it happens, it's superb: an assured, detailed and convincing story about a daytime soap star who returns to her native Louisiana because she has become a paraplegic after being swiped by a New York cab. Mary McDonnell gives her best performance to date as May Alice Culhane, a woman whose courage and desire to live are in part restored by another needy refugee from the north, her nurse Chantelle (Alfré Woodard).

The film works by a frequent, deliberate toying with near-cliché and near-bathos. May Alice takes up a dormant interest in photography; how easy it would have been to give her an exhibition and a new career. But no, it's just a hobby, a medium-level detail. She is attracted to an old flame, who is now a local handyman; the film explores the problem of sexuality in someone paralysed below the waist, but there is no affair and no protestations of love, just a completely plausible relationship.

The same care and understatement informs the central relationship between Chantelle and May Alice. They have a friendship, of sorts, but ultimately Chantelle is there because she needs a job, and needs to escape her life in Chicago. There is a mutual need, and some warmth—the film brilliantly explores the blurred line between need and affection. At one point, a visitor mistakes Chantelle for a black family retainer. By the end of the film, that is what she has become. Family retainers are, no doubt, a Bad Thing—and Sayles (and Chantelle's father) thinks so too. But for this fictional character, in this situation, it's a good place to be. Creating a reality so specific that this can be said without sending alarming general messages is a real cinematic achievement.

—David Braddon-Mitchell

Enigma variations

Wittgenstein, dir. Derek Jarman (independent cinemas). There is something very austere about this film on the life of the Viennese philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. It is divided into short

scenes that are not connected by a smooth narrative structure, and each is filmed against a black backdrop with simple and stark lighting. This parallels Wittgenstein's style of writing (which philosophers, or anyone else for that matter, emulate at their peril): discrete paragraphs, unconnected by a smooth argumentative structure, that worry over recurrent themes; the result lends itself to as many interpretations as there are readers.

I'm not convinced that this succeeds. What underlies the film is really a simple narrative—it is a biographical documentary with pretensions. We are told about the life of Wittgenstein in a fairly conventional way, with the Wittgensteinian structure as an overlay to the narrative of a life that might have been more effectively (though more expensively) done conventionally.

The style of direction may have worked well if the film had been about Wittgenstein's thought in a more uncompromising way, but that would have been a movie for a very small market indeed. As it is, the film will leave many people puzzled at what the intellectual fuss was supposed to be about. I suppose one might come out having an idea that Wittgenstein thought it was impossible to have a private language, and that in some sense everything was private. But I'd be surprised if anyone could extract reasons for these views from the film. There are various scenes in which Wittgenstein passionately pronounces on some theme, and Russell or Keynes as spokespeople for tolerant orthodoxy mutter something along the lines of 'I say old boy, that can't be right, can it?', but these scenes don't add up to even an elementary guide to the arguments that might be reconstructed from Wittgenstein's writing. And if the film denies the view that everything is public by leaving us very puzzled about what is going on inside Wittgenstein, that's not a good enough excuse.

But there is a bit to enjoy—Michael Gough is delightful as Bertrand Russell, as is Tilda Swinton as Lady Morrell. Karl Johnson's adult Wittgenstein is pretty good, too. I think the blame lies elsewhere if he comes across almost as an upmarket Kahlil Gibran. Perhaps some of it, just a little, lies with Wittgenstein himself.

—David Braddon-Mitchell

Widen the network ...



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Passing the test of time

SOME NEWS STORIES just give you a warm feeling inside. According to one I read recently, so many mechanisms in new cars are now controlled by computer that when they break down there's often nothing the breakdown service can do to fix them. I like to imagine their owners cursing their \$30,000 worth of useless technology as they try to flag down a cab on the Harbour Bridge in the rain. What's more, they're probably the same sort of people who insist (and with such enthusiasm) that newspapers will be obsolete before long because we'll all be able to get our news packaged and delivered through the TV at the touch of a button. Well, maybe we will. But why *should* we?

I know what you're thinking—'Luddite'. I'd prefer to describe my views as a healthy mistrust of the assumption that newer necessarily means better (postluddism?). We're surrounded by examples of how old technologies can do certain things better, and if we're smart enough we can choose the most appropriate ones instead of just the latest.

Take cricket. Since the 1977 Packer revolution, the techniques of televising cricket have improved beyond measure. More cameras with better angles have made watching the game on TV infinitely more enjoyable (between the ads at least). During the same period, however, there has been no corresponding improvement in the quality of the commentators. Tony Greig, I suspect, was obsolete before he even came into production. Luckily, there is an alternative—the radio.

Using the pictures from TV and the words from radio has become the most satisfying way to experience the game for many (perhaps most) cricket-lovers. Other sports can provide exciting radio events, but they don't generally allow the time for anything much beyond mere description. And some, like tennis, are just ridiculous on radio.

Cricket's slower rhythm makes analysis not only possible but essential, and the game's relatively static format allows the commentator to paint a comprehensive picture at any given moment. But that alone doesn't explain why even people attending the matches themselves often listen

to the radio commentary. More important has been the development over many years of an accepted style and a familiar cast of characters so that the coverage of test matches on the ABC (or via the BBC) has become an entertainment in its own right.

One key to the popularity of *Test Match Special* is that it doesn't need to rely on the tension of the match itself. In fact, the personalities of the individual commentators are allowed freer rein when the cricket is dull. Thanks to England's embarrassing ineptitude on the field, this summer's Ashes series was a vintage season for long-running in-jokes, arcane diversions and sheer silliness.

The predominant atmosphere in the commentary box in England is unmistakably that of a boarding-school dormitory, leavened with colonial curiosities (our own Neville Oliver) and one or two scholarship boys with appropriate provincial accents (Fred Trueman, David Lloyd). Apart from the cricket, the favourite topic of conversation is invariably food, especially the numerous cakes sent in by admiring listeners. Equally fascinating are any unusual physical characteristics of the players, which they pick on with schoolboys' characteristic glee ('Andy Caddick, six feet-five, prominent ears ...') Women (more often 'ladies' or 'girls') are, of course, conspicuous by their absence.

BRIAN JOHNSTON, an Eton-educated, amiable, high-Tory version of Ian McNamara, sets the tone. When he's not covering the cricket, Johnston spends his time visiting implausibly rustic English villages to discuss jam-making with the vicar's wife for his hugely popular show, *Down Your Way*. It's Johnston who is primarily responsible for making up ridiculous nicknames for his fellow-commentators, telling appalling jokes and appraising the qualities of the cakes.

Johnston's sense of the absurd, as well as his keen cricket insights, make him a unique broadcaster. At 81 (going on 14), he can still deliver lines that reduce the rest of the class to fits of helpless giggles ('Greetings to Keith, who very kindly inflated my wife's tyres last week ...'). On one famous

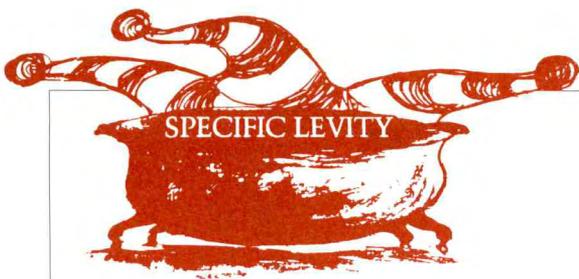
occasion during a match between England and the West Indies, he shocked his more prim devotees by informing them that 'the bowler's Holding, the batsman's Willey.'

If Johnston is the lovable prankster of the team, then Christopher Martin-Jenkins is the head prefect. 'Come on Lewis, you can do better than this,' he exhorted during England's flabby capitulation in the First Test. His intimate knowledge of the game, despite having never played it professionally, also suggests that he's something of a swot. Trevor Bailey is even more pompous, and much more irritating because he lacks the capacity for self-denigration that serves the others so well. Bailey is prone to describing shots as 'rather horrid', as though they were a dose of matron's castor oil.

The remarkable thing about *Test Match Special* is that it is so rarely boring, despite broadcasting for seven hours at a time—a tribute to the commentators' originality and professionalism beneath the veneer of childishness. Admittedly there are times when you wish Fred Trueman would stop going on about how he was just talking to Len Hutton the other day, and how things aren't what they were in his day, and how he just can't understand what's going on out there. But even Fred's tedious nostalgia is somehow reassuring, a guarantee that English summers never change (that is, they're still not as good as they used to be).

With ever-increasing competition from other media, radio needs to nurture its niche markets. Cricket is certainly one of them, a happy and enduring conjunction of interests between the event and the medium. Channel Nine did their best to alienate the radio audience this season by delaying the screening of the first session of the test matches by half an hour, thus making it impossible to create your own simulcast. More fool them for taking their audience for granted. I, for one, prefer to keep my ear to the wireless and leave Tony Greig to fiddle with his new-fangled gadgets on his own. ■

Mike Ticher is a Sydney journalist. He denies any responsibility for the England team.



Eureka Street Cryptic Crossword no.16, September 1993

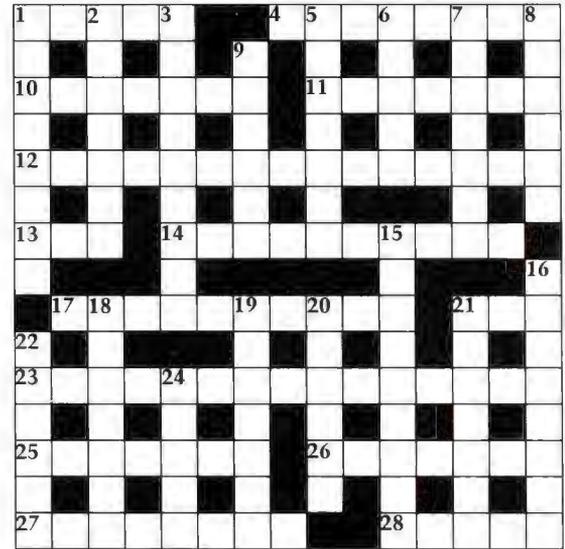
Devised by Joan Nowotny IBVM

ACROSS

- 1&6-down. Great ending to the contest. (5,5)
- 4 A fraction of the period in mid-course. (8)
- 10 Sal 'n three posh characters mixing together? Not what you'd expect! (7)
- 11 Managing to form circle round Sister, perhaps. (7)
- 12 Being indecisive, silly Sally takes in two breaths with a gin cocktail. (6,9)
- 13 Originally many came gladly to watch their team here. (1,1,1)
- 14 Brief experience completely enjoyed with aesthetic discernment. (10)
- 17 More than one of the same! Such characters may be well-known at the football. (10)
- 21 A fly on the wall could contain this organisation. (1,1,1)
- 23 He'll be remembered by posterity—has hip replacement done by team medico. (15)
- 25 I express hesitation after I get free of element. (7)
- 26 Somehow compete in pain and you'll attain your goal. (7)
- 27 Whoever wins 1,6 will be like Mohammed Ali. (8)
- 28 Made unfashionable appointment. (5)

DOWN

- 1 Don't upset me! Rogues are ghastly. (8)
- 2 To have a Greek character perform an aria is rather funny! (7)
- 3 He has two cards only in the suit jacket he is wearing. (9)
- 5 Agree about current land measure. (7)
- 6 See 1 across.
- 7 First sign shortly. (7)
- 9 Holds fast the hooks. (6)
- 15 United Nations Security Council faced possible death, but came through without harm. (9)
- 18 I meet my date, perhaps, at night. On the contrary! (7)
- 19 Must his order change the land strip? (7)
- 20 He cometh with cold confections. (6)
- 21 There's nourishment in metal treated creatively. (7)
- 22 Bound into September! (6)
- 24 Went up to African dictator, the fool! (5)



Solution to Crossword no.15, August 1993



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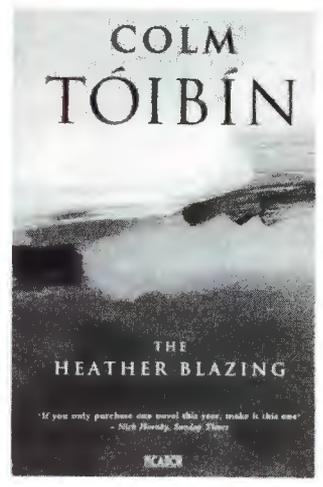
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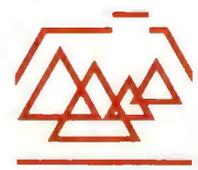
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PIC

Colm Tóibín is visiting Australia in September for the Melbourne Writers' Festival. Tóibín was born in Ireland and worked as the editor of *Magill*, an Irish current affairs magazine, during which time he acquired the ideas for his acclaimed first novel, *The South*. *The Heather Blazing* is his second novel, and he is now a contributing editor to *Esquire* magazine.

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