

Bleeding Battlers from Ironbark



824.3.M595 1
Bleeding battlers from Ironbark

1001101119
UCA - ROCKHAMPTON



C9

DAVID
MYERS

AUSTRALIAN
MYTHS IN
FICTION & FILM:
1890s-1980s

A824.3
.M595



1090356

Bleeding Battlers from Ironbark

DAVID
MYERS

AUSTRALIAN
MYTHS IN
FICTION & FILM
1890s-1980s



UNIVERSITY OF
CENTRAL
QUEENSLAND

Publications

COPYRIGHT © David A. Myers 1992

All rights reserved


This book is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright Act, no part may be reproduced by any process without written permission. Enquiries should be made to the publishers.

Designed and published by University of Central Queensland Publications
Rockhampton, Queensland, Australia 4702.


National Library of Australia card number and ISBN 0 908140 34 7

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank David Baker for lending me his personal copies of his films *Squeaker's Mate* and *The Great McCarthy*; the National Film Library for lending me such films as *Jedda*, *For the Term of his Natural Life* and *A Personal History of Australian Surfing*; Meg Labrum of the National Film and Sound Archive for supplying the films that illustrate this book; the South Australian Film Corporation for giving permission to print stills from *Breaker Morant* and *Sunday too Far Away*; Anthony Buckley Films Pty Ltd for permission to print stills from *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*; Margaret Fink for permission to print stills from *The Getting of Wisdom* and *We of the Never Never*; Pavillion Films Pty Ltd for permission to print stills from *Monkey Grip* and *Picnic at Hanging Rock*; Associated R & R Films for permission to print stills from *Gallipoli* and David Baker for permission to print stills from *Squeaker's Mate* and *The Great McCarthy*. I would also like to thank my colleagues at University of Central Queensland, including John Williams, Raeleen Robertson, Eve Prickett, Greg Benson and all the staff of UCQ Publications for printing; Len Cook and Shane Steele for cover design; Shane Steele for Illustrations; Armin Kullack for publicity and distribution; Judith Anderson, Grahame Griffin, Wally Woods, Bill Fitzgerald and Jutta Myers for many useful suggestions and enthusiastic encouragement in the writing of the MS. I owe a special debt of gratitude to John Armstrong for inspiring me with his love of Australian traditions and for his perceptive criticisms of the style, structure and ideology of the MS.



For Jutta, Barnaby, Holly, Toby and Rachel who were understanding
but not saintly.



Contents

Page

i

Preface

PART ONE

THE SELF-CELEBRATING PAST: BATTLERS AGAINST THE ODDS

Chapter 1	
Old Wine into New Bottles: Nostalgia for Anachronistic Myths	1
Chapter 2	
The 1890s: " <i>Temper, Democratic; Bias, Offensively Australian</i> "	13
a. Bleeding Battlers From Ironbark	20
The Story: <i>When the Wolf Was at the Door</i> in <i>On Our Selection</i> , by Steele Rudd.	
The Film: <i>On Our Selection</i> , directed by Ken Hall.	
b. Beyond the Mateship Myth: Stoic Endurance	24
The Story: <i>Squeaker's Mate</i> , by Barbara Baynton.	
The Film: <i>Squeaker's Mate</i> , directed by David Baker.	
The Story: <i>The Union Buries Its Dead</i> , by Henry Lawson.	
The Film: <i>The Union Buries Its Dead</i> in <i>Three In One</i> , directed by Cecil Holmes.	
Chapter 3	
Pom-Bashers, Anzac Martyrs and Trade Unionists	37
The Film: <i>Gallipoli</i> , directed by Peter Weir.	
The Film: <i>Breaker Morant</i> , directed by Bruce Beresford.	
The Film: <i>Sunday Too Far Away</i> , directed by Ken Hannam.	
Chapter 4	
The Innocent Convict and the Eureka Revolutionary	53
The Novel: <i>His Natural Life</i> , by Marcus Clarke.	
The TV Series: <i>For the Term of his Natural Life</i> , directed by Rob Stewart.	
Chapter 5	
The Feminist as Flirt and as Artist	69
The Novel: <i>My Brilliant Career</i> , by Miles Franklin.	
The Film: <i>My Brilliant Career</i> , directed by Gill Armstrong.	
Chapter 6	
Aping the English: The Conventions of 19th Century Gentility	81
The Novel: <i>The Getting of Wisdom</i> , by Henry Handel Richardson.	
The Film: <i>The Getting of Wisdom</i> , directed by Bruce Beresford.	

Chapter 7	93
Gender and Race Taboos in the Top End	
The Novel: <i>We of the Never Never</i> , by Jeannie Gunn.	
The Film: <i>We of the Never Never</i> , directed by Igor Auzins.	
Chapter 8	105
Sacrifice of the Vestal Virgins to the Phallic Rock	
The Novel: <i>Picnic at Hanging Rock</i> , by Joan Lindsay.	
The Film: <i>Picnic at Hanging Rock</i> , directed by Peter Weir.	
PART TWO	
THE SELF-SATIRISING PRESENT: SLAUGHTERING THE SACRED COWS	
Chapter 9	115
Female Virgin on the Rampage	
The Story: <i>The Night the Prowler</i> , by Patrick White.	
The Film: <i>The Night the Prowler</i> , directed by Jim Sharman.	
Chapter 10	125
Sexual Equality for the Sisterhood	
The Novel: <i>Monkey Grip</i> , by Helen Garner.	
The Film: <i>Monkey Grip</i> , directed by Ken Cameron.	
Chapter 11	135
Apartheid and Genocide: Australia's Shame	
The Novel: <i>The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith</i> , by Thomas Keneally.	
The Film: <i>The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith</i> , directed by Fred Schepisi.	
Chapter 12	147
Born Again in the Garden of Eden	
The Novel: <i>Bliss</i> , by Peter Carey.	
The Film: <i>Bliss</i> , directed by Ray Lawrence.	
Chapter 13	161
Football Fever: Booting to the Big Time	
The Novel: <i>A Salute to the Great McCarthy</i> , by Barry Oakley.	
The Film: <i>The Great McCarthy</i> , directed by David Baker.	
Chapter 14	172
"Water from the Moon": Horror and Utopian Hopes for Indonesia	
The Novel: <i>The Year of Living Dangerously</i> , by Christopher Koch.	
The Film: <i>The Year of Living Dangerously</i> , directed by Peter Weir.	
Conclusion	186
Select Bibliography	187
Author	194

Preface

My purpose in writing this book is to interpret popular myths about the character of the legendary "true blue" Australian. In order to achieve this purpose I have divided my analysis into two parts. In Part One, entitled *The Self-Celebrating Past: Battlers Against the Odds*, I interpret classic works of Australian fiction that were mostly written in or around what is arguably Australia's most patriotic era, the 1890s. In each chapter I compare a classic work of fiction with a modern film adaptation bearing the same title. Most of these films are contemporary to us in the 1970s and 1980s. In Part One I also interpret the very popular contemporary films: *Gallipoli*, *Breaker Morant* and *Sunday Too Far Away*. All three of these films look nostalgically to our mythic-heroic past in order to revive widespread feelings of patriotic pride.

In Part Two, *The Self-Satirising Present: Slaughtering the Sacred Cows*, I interpret some contemporary works of Australian fiction that tend to mock and undermine the common beliefs of average Australians. In each chapter I compare a recent work of fiction with a film adaptation bearing the same title. These novels and films show evidence of intense dissatisfaction with our traditions of the past and our conventions of the present. They all suggest alternative myths and an alternative way of life for Australians today in the 1980s who are puzzled about their national identity.

I personally am emotionally conservative insofar as I am attracted to the myths of courage and endurance from Australia's pioneering past. Innocent convicts, democratic mates at the gold diggings, noble bushrangers who robbed from the rich and gave to the poor, battlers on the outback selections, swaggies "on the wallaby track", gallant Anzac soldiers and determined trade unionists, – these are the legends of mythical Australia that stir my blood.

On the other hand, intellectually and satirically I am fascinated by our artists today who question the relevance of these old pioneering myths to our contemporary urban sophistication and our increasingly international way of life. I am therefore inwardly divided in my loyalties and confused about my own Australian identity. I wonder whether I am a typical Australian in my indecision about whether I should reach backwards nostalgically to anachronistic myths of the past or venture forward to the problems of the present and the future which sometimes seem frightening or repugnant.

I hope that this book will help to clarify what it meant to be an Australian in the 1890s and what it means to be an Australian in the 1980s. Not of course that there ever was only one kind of Australian then or only one kind of Australian now. Now more than ever in our multi-cultural society we need an openness and an acceptance of many kinds of Australians. This means a cosmopolitan tolerance of different lifestyles, different religions and different ideologies. It is through an understanding of our literature and our films that our minds and imaginations can be opened to grapple with or to embrace all that is different from our limited selves."

I hope that this book will be of use to students and teachers of Australian literature and Australian film at senior secondary and at tertiary level. I have based each chapter on a specific novel and/or a specific film to allow students easy reference to my interpretations and thus to encourage classroom debate on a series of set topics. But I also hope to reach all those Australians who are excited by the 1988 bicentenary of the European settlement of Australia in 1788 and who would like to read a straight-forward introduction to the main themes of Australian art.

It will quickly become clear to readers of *Bleeding Battlers From Ironbark* that the views I have expressed on Australian culture and history are not meant to be scientific. On the contrary. My interpretations of Australian fiction and film are deliberately, and I hope, provocatively, subjective and personal. I hope that my views will stimulate all kinds of Australians to discussion and even to strong disagreement. Some conservative readers will be bound to feel that I have been antipathetic to the Christian church or to the Anzac tradition. On the other hand, younger readers may well find my views on monogamy and family life old-fashioned and patriarchal

The aim of this book is not to proclaim my interpretations as some form of higher truth to which all readers must assent as though it were infallible dogma. My aim is to disturb readers and to provoke them to counter-thought. All readers are potential commentators: they are not or should not consent to be, passive consumers of fiction and film. Commentators must react spontaneously with their whole personality to works of art. This is the only way to ensure that their comments will be creative, provocative, entertaining, emotionally rich and above all, honest. Comments on fiction and film are not scientific and should not pretend to be. There is no single correct interpretation of a work of art: there are many conflicting interpretations about which we can happily and meaningfully dispute. If these disputes are unpretentious, unladen with jargon, imaginative and lively, they will create a forum in which the art of a nation can find truly popular resonance.

There have recently been some very useful books published on Australian fiction and film. There is, for example, Brian McFarlane's *Words and Images: Australian Novels into Film*, (Heinemann, Victoria, 1983). McFarlane writes on many of the novels and films that I also have chosen for interpretation. But McFarlane focuses on the art of converting the verbal imagery and narrative perspectives of the novel into the visual imagery and camera-techniques of film. He is very informative on this subject. There is also Graeme Turner's *National Fictions: Literature, film and the construction of Australian narrative*, (Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1986). Chapter 5 of Turner's book entitled *Representing the Nation* is particularly relevant to my enquiry into myths of Australian identity. Turner argues that "*our nationalist myths are not unmediated reflections of history but transformations of it*";¹ that is, to use my words, our myths are proud lies that help us to walk tall. One passage from Turner's *Chapter Five* contains an excellent formulation of Australian mythology and is worth quoting in full:

In Australia, the discourses of nationalism are drawn almost exclusively from the demythologised past, specifically the radical past – the time when Australia was represented as the ‘social laboratory of the world’, its commitment to democracy manifest in the secret ballot and in votes for women, and its essential character being seen to reside in the organic, egalitarian society of the bush communities. That the myth of Australia’s radicalism and egalitarianism can survive the contradictions of one’s everyday experience reveals how effectively it has been mythologised. The representations of the past in film, fiction, fine art and television tend to propose a continuity between nineteenth century Australia and the present that is unquestioned despite its inconsistency with aspects of contemporary life... The typical depiction of the authentic Australian in the past is that of the common man of authentic values, who is constantly oppressed and victimised by British imperialism or by authority generally. Both the romanticising of the figure of the bushranger or the mythologising of the democratic spirit of Eureka are examples of this.²

Turner thus raises a question that is central to the theme of this book: why do we contemporary, urbanised Australians cling so tenaciously to myths of our national identity that so obviously contradict our current lifestyle in every respect? And what hope is there that our contemporary, intellectual novelists will provide us with a new mythology appropriate to our times, a mythology with which we can identify without the embarrassment of having to pretend that we are Pom-bashers, bleeding battlers from Ironbark, Eureka revolutionaries or Anzac martyrs. T. Inglis Moore’s book, *Social Patterns in Australian Literature*, (Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1974), deserves a special mention as a pioneer in the search for an Australian mythological identity through Australian art. The task of commentators now is to update his work primarily by examining contemporary fiction’s debunking of old myths and attempts by today’s novelists to create new myths of identity.

I have limited myself on the whole in this book to a detailed, textual analysis of contemporary films that are based on well-known Australian novels of high quality. I have also thought it worthwhile, however, to summarise the much debated myths of Australian art in the 1890s and to interpret some contemporary films like *Gallipoli*, *Breaker Morant* and *Sunday Too Far Away* which are not based on classic novels. This means that my choice of fiction and film has been somewhat arbitrary and personal.

Footnotes

1. Graeme Turner, *National Fictions*, p. 107.
2. Graeme Turner, *National Fictions*, p. 108.

Preface for Second Edition

The only major change to this book is the addition of a final chapter devoted to Christopher Koch's novel *The Year of Living Dangerously* and to the film of the same name directed by Peter Weir. It seems appropriate to conclude my book with the analysis of a novel and a film which are not preoccupied with the long since anachronistic myths of Australia's outback past. *The Year of Living Dangerously* reaches out beyond Australian society and shows a philosophical awareness of the Asian cultures which will provide much of the context for our future attempts to define our own increasingly multicultural identities.

Reviews of the first edition of *Bleeding Battlers from Ironbark* have stressed that whatever virtues this book may have, they are also paradoxically its major defects. The candour and the intimacy for which I have striven in my comments have a reverse side which is prejudice and lack of objectivity. I can only repeat my hope that my outspokenness will provoke readers to contradict me frequently and so to find their own personal interpretations.

David Myers
University of Central Queensland
January 1992.

PART ONE

The Self-Celebrating Past: Battlers Against the Odds



CHAPTER ONE

Old Wine into New Bottles: Nostalgia for Anachronistic Myths

In the 1950s three cultural historians, Vance Palmer¹, A. A. Phillips² and Russel Ward³ separately evolved a romantic-nationalist interpretation of Australian art and politics in the 1890s. They saw the 1890s as a time of great social excitement, of buoyant optimism for the future of a federated Australian republic. They saw the writers of the 1890s making a proud and patriotic contribution to world literature with a unique celebration in ballad and short story of our landscape and our outback life style. They saw Australia in the 1890s as the social laboratory of the world, pioneering not only physically in the remote interior, but also pioneering in democratic socialism with suffrage for women and old age pensions. They saw in the 1890s a time when writers and the people were united in pride in their country, in a vision splendid of a truly classless, egalitarian society with a literature that was immediately accessible to the average bloke in the street.

This vision was highly romantic and based to some extent on pioneering myths that were already out of date by the 1890s. Outback bushmanship, campfire-companionship, droving on horseback, founding cattle and sheep stations, mateship among swaggies "*on the wallaby track*", the brief moment of democratic revolution at the Eureka Stockade – most of these ideas were composed of large parts of wishful thinking and dreams of a utopian, Golden Age in the past. But it really does not matter that this interpretation of Australia's past was romantic, mythical and on the whole non-factual. It matters that Australian writers and readers were together inspired by this dream of the way we would like to be.

In the last three decades the literary and socio-political historians of our academies have set out to demolish this dream of the 1890s, to grind it down to the grey dust of facts and statistics. Academics have brought the full weight of their scholarly research to bear on this demolishing job. By their own criteria, they have done the job well. The bare facts of national history are rarely noble or inspiring: knife-in-the-back squabbles for power, corruption, brutality, snobbish class divisions, unimaginative conformism, parochialism, racism and xenophobia tend to be the rule rather than the exception. Myths of national identity provide dreams that transcend mundane human evil.

The classical Greeks and the nordic Aryans had collections of heroic national myths in which they saw themselves as bold adventurers, dauntless questers and even as demigods with supernatural powers. Today we would regard it as ridiculous and naive to debunk these myths by proving that they are not realistic. The artistic imagination is not constrained by realism. Flights of fantasy, which aim to make us more inspiring and more awesome, nobler and more powerful than we are, fulfil a psychological need in our personality. Australian myths in fiction and film, and indeed in art generally, fulfil this psychological need to improve on the way God made us. Myths are our comforters, our consolation to ourselves to compensate for our knowledge of our puniness and sinfulness. Australian historians will continue to discover the squalid facts about the brutal, deceitful creatures we were in the 18th and 19th centuries (and still are in the

20th century). But Australian artists will continue to create dreams of optimism and spiritual vision that will in some way counterbalance the squalor of this reality.

In the 1970s and 1980s the film-makers and the people of Australia chose to thumb their noses at academic research into the facts of our history. A spate of nostalgic films about our mythical past has united artists and public in a way reminiscent of the widespread popularity of Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson in the heyday of *The Bulletin* in the 1890s. Some of these films, like *The Man From Snowy River*, have little to recommend them artistically except their glorious photography of the mountain scenery and some great horsemanship. But then some of the ballads penned in the 1890s weren't very sophisticated either: the people still loved them. They were accessible to popular fantasy.

Certainly films like *Gallipoli*, *Breaker Morant*, *Sunday Too Far Away*, *We of the Never Never*, *My Brilliant Career*, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* have all contributed, in different ways, to our urban nostalgia for the mythical Golden Age of our outback. Even so, our film makers today have barely begun to explore the gold mine of Australian literature at the turn of the century. When shall we see contemporary films of the short stories of Henry Lawson or of Henry Handel Richardson's *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* or of the *Billabong* novels by "the most beloved of all Australian writers", Mary Grant Bruce?

An Australian Identity

In 1988 we celebrate the Bicentenary of the European settlement of Australia and this should stimulate us to reflect on the attempts of Australians in the last one hundred years to find a national image and to reconsider our national heritage as it has been expressed in Australian art. The forms of art in which we are interested in this book are classic Australian fiction and contemporary Australian film. Fiction and film provide us with ways of focusing on two matters of patriotic concern.

Firstly, what does it mean to be Australian? Does it mean anything other than being a second-rate Englishman or a slavishly imitative pseudo-American? Are we doomed to being a nation of second-hand traders in cast-off fashions from England, Europe and North America? Or have we originated a unique culture appropriate to our philosophy of life, our traditions, and our physical environment?

Secondly, has Australian fiction recorded significant changes in our national image of ourselves in the last one hundred years? Has the Australian film industry in the last 20 years from the late 1960s recorded an objectively true image of the average Australian's image of himself? Or are contemporary Australian films hopelessly nostalgic and ideologically biased?

What do ordinary Australians believe about themselves and their national identity in a Western world that is becoming increasingly conformist due largely to the activities of the international media in the Western global village? Must we not ask: Who leads whom? Do artists observe real Australians at work and play and

so through mimesis create myths of national identity that are always slightly behind newly developing reality? Or do visionary artists create utopian myths which average Australians try to live up to? Or have our artists deliberately chosen to create romantic, escapist myths which flatter our vanity but which often ignore unpalatable facts about our life style? Perhaps there is a measure of truth in all of these theories. Certainly it is true that romantic myths of pre-industrial, colonial Australia fulfil a similar psychological function to religion. They bolster up Australians today who feel threatened with inferiority and anonymity and give them a sense of group identity and national worth. The clashing interpretations of early Australian life style focus on disputes about half a dozen myths that are vital to the definition of an Australian self-awareness.

Convicts as Victims

The first myth that we shall consider is about the convicts who were sent to Australia from 1788 to the 1860s. The popular romantic myth about Australia's past as a convict colony states that the *"typical convict was an innocent creature who had sinned once and been savagely punished for it"*.⁴ Robert Hughes explains how this myth was exploded with statistical evidence:

The popular Australian stereotype of convict identity says convicts were innocent victims of unjust laws, torn from their families and flung into exile on the other side of the world for offences that would hardly earn a fine today – poaching rabbits or stealing bread to feed their starving families.

They were forced into committing these acts because their rulers had so brutally mismanaged England that they could no longer survive as honest yeomen in a collapsing rural economy.

This was no fact, but a stout and consoling fiction. The innocence of convicts as a class (if not their manliness) was first exposed to criticism by Manning Clark in the 1950s and finally demolished by a statistical analysis by L. L. Robson in 1963.

• • •

They (the convicts) shared other traits with lumpen workers, chiefly a loathing of authority. Tribal loyalties were fanatically strong, they stuck together against the peeler, the beak and the pin chaplain in his 'cackle tub' as the prison pulpit was known. This contemptuous resistance to everyone and everything outside one's small group was one of the roots of Australian mateship.

• • •

Mateship, fatalism, contempt for do-gooders and God-botherers, harsh humour, opportunism, survivors' disdain for introspection and an attitude to authority in which private resentment mingled with ostensible resignation – such was the meagre baggage of values the convicts brought with them to Australia.⁴

The classical Australian novel about 19th century convicts is *His Natural Life* by Marcus Clarke. Clarke portrayed the convicts on the whole as a depraved, brutal lot, but on the other hand his hero Richard Devine alias Rufus Dawes is an innocent man who is wrongly convicted and brutally mistreated as a convict for two decades of his life. So Clarke both denies and affirms the popular myth. In any case it is not the factuality of the myth which concerns us here. What matters, is the potential of our wishful thinking about convicts as victims to produce in us dreams of a classless society with no brutalised lower classes and a fair go for everybody. What matters, is that we are inspired to see ourselves as a nation of rugged battlers who don't whinge. We believe we are psychologically, if not physically, descended from tough-minded convicts. We see ourselves as anarchistic, true individualists who don't need any guiding hand from the upper classes: we scoff at the British because they are still presided over by superfluous aristocrats.

Bushrangers and Goldminers as Fraternal-Anarchistic Revolutionaries

Let us briefly consider some of the other traditional myths about an Australian identity that are central to this book. There is for example, the myth of the brave bushranger who takes from the rich and gives to the poor and defies all authority. Manning Clark informs us that after Ned Kelly's gang had successfully robbed two banks in 1878, Ned boasted "*that his men had never harmed a woman nor robbed a poor man.*"⁵ Clark explains that conflicting attitudes towards Ned Kelly and bushrangers were symptomatic of class warfare in Australia. The rich squatters and the bourgeoisie regarded bushrangers as godless, depraved murderers and thieves. But the poor and the dispossessed saw bushrangers as heroic revolutionaries.

Bushrangers have been celebrated in Australian literature as early as such convict songs as "*Jim Jones at Botany Bay*":

*But by and by I'll break my chains; into the bush I'll go,
And join the brave bushrangers there – Jack Donahoo and Co.;
And some dark night when everything is silent in the town I'll kill
the tyrants one and all, and shoot the floggers down:
I'll give the law a little shock: remember what I say,
They'll yet regret they sent Jim Jones in chains to Botany Bay.*⁶

Other famous literary celebrations of bushrangers include Rolf Boldrewood's *Robbery Under Arms*, which appeared as a newspaper serial in 1882–83, and Douglas Stewart's verse play *Ned Kelly*, which appeared in 1943. *Robbery Under Arms* has also appeared as a film at least four times – in 1907, in 1920, in 1957 and in 1985.

T. Inglis Moore explained that the popularity of the bushranger myths stems from traditional Australian rebelliousness against authority:

The rebelliousness derived . . . from three elements . . . the convicts, the Irish, and the native-born. All were essentially of the working class, and all had grievances: the convicts against

the penal system and society as a whole, the Irish against British rule, and the Currency lads against a social system which usually denied them the lands granted or sold to British immigrants. Ned Kelly combined the heritage of all three.⁷

Similarly there is the myth of the 1850s goldminers as fraternal-anarchistic revolutionaries. It is alleged that our democratic socialism today stems from the rough and ready mateship of the goldfields and the Eureka Stockade rebellion of the miners against authoritarian interference with their freedom. The miners and the bushrangers both fought against policemen and soldiers who were seen as the hired servants of the rich, propertied classes. It is easy of course to scoff at this foundation myth of democratic socialism by pointing to the rich squatters of the nineteenth century. But most Australian myths are deeply rooted in class conflict. The myths are often the compensatory dreams of the poor. In the patriotic 1890s Australia's balladeers revived the legend of the goldminers and Henry Lawson wrote a revolutionary ballad called *Eureka*:

*But not in vain those diggers died. Their comrades may rejoice
For o'er the voice of tyranny is heard the people's voice;
It says - 'reform your rotten law', the diggers' wrongs make right,
Or else with them, our brothers now, we'll gather to the fight.*

Contemporary critics in the 1980s see the ballads as simply hot air. They point to the unequal distribution of wealth in Australia today and to the conspicuous consumption of the super rich in our metropolitan cities. Nevertheless one can assert that our welfare system, in which we care for the poor and disabled, can be traced back to the spirit of the Eureka Stockade rebellion. Certainly there is a broad spectrum of people in Australia today who are sympathetic to compensating for the lottery of birth by insisting on free education, free medical care, adequate provision for the elderly and the have-nots, and in general trying to ensure a "fair go" for everybody.

Outback Mateship and Stoic Endurance

Another popular myth essential to the Australian image is that of outback mateship. We have allegedly evolved a unique system of mateship in Australia as a spiritual response to the harshness of our desert interior and the absence of women and families in our rugged and desolate environment. This mateship is restricted to the working classes. Its soul seems destroyed by the amassing of wealth. This point is made very clearly in the recent film *Sunday Too Far Away*. The rich squatter and his beautiful daughter are excluded from the democratic union rituals and the rough and ready mateship of the shearers.

Henry Lawson who is generally regarded as the main apostle of Australian mateship, wrote a poem about outback mateship that he called *Shearers*:

*No church bell rings them from the track
No pulpit lights their blindness -
'Tis hardship, drought and homelessness*

*That teach those Bushmen kindness:
The mateship born, in barren lands,
Of toil and thirst and danger,
The camp-fire for the wanderer set,
The first place to the stranger.⁸*

Manning Clark, who in general lauds Henry Lawson for his

vision of mateship as a comforter against a harsh indifferent environment, and possibly as a consolation for the loss of that life of the world to come,

does have reservations about the extent of the bushman's hospitality. Clark says:

The sentiments of mateship tended to be reserved for the native-born, and the ideals that were the offspring of their loneliness and isolation became in turn forces to strengthen their provincialism and their xenophobia.⁹

The myth of mateship in Australia is commonly associated with the myth of the stoic endurance of the legendary outback Australians, the bleeding battlers from Ironbark. We Australians love to identify with that myth. The harsh land, the heat and the flies are against us, but we battle on to get the job done. We are all well versed in outback survival, bush lore, horsemanship, fighting bushfires and coping with flash floods. This is the most heroic of our national myths. It is also the myth that is most glaringly contradicted by our contemporary urban life style. The myth continues nevertheless and is celebrated in films today ranging from *The Man From Snowy River* to *We of the Never Never to Crocodile Dundee*. In this book I interpret the stoic endurance beyond mateship that is celebrated by Steele Rudd in *On Our Selection*, by Barbara Baynton in *Squeaker's Mate* and by Henry Lawson in *The Union Buries Its Dead*.

A Fair Go For Everybody

Another myth about us Australians states that we cheer for the underdog and that we believe in giving everyone a fair go. We celebrate this myth in John O'Grady's novel *They're a Weird Mob* and in the film that director Michael Powell based on this novel in 1966. In these works Australian tradesmen are seen as speaking an esoteric dialect and engaging in obscure rituals of mateship in their substitute-church, the pub. The average Australian may have a harsh, contemptuous sense of humour but he is always willing to give a hand to help a new migrant assimilate, provided of course that he shows the proper respect for the Australian way of doing things. This myth is contradicted by the bureaucracy and the xenophobia encountered by postwar immigrants to Australia in Sarah Dowse's novel *Silver City* and the film of the same name directed by Sophia Turkiewicz in 1984.

Australia's trade-union movement has its origins in the democratic notion of a fair go for everybody. The mass trade union strikes throughout Australia in the 1890s were an expression of the demand of the working class for a fair go against

the monopoly of capitalism. This is also expressed in Ken Hannam's film *Sunday Too Far Away* which is about the shearers' strike of 1955. I interpret this film in chapter three.

Women's emancipation and feminism in Australia is also born of the myth of a fair go for all. The female novelists whom I interpret in chapters five, six, seven, eight and ten of this book and the female film director of *My Brilliant Career*, Gill Armstrong, are all in one sense or another feminists insisting on equality and a fair go for women. Miles Franklin and Henry Handel Richardson may have used male pseudonyms but their aggressive heroines demanded independence as human beings and as incipient artists. Jeannie Gunn demanded an equal say in the hitherto all-male world of the outback Northern Territory. She contended that women had a lot to teach emotionally inhibited men in the art of intimate self-expression and communication. Joan Lindsay admittedly says little about feminism but she does seem to contend in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* that some girls have a spiritual affinity with nature and can escape from authoritarianism by a mystic fusion with the earth and timelessness. Helen Garner created a female protagonist who demanded equal sexual rights for women and who celebrated the union of women in the sisterhood.

The Anzac Soldier

The foundation myth of Australian nationhood is undoubtedly the legend of Anzac. According to this legend, Australians are the world's bravest and most loyal soldiers. They are not given to the submissive discipline or the spit and polish of the English army. [They are anarchistic but expert guerilla fighters who rely on mateship rather than obedience to officers.] This myth is celebrated every year with Anzac Day. It is one of the oddities of our society that our nationhood seems to be founded on an obscure military failure in far away Turkey some seventy years ago. This myth is nevertheless enduringly popular and forms the basis for the contemporary films *Gallipoli* and *Breaker Morant*.

Peter Weir in *Gallipoli* and Bruce Beresford in *Breaker Morant* both celebrate the mateship of Australian soldiers at war. Both directors also agree in seeing the Australian soldier as the martyr of English deceit and deviousness. Atkinson contends that the Anzacs were not "Pom-bashers"; they revolted against the inequality of the British class-system as it was reflected in the British army:

It is not that the people of Australia dislike Britain or the British, but they hate the old systems of caste and privilege, the devious diplomacy of European chancelleries, the chronic prevalence of destitution, the age-old servility of the poor, the atmosphere of aristocratic condescension, the reluctance to change prevalent amongst all classes in the old world.¹⁰

It should be noted that the national ceremony on Anzac Day, at least in its ideal form, is not a glorification of aggressive militarism but a celebration of the mateship and self-sacrifice that were discovered by front line soldiers under fire.

This is once again a myth for the working class and tends to exclude the high-ranking officers of the upper classes.

Bush, Desert, Surf: Pagan Mysticism

An increasingly popular myth today is that we Australians have a close spiritual relationship with our eucalypt bush, with the lonely deserts of our interior and with the pounding surf of our never-ending coastline. We are alleged to make sacred pilgrimages to the dead heart of Australia; there we worship at the monolith of Ayer's Rock now known as Uluru. Uluru is sometimes ironically referred to as the Australian equivalent of the holy stone of Kaaba in Mecca, the sacred goal of Muslim pilgrimage.

The growing strength of the conservation movement in Australia stems from an almost religious reverence for the sacredness of forest, river, sand dunes and coral reef. Patrick White creates a mysticism of landscape in such novels as *Voss* and *The Tree of Man*. Michael Blakemore has made a film entitled *A Personal History of the Australian Surf* in which he celebrates the art of surfing as a form of spiritual cleansing and regeneration. There is an increasing feeling nowadays that we white Australians are learning from the original inhabitants of Australia, the Aborigines, a kind of pagan mysticism about our vast arid interior and also of course about the enormous variety of Australian landscapes ranging from the tropical rain forests of the north to the Snowy Mountains in the south. Aborigines are increasingly depicted in modern Australian films like *Jedda* (directed by Charles Chauvel in 1955), *We of the Never Never* (directed by Igor Auzins in 1982), *The Last Wave* (directed by Peter Weir in 1977), *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (directed by Fred Schepisi in 1978) and *Storm Boy* (directed by Henri Safran in 1976) as the initiates of a spiritual paganism and a religiosity that they draw from their closeness to the forces of nature. This religiosity is seen as poetically attractive in the creation-myths and the legends of the Dreamtime and far removed from the hypocrisy and cant that have tainted the Christian church.

Myths of the Past as Proud Lies for a De-mythologised Present

I hope that it is clear from this introductory chapter that I am proposing that we view our myths of Australian identity as expressions of spiritual, moral or emotional need. Traditional myths of Australian identity are proud lies that help average Australians to walk tall. The mythical idea that Australia's harsh, unforgiving landscape and climate provoked the spiritual triumph of mateship has now been all but forgotten in today's pampered, urban luxury. Myths of Australian national identity are hard currency only for advertising agencies trying to promote tourism or campaigns of Buy Australian Products. In any case, multinational business companies, the electronic media in the global village and widespread international travel have eliminated many of the differences between national cultures in the Western World. At the very time when tourists are frantically keen to find unique and exotic national cultures, there are none to be found. There are only spurious national myths invented by travel agencies in a desperate search for the tourist dollar.

It is therefore understandable that the average Australian retreats from the confusing and unsatisfying present into the consoling past, taking refuge in a mythical time when literature celebrated the little man's battle to survive against the odds of a harsh country and a savage climate. When our metropolitan cities removed us from the savagery of nature, they also removed us from self-celebration in myth. We are living in spiritually impoverished, de-mythologised times.

For the common man today there is the choice of passively idolising sporting or financial heroes or falling back nostalgically into a mythological past to dream of egalitarian mateship and democratic solidarity. Australian movies like *Coolangatta Gold* (directed by Igor Auzins, 1984) celebrate contemporary myths of male aggression, the uncompromising determination to win at all costs and the glamour of success after years of puritanical self-discipline. But even here the aggressive competitiveness is modified. The leader in the race sacrifices his certain victory in order to let his brother win. He knows that his brother psychologically needs to win in order to bolster his threatened ego. The old mateship-myth is still not dead, at least not in the heads of romantic script-writers and film directors.

Nevertheless the days are gone when Australians were taught to compete like gentlemen, and if defeated, to accept defeat with good grace. Traditional Australian mythology was based on heroism in defeat and spiritual dignity in failure. New Australian mythology focuses on success and glory. Defeat, or even coming second, is pointless because it guarantees obscurity and public humiliation. Unless, of course, as with the self-sacrificing hero of *Coolangatta Gold* you are emotionally mature and not in need of the limelight. But for most Australians the sentence in this film that counts most is: "*Who the hell remembers who came second?*" This obsessive need to win provides a fascinating counter-motto to the insistence of our contemporary media that Australia is suffering from a national loss of nerve, cultural cringe and parasitic apathy.

Where today are the adventure, the challenge and the hardship that created suffering, toughness in adversity and national myth? National pride in the 1980s is certainly not based on egalitarianism, mateship or workers' solidarity. National pride is focusing on the worldwide economic striving of nations for competitive ranking in GNP. National failure is awarded the booby prize of astronomical national debt.

In the fascist decades of the 1930s and 40s, competition among the nations was for macho poses of theatrical virility and military heroism. Now in the 1980s the former fascist nations, Germany and Japan, have not only recovered from ideological shame and military defeat but are competing successfully with far larger nations for a controlling share of the world markets. Economic imperialism has replaced military imperialism. But whereas fascist imperialism inspired artists to adopt either extreme right or extreme left positions, capitalist imperialism has inspired only satiric anti-myths of alienation among artists. This is the big gap between the news-hunting reactions of journalists in search of instant heroes and

the ideological rejection by intellectual artists of capitalist entrepreneurs. The journalists find myths of derring-do among robber-barons of today's mining enterprises and corporate takeovers; but the artists find only soulless money-grubbing done in ignorance of ecology and with no relevance to man's moral state. Either way there are no consoling myths for average private citizens. They will remain anonymous and insignificant. It is small consolation that in modern media mythology they are offered the opportunity to adore the moguls of high finance.

Traditional myths of Australian identity are proud lies that help average Australians to walk tall. Even when we now know that the myths are untrue and probably never were much more than wishful thinking, we continue to be nostalgically loyal to them. They are part of our cultural heritage even if they are not part of our factual-historical heritage. We cling to these untrue, outmoded myths now because they are so romantically attractive and are so obviously preferable to the depressing truth: that our city-culture is spiritually impoverished, boringly materialistic, second-rate, and an ugly copy of American city culture.¹¹ To quote the Australian architect Robin Boyd:

The Australian ugliness begins with fear of reality, denial of the need for the everyday environment to reflect the heart of the human problem, satisfaction with veneer and cosmetic effects. It ends in betrayal of the element of love and a chill near the root of national self-respect.¹²

Our contemporary suburban way of life shows no adventurousness, no romantic idealism, no sign of spiritual depth or serenity. Instead we see what Boyd called featurism, a process of uglification through strident colours and tacky stick-on veneer.

Satirical Debunking and the Creation of New Myths

Australia does have intellectual artists today who are trying to shock us complacent, bourgeois suburbanites by slaughtering many of our sacred cows. These artists either ignore or satirise the old myths and sometimes create new alternative myths for our times. But these new alternative myths are often not particularly optimistic or uplifting. I consider some of these contemporary artists in Part Two of this book under the title: *The Self-Satirising Present*. Patrick White attacks the myth of the sanctity of female virginity in *The Night the Prowler*. Helen Garner attacks chastity, monogamy and the WASP work-ethic in *Monkey Grip*. Thomas Keneally exposes the shame of our treatment of the Aborigines in *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*. Peter Carey sees an epidemic of cancer as an appropriate image for our urban civilisation today in *Bliss*.

Nevertheless even the satirical artists suggest some faint hope for new myths. Patrick White goes beyond nihilism to mystic love. Helen Garner champions the freedom of the artist to experiment and also the solidarity of the sisterhood. Thomas Keneally celebrates the self-sacrificing mateship of the Aborigine called Mort and even holds hope for the genuine Christian remorse of the Reverend

Neville. Peter Carey suggests a retreat from our insane cities and a quest for new salvation in an ecological closeness with nature.

Footnotes

1. Vance Palmer, *The Legend of the Nineties*, Melbourne, 1954.
2. A.A. Phillips, *The Australian Tradition, Studies in a Colonial Tradition*, Longman Cheshire, 1980, first published 1958.
3. Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1958.
4. Robert Hughes, *The Truth of Our Convict Past* in *The Weekend Australian Magazine*, January 17-18, 1987.
Humphrey McQueen is even more negative in his debunking of myths about the convicts. McQueen finds more examples of betrayal than of mateship among the convicts and claims that they have been falsely endowed with an image of egalitarian class solidarity in the same way that our gold-miners, shearers and bushrangers have also been falsely sentimentalised. (Humphrey McQueen, *A New Britannia*, Penguin, 1970, p. 136.)
5. Manning Clark, *A Short History of Australia*, Mentor Books, New York, 1963, p. 162.
6. As quoted in Douglas Stewart and Nancy Keesing (eds.), *Old Bush Songs*, Sydney, 1955, p. 18.
Humphrey McQueen rejects the romanticization of the bushranger in Australian bush ballads and says: "Overwhelmingly, bushrangers were no more, and often a good deal less, than louts of the contemporary bokie variety. They roamed the countryside terrorising small farmers and stealing their poultry. As such they were thoroughly detested by ordinary people who had more immediate tasks to perform than writing ballads in praise of the hoodlums who added appreciably to the difficulties they experienced in an alien environment." (Humphrey McQueen, *A New Britannia*, Penguin, p. 137.)
7. T. Inglis Moore, *Social Patterns in Australian Literature*, p. 246.
8. Henry Lawson, *Poetical Works*, Pacific Books, 1971, p. 103.
9. Manning Clark, *A Short History of Australia*, p. 118 and 119.
10. Meredith Atkinson (ed.), *Australia: Economic and Political Studies*, 1920, as quoted by T. Inglis Moore, *Social Patterns in Australian Literature*, p. 246.
In *A New Britannia*, McQueen denies that Australians really worship egalitarian mateship and cynically claims that the only real Australian heroes are Ned Kelly and Phar Lap: "It was not accidental that Australians chose a racehorse and a bushranger as their heroes since both expressed the same get-rich-quick, Tatts syndrome." (*A New Britannia*, Penguin, 1970, p. 140.)
11. John Docker argues that we cannot expect to find the "distinctiveness" of a "specific culture" in our cities and that we must look to the country for our natural myths. Docker says
This distinctiveness is usually sought in organic connections between a specific culture, language, and a natural environment. Such an organic connection is often expressed in a 'folk' substratum, which is seen as subsisting and developing most strongly in a rural setting: a rural society is the repository or guarantee of myths, legends, lore and folk poetry, oral traditions which have grown in long and close association with a particular natural environment. An urban setting, however, tends to a kind of cultural impersonality, encouraging a cosmopolitanism and over-sophistication which destroy a people's individuality. Cities tend to be the same everywhere - only rural environments provide a culture's necessary distinctiveness or uniqueness.
- John Docker, *In a Critical Condition*, Penguin, 1984, p. 17.
12. Robin Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness*, F. W. Cheshire, 1960, republished by Penguin, as quoted by Ken Brass in *The Weekend Australian Magazine* 2, March 7-8, 1987.

CHAPTER TWO

The 1890s: “Temper, Democratic; Bias, Offensively Australian”

A: Bleeding Battlers From Ironbark

B: Beyond The Mateship Myth: Stoic Endurance

The decade of the 1890s is commonly regarded as the first Golden Age of Australian literature. Works of national literary significance had of course been written before the 1890s. Marcus Clarke, for example, had published his masterpiece *His Natural Life* some twenty years earlier in 1874. Even earlier, in 1853, Charles Harpur had published a play called *The Bushrangers*. Henry Kingsley wrote *The Recollections of Geoffrey Hamlyn* in 1859. Henry Kendall's bushland poems and Adam Lindsay Gordon's *Bush Ballads and Galloping Rhymes* appeared in the 1870s. Nevertheless it was in the 1890s that Australian literature really came of age. This decade saw the rise to prominence of Australia's most enduringly popular story writers and balladeers.

Henry Lawson published *Short Stories in Prose and Verse* in 1894, *While the Billy Boils* in 1896, *On the Track* in 1900, *Over the Sliprails* also in 1900, and *Joe Wilson and His Mates* in 1901. Joseph Furphy wrote *Such is Life* – a title taken allegedly from the last words of bushranger Ned Kelly – during the 1890s, and it was published in 1899. Barbara Baynton's *Bush Studies* appeared in 1902. Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career*, written during the 1890s, was finally published in 1901. Price Warung's *Tales of the Convict System* appeared in 1892. Banjo Paterson published *The Man from Snowy River* in 1895, and *Waltzing Matilda*, for which Paterson wrote the text, was first publicly performed in 1895.

The forum for most publications of short stories and bush ballads was *The Bulletin*. In *The Bulletin Story Book* of 1901, editor A. G. Stephens berated "*The grotesque English prejudice against things Australian.*"¹ This policy of *The Bulletin* and the motto of Joseph Furphy's *Such is Life* – "temper, democratic; bias, offensively Australian" – set the tone of much of Australian literature in the 1890s.

What this group of writers had in common was that they created myths of Australian national identity. They celebrated an Australian landscape and an Australian life style in the bush. They forged unbreakable links between literature and the people. Literature was not a cultural precinct reserved for rarefied academics. As Henry Lawson says in *The Uncultured Rhymers to His Cultured Critics*:

*I come with the strength of the living day
And with half the world behind me;
I leave you alone in your cultured halls
To drivel and croak and cavil:
Till your voice goes further than college walls
Keep out of the tracks we travel!*

The bush ballad and the short story became genuinely popular with a broad spectrum of the Australian people, perhaps because the people recognised flattering myths about themselves and saw folk heroes with whom they could identify.

G.A. Wilkes summarised this traditional view of the 1890s when he said:

With the foundation of The Bulletin in 1880, there arises a group of writers determined to exploit Australian material, so that the school of the stockwhip and the gum-tree supersedes the effete and derivative tradition of an earlier age: the work of this new school reflects the political climate of the day in its hostility to privilege and social injustice, and in its vision of an ideal future for the new continent in the south. The literature of the 1890s is the robust and buoyant literature of a new nation coming to birth: its characteristic achievement in verse is to be seen in the ballad, and in prose in the short story – in these two forms Australian writing first becomes independent of the English tradition.²

In the 1890s a few Australian writers found resonance by throwing off the cultural cringe to England and celebrating the struggle of the bleeding battlers from Ironbark.³ This is not to assert that the only good writing done in the 1890s was aggressively nationalistic. Both the poet Christopher Brennan and the novelist Henry Handel Richardson were much more steeped in European culture

In this book I am interested in the Australian myths created largely in the 1890s by Lawson, Paterson, Furphy, Franklin, Baynton and Rudd. I am then interested in interpreting the ways in which contemporary film makers have created a sentimental revival of these old myths.

The literary historian H.M. Green wrote that the 1890s had “*a mood of confidence and romantic optimism*” and a “*fervent democratic nationalism*” exemplified by Henry Lawson’s “*doctrine of mateship*”. I would have thought that it was Banjo Paterson who was romantic and optimistic; Henry Lawson inclined more to the sombre and the grimly melancholy in his tragic evocation of bush life for the poor. Norman Lindsay wrote in his *Bohemians of the Bulletin* that the 1890s had seen the birth of “*a national literature in prose and poetry*”. This literary birth was accompanied by a new-found ability in Australian artists, such as the painters of the Heidelberg school, to paint canvases of the Australian landscape that looked like Australia and not like an imported England. Similarly, political statesmen like Henry Parkes and Edmund Barton were advancing Australia towards Federation and the pride of nationhood.

It is a curious paradox that the proud myths of the 1890s were spawned in a decade of terrible economic depression that followed on the economic boom of the 1880s.

Approximately twenty five percent of Australian workers were unemployed in the 1890s. In *My Brilliant Career*, Miles Franklin evokes the drought of the 1890s that brought dust storms and financial ruin to many small farmers. Small wonder that Australians needed the comfort of nationalism and working class mateship to get them through the grinding poverty and the shame of having failed to make a go of it on their small selections. The era of the swaggy tramping the outback had arrived. The era of our unofficial national anthem, *Waltzing Matilda*, was born. *Waltzing Matilda* tells of the hatred felt by the unemployed

for the rich squatters and the swaggy's grim defiance of the mounted troopers who were regarded as the hired guards of the propertied classes.

Literary scholars and academic historians of the 1970s and the 1980s have tended to nit-pick at these grand myths of the 1890s in the interest of an uninspiring factual truth. For example, it has been correctly pointed out that Australian outback society was in no way classless or genuinely democratic. It was ruled by a snobbish, anglophile, colonial gentry and this is made clear in Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career*.

The myths of mateship and egalitarianism have been found to be not so much based in fact as the wishful thinking of a handful of sentimentalists and urban utopians writing for *The Bulletin*. Historian Graeme Davison found that the romantic nationalists had got their theory back to front: there was no "*transmission to the city of values nurtured on the bush frontier*". On the contrary, the 1890s saw "*the projection onto the outback of values revered by an alienated urban intelligentsia*".⁴ That is, writers like Banjo Paterson and Henry Lawson, both long since permanent residents of Sydney, romanticised their memories of life in the bush. Paterson's memories, as expressed in such poems as *Clancy of the Overflow* and *In Defence of the Bush*, were effortlessly optimistic and even "glamorous".⁵ Lawson's memories of the outback are much harsher and grimmer, but his egalitarian loyalty to the lower classes is much more passionate than Paterson's facile romanticism. Lawson does sometimes idealise the campfires, the Cobb and Co. coaches and the mateship of the goldfields as in *The Roaring Days*. But more often he prefers satirically to undercut the silly idealisation of the bush with sardonic poems like *Australian Bards and Bush Reviewers* and to reserve his gloomy passion for such revolutionary poems as *Freedom On the Wallaby* and *Song of the Republic*.

Certainly Paterson and Lawson were not the only country people to emigrate to the cities. The depression of the 1890s saw more and more Australians crowding into the few major cities along the coast as Australia prepared to become the most urbanised nation in the Western world. Leon Cantrell makes this point with the following words:

Paterson was a well-to-do Sydney solicitor and journalist: a 'city bushman', as Lawson sneeringly called him. But Lawson himself was a city down-and-out for almost his entire writing career. Steele Rudd's life in Brisbane was made possible by his accounts of the harshness of bush life. Barbara Baynton, later Lady Headley, was an Anglo-Australian socialite and a highly successful businesswoman. Even Furphy found Shepparton, with its proximity to the Melbourne public library, more congenial than the Riverina of which he wrote. The truth is that bushlife is most frequently depicted in our literature of the 1890s as harsh and destructive of all but the basic urge to survive. Or, if Arcadian, as belonging to a bygone age, now lost. Egalitarian

*mateship is less common than loneliness and betrayal. Failure is more real than success.*⁶

There are any number of stories by Henry Lawson and Barbara Baynton to support this gloom and doom thesis. In this book we have, for example, interpreted Lawson's *The Union Buries Its Dead* and Baynton's *Squeaker's Mate* in this vein. Nevertheless physical failure can be transformed into spiritual triumph through the determination to endure and through the wry self-deprecating humour of the characters who are celebrated by the author. Henry Lawson's *The Drover's Wife* may evoke the loneliness and the bitter misery of this poor woman in her God-forsaken environment, but it also shines radiantly with the triumph of her maternal love and her uncomplaining heroism. Similarly, there is undoubtedly grinding poverty and even a tragic threat to love and loyalty in Lawson's *Water Them Geraniums*. But the harrowing pathos of this story is transcended finally by the inarticulate and comic mateship of the neighbour's fourteen-year-old boy and by the unflagging courage and perseverance of his mother right up to the moment of her death. This mother is presented with pitiless realism. She is gaunt, haggard, worn-out and bitterly shamed by her husband's desertion and the arrest of one of her sons for horse-theft. She nags her children horribly. But she is also admired for climbing up apple trees to cut off branches to keep the cows alive in a drought, for fighting bushfires alone, and above all for her brave attempt to adorn her humble shanty by lugging buckets of precious water to keep the few poor geraniums alive. The geraniums are the spirit that flowers in spite of failure and defeat. When Mrs Spicer is dying, she is as self-effacing as ever. After she has died, her children come to the neighbours some four miles away and say, "*She said not to go for you; and she said to be sure and water them geraniums.*" What a brilliant mixture of pathos and humour and what a legacy for a mother to leave her children – a determination to continue the struggle that goes beyond the grave.

Similarly, Jeannie Gunn loses her beloved husband to premature death in the lonely outback, but she rises above this loss to celebrate the beauty and the joy of the year they shared together in *We of the Never Never*. Some two decades later in remote Turkey, Australia's nationhood, rightly or wrongly, was founded on gallant military failure; but this failure was transcended in myth by the spiritual triumph of mateship at Gallipoli. It can thus be argued that there is an inspiration beyond tragedy and that the dominant mood of Australian literature in the 1890s is not gloom and doom, but determination, unflagging courage and wry humour.

Interpreting the 1890s is rather like interpreting the Bible. By selective quotation you can make it mean anything you want to. Everyone is entitled to re-construct an image of the 1890s according to his taste and temperament and a process of selective quotation. I personally am sentimental and anachronistic enough – like some of Australia's contemporary film-makers – to select the romantic bush ballads of Banjo Paterson, the farcical humour of Steele Rudd, the vigorous self-assertion of Miles Franklin and the passionate commitment to

egalitarian democracy made by Henry Lawson. I therefore conclude this chapter by quoting Lawson's poem

Freedom On The Wallaby

*Our fathers toiled for bitter bread
While idlers thrived beside them;
But food to eat and clothes to wear
Their native land denied them.
They left their native land in spite
Of Royalties' regalia,
And so they came, or if they stole
Were sent out to Australia.*

*They struggled hard to make a home,
Hard grubbing 'twas and clearing.
They weren't troubled much with toffs
When they were pioneering;
And now that we have made the land
A garden full of promise,
Old Greed must crook his dirty hand
And come to take it from us.*

*But Freedom's on the Wallaby
She'll knock the tyrants silly,
She's going to light another fire
And boil another billy.
We'll make the tyrants feel the sting
Of those that they would throttle;
They needn't say the fault is ours
If blood should stain the wattle.*

Perhaps the revolutionary fervour of this poem is very much in the realm of wishful thinking. It evokes a vision of a nation based on brotherhood, hard work of the yeoman class and equal opportunity for all. Some eighty years later film directors like Peter Weir in *Gallipoli*, Bruce Beresford in *Breaker Morant* and Ken Hannam in *Sunday Too Far Away* resurrected this vision and inspired a new generation of Australians all over again.

Footnotes

1. As quoted by Ken Goodwin, *A History Of Australian Literature*, Macmillan, 1986, page 38.
2. G.A. Wilkes, "The eighteen nineties" in Grahame Johnston (ed), *Australian Literary Criticism*, Oxford, Melbourne, 1962, page 31.
3. The power of this resonance enjoyed by writers for the *Bulletin* in the 1890s is attested to by the novelist Miles Franklin:

It is hardly possible to overstate how much indigenous ballading and versifying meant in the nineties to those in and below their teens, and on up to grizzled old men too. Each fresh expression of the land and its activities had the stimulation of news. Lawson, Paterson and Ogilvie ably filled the places of the film's favourites today, being of handsome physical appearance and winning personality. The poems of these men and others were recited by everybody, whether he had gifts that way or not. Around camp fires or in huts self-expressionists grew truculent as to who should come first with 'The Man From Snowy River' or 'When the World Was Wide'.

Miles Franklin, *Laughter, Not For A Cage* (Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1956, page 106).

4. Graeme Davison, 'Sydney and the Bush: An urban context for the Australian Legend', *Historical Studies*, 18, 1978, see pp.191-209. See also Alan Frost, "On Finding 'Australia': Mirages, Mythic Images, Historical Circumstances" in *Australian Literary Studies*, Vol.12, No.14, October 1986.
5. Goodwin rightly says that Paterson's ballads "presented a glamorous view of life in the bush, substituting deeds of story-book heroism for the hard grind depicted by Lawson." (Ken Goodwin, *A History of Australian Literature*, Macmillan, 1986, page 45).
6. Leon Cantrell (ed), Introduction to *The 1890s: Stories, Verse and Essays* (St Lucia, Univ. of Queensland Press, 1977, p xx).

A: Bleeding Battlers From Ironbark

The Story: "When the Wolf Was at the Door" in *On Our Selection* by Steele Rudd

Steele Rudd gives depth to his mixture of comic banter and high drama in *On Our Selection* with his starkly realistic evocation of grinding poverty. Even the farcical comedy is based on a first hand knowledge of what it was like trying to scratch a meagre living from a small selection of arid land in a drought. When, in the middle of the drought, there is a grass fire in the paddock, Dad tries to fight it with green bush:

When near the fire Dad stopped running to break a green bush. He hit upon a tough one. Dad was in a hurry. The bush wasn't. Dad swore and tugged with all his might. Then the bush broke and Dad fell heavily upon his back and swore again.¹

This incidental humour is balanced against the dramatic tension of Dad's attempt to save his wooden "cockatoo-fence" from the grass fire. When he fails after hours of frantic flailing at the fire like a windmill, there is the quiet, understated pathos born of despair:

'It's no use', said Dad at last, placing his hand on his head and throwing down his bough. We did the same and watched the fence go.

Contrasted with this despair of helplessness is the strange behaviour of Joe. Joe pulls the wings off flies and pretends to admire the "splendid sight" of the fence burning down. Whether Joe is engaged in black humour or whether he is simple-minded is not revealed in this text. Also contrasted with Dad's hard work and despair is Dan's challenge to his father's wisdom. Dan refuses to stay any longer on the unviable, unworkable farm. He grins with the confidence of youth and goes off shearing, ushered out of the house by the melodramatic curses of Dad: " 'Go!' said Dad furiously, pointing to the door. 'leave my roof, you thankless dog!' " But when Dan comes back from shearing with money for food and new clothes, how he is welcomed back! There is no farce in this welcome, only joy and relief. The sad futility of the family's back-breaking work is realised in the final paragraph

And how Dan talked of tallies, belly-wool, and ringers, and implored Dad, over and over again, to go shearing, or rolling up,

or branding – anything rather than work and starve on the selection.

But Dad stayed on the farm.

Perhaps our Australian society today needs to borrow some of this brave man's proud determination to make a go of it. The humour of Steele Rudd's *On Our Selection* is given depth and meaning by the family's struggle to survive. Dad is in debt to the storekeeper for flour to make humble bread; his neighbour Mr Anderson is in debt to Dad for a fence Dad built; Mr Anderson is in debt waiting for payment for chaff. In the meantime there is no flour, no sugar and no tea and their clothes are more patches than original garment. When Mother gets sick, there is no doctor and no medicine, but only loving nursing from Dad. Steele Rudd does not write farce. He writes a tragi-comic celebration of the courage and the true grit of a bleeding battler from Ironbark.

Footnote

1. Steele Rudd, "When the Wolf Was at the Door" from *On Our Selection*, in *The Penguin Book of Australian Short Stories* (ed. Harry Heseltine), pp. 41-44.

The Film: *On Our Selection*, directed by Ken Hall

In 1920 and in 1921 Raymond Langford directed two films based on Steele Rudd's popular short story collection *On Our Selection*. I have not seen these films but have been told that they were of high quality. In 1932 Ken Hall directed another film of *On Our Selection*. It begins with a bushland symphony of bird and animal sounds that was apparently very popular with audiences of the day. Igor Auzins uses a similar symphony of insect and dingo calls in *We of the Never Never* when Mr and Mrs Gunn share their first experience together of campfire romanticism in the outback of the Northern Territory.

Much of Ken Hall's film presents human interaction as vaudeville farce slowed down to a hayseed drawl. This farce only captures the most superficial aspect of Steele Rudd's sketches. Steele Rudd's farcical humour is really meant as a brave front to cover up despair at drought, bushfire and barren soil. This underlying despair is lost in Ken Hall's film.

Some of Steele Rudd's witty one-liners survive the translation into film. For example, "*That man is just so successful! He came here two years ago to his selection with only two pounds to his name and now he owes two thousand pounds!*" This is wit born of financial desperation. Or to take another example: "*Stone the crows! It's so dry, all we can do is cross the sheep with the emus and breed ostrich feathers.*" The visual jokes of the film do not live up to the succinctness of this wit. Often the farce is too exaggerated and too protracted for our modern, sophisticated tastes.

Set amongst the farce is a melodramatic plot contrasting a vile city slicker and an honest country boy who vie for the hand of the beautiful country girl. The girl's honour and virtue are threatened because, understandably, she yearns for the excitement and the entertainment of the city. Much of this melodrama seems borrowed from Hollywood's silent movies of the early 1920s.

The basis of both the farce and the melodrama is to prove that country folks are the salt of the earth. Country folks are good-hearted, do an honest day's work and live cheerfully in poverty and deprivation. City slickers and politicians are deceitful and untrustworthy blackguards who sponge parasitically off the honest labour of the man on the land. Much of the film is based on a class-conscious celebration of the fight of the little man to survive the greedy attacks of the rich squatter who is determined to foreclose on the mortgage. This perhaps is one of the reasons why Australian audiences in the 1930s depression loved the series of farces about Dad and Dave. Farce is obviously a more popular medium than intellectual satire or elevated tragedy.

The most popular figure in these farces is always the patriarch Grandad Rudd. He clings to his land with fierce pride and independence. Morally he is

undefeatable. He is loved by film audiences for his embarrassment when a snobbish female visitor catches him in his long nightshirt with no trousers on. He is revered for his determination, after losing everything in the drought but his land, to start afresh. This myth of a poor but brave man tackling the hostile outback environment is what Australians celebrated when they went to see the films of *On Our Selection*.

Footnote

1. Tom Weir calls Ken Hall's *On Our Selection* a "vulgar remake" and compares it unfavourably with Langford's earlier silent film of *On Our Selection*. (Tom Weir, "No Daydreams of Our Own: The Film as National Self-Expression" in Albert Moran and Tom O'Regan, *An Australian Film Reader*, Currency Press, Sydney, 1985, pp. 146-147.

B: Beyond The Mateship Myth: Stoic Endurance

The Story: *Squeaker's Mate*, by Barbara Baynton

Squeaker's Mate is a story in Barbara Baynton's *Bush Studies* which she published in 1902. Baynton drew on her early life experiences in the country near Scone in the Hunter River Valley of New South Wales. Most of Baynton's stories are pessimistic, although they derive some inspiration from the ability of the female characters to endure suffering. The representation of nature is almost uniformly bleak. Amusingly enough, Baynton did not stay behind in outback N.S.W. to share the woes of her female protagonists. As Goodwin puts it, "*she married as her third husband an English baron and travelled regularly between the Melbourne suburb of Toorak and London in her search for antiques and fine china*".¹

Squeaker's Mate takes the Australian myth of mateship among men in the outback and grimly satirizes it. Baynton creates a woman who is commonly regarded as "*the best long-haired mate that ever stepped in petticoats*",² until she is crippled by a falling tree. She is taller than her man and before her accident she did nine-tenths of the hard work on the small selection for which she paid with her own money. Why then, we ask, did she allow the land to be registered in Squeaker's name? Does it perhaps have something to do with her shame and grief at her barrenness? Perhaps she reasons that if she cannot give Squeaker an heir, she can give him land. Or perhaps she thinks that if she gives him presents, she will be able to control his hysterical, alcoholic temperament and get him to help develop the selection that is her only dream in life.

Baynton has a wider perspective than film director Baker. She is able to make use of concentrated narrative technique to show the opinions of the neighbouring men and women of Squeaker and his mate. Their opinion is of course unanimous on Squeaker's moral worthlessness, but on the other hand, although they think highly of his mate as a work horse, they cannot warm to her as a woman or even as a human being. Her grim independence makes her unapproachable.

Baynton also makes more use of dialogue than Baker does in the film. Baker prefers to exploit the long, bitter silences after Squeaker's hysterical outbursts. Baynton uses Squeaker's brutal abuse of his crippled wife to create a metaphorical parallel between her and the snakes he fears so much:

'Erh,' said he, 'see! yer carnt, yer jes' ther same as a snake w'en ees back's broke, on'y yer don't bite yerself like a snake does w'en 'e carnt crawl.' (p.16)

This devastating parallel with a snake becomes a leitmotif expressing unbelievable cruelty as Squeaker tries to taunt her into committing suicide. Having thus treacherously left his mate in the lurch, Squeaker then violates the other great unwritten law of the outback farmer: he maltreats his sheep because he is too lazy to let them get to water. He then sells the sheep in order to have himself fitted out like a dandy.

It is astonishing how credible his villainy is. Baynton achieves this credibility by showing how weak he is in the middle of his brutality and self-indulgence. When he is trying to get the crippled woman out of his house, so that he can bring in a new woman, he doesn't simply throw her out. He is too scared of her still:

'Try could yer crawl yerself?' he coaxed, looking at her bulk. (p.19)

As the crippled woman lies helpless in the shack with nothing to look forward to but her eventual death, Baynton chooses to vary the grim tone with touches of both melodrama and farce. She evokes the eeriness of the lonely bush nights with these words:

However, she was not fanciful, and being a bush scholar knew 'twas a dingo, when a long whine came from the scrub on the skirts of which lay the axe under the worm-eaten tree. That quivering wail from the billabong lying murkily mystic towards the East was only the cry of the fearing curlew. (p.16)

There are two moments of farce which could almost have come from Steele Rudd. The first is Squeaker's habitual trick of pretending that he has been bitten by a snake so that he may have permission to drink a pint of brandy. The second is realised in much more detail. Squeaker works at the command of the new fancy woman. He tries to harness the horse to fetch water but does his job so sloppily that the horse takes fear and bolts. Baynton elects to create farce out of Squeaker's great incompetence, perhaps in order to relieve the grotesquely tragic mood:

Hours after, on the plain that met the horizon, loomed two specks: the distance between them might be gauged, for the larger was Squeaker. (p.23)

In preparing us for the climactic final scene, Baynton has the advantage of being able to narrate to us the fancy woman's secret thoughts. Baynton creates great tension by emphasising the fancy woman's terror of the crippled woman's dog. She is also able to make quite clear the ravaging thirst of the fancy woman which, combined with her fear of snakes, drives her to try to steal the cripple's meagre water supply. Similarly, Baynton has the advantage of conveying succinctly the cripple's secret emotions of jealousy at the fancy woman's

pregnancy and youth. The crippled woman is mortified by her barrenness and this is a large factor in heightening her determination to get revenge.

Baynton succeeds in creating tension, suspense and abrupt horror in the final scene. The bony fingers of the half-paralysed human being grab the fancy woman caught in the low act of stealing. Such is Baynton's art with mood and characterisation that even this evil we accept readily as convincing. The style here at the climax is masterful:

Down, down the woman drew her prey. Her lips had drawn back from her teeth, and her breath almost scorched the face that she held so close for the starting eyes to gloat over. Her exultation was so great, that she could only gloat and gasp, and hold with a tension that had stopped the victim's circulation. As the wounded, robbed tigress might hold and look, she held and looked. (p. 25)

Baker is quite successful in translating these words into visual imagery by concentrating his close-up camera on the savage emotion that has suddenly sprung into the cripple's normally inscrutable face and recording her horrible groans and gurgles of murderous triumph.

Baynton's ending is clever in varying the tone of horror in the revenge. There is no proof that the cripple has been killed by Squeaker's blows across her arms. She has perhaps returned to her former impassivity because her revenge has been completed. The fancy woman has taken to her heels in farcical terror, hightailing it across the plains in search of town. And Squeaker betrays his fancy woman by begging that the vicious dog be called off him and put on to "sool" her as she flees. Squeaker then even tries to arouse sympathy in the heart of his old mate whom he has so shamefully betrayed and humiliated. Fittingly, her faithful dog's teeth fasten on him and pull him back. The ending is brilliantly left open.

It is difficult to imagine a more savage satire on the romantic myth of mateship in the whole of Australian literature.

Footnotes

1. Ken Goodwin, *A History of Australian Literature*, p. 43
2. Barbara Baynton, *Squeaker's Mate* in Sally Krimmer and Alan Lawson (eds), *The Portable Barbara Baynton*, Univ. Queensland Press, 1980, p. 11. All future page references are to this edition of the text.

The Film: *Squeaker's Mate*, directed by David Baker

David Baker has shifted the locale of this short story by Barbara Baynton from the plains of north western New South Wales to the majestic Gippsland forest of Victoria. The sheep have been replaced by a handful of cows and the two dogs have been reduced to one, the faithful companion and guard dog of Squeaker's mate herself. David Baker's crew has designed a set amidst the giant gums of the Gippsland forest that is very close to a parody of the famous triptych painting by McCubbin of the man, his wife and their child in the big tree wilderness. This original 19th century painting stood for pioneering, hard work rewarded by success, family togetherness and the wholesomeness of a new life style on a new continent. But David Baker's set contains a poorly built hut and an even sloppier shack for the poultry. After the woman breaks her back while felling a giant tree, she drags herself over to this shack where she lies like a living corpse on her grave-to-be. Sometimes we see her eye peering out through a crack in the timbers silently taking in the way in which Squeaker is corrupting and destroying her dream of proud self-sufficiency.

The casting of David Mitchell as Squeaker and Myra Skipper as Squeaker's mate is excellent. He is skinny and neurasthenic, hysterical, labile, bone-lazy, self-indulgent, deceitful, treacherous and alcoholic. By contrast, she is broad of frame and bulky of body; her face too is broad and impassive, strong, determined, capable, and in the end, patiently enduring while she waits for her moment of revenge. Sometimes, however, one feels obliged to question the clarity of motive in Squeaker's acts in the film. For example, in the story he takes a crowbar to lever the fallen branch off his crushed mate. In the film ^{Squeaker} he doesn't seem capable of understanding that she is not resting or sleeping. She is crushed and paralysed and there are flies all over her face, but he simply ignores her. Instead of caring for her, he rushes off to sell the honey that she has harvested. We wonder whether he is sub-normal or whether he is evil personified. David Mitchell is well cast as Squeaker, but inclines to overact a little in the expressionist style.

One of the strengths of the film is the silence of the woman. Before her accident, when she sees that Squeaker is slacking off and shirking, her contemptuous eyes say it all. After her accident when she learns from cruelly chattering and mocking Squeaker that she will never walk again, she lies in silence and broods. When she does talk, it is only to offer practical advice on how to run the farm and she talks in a low, flat monotone, in contrast to his squeaks of self-pity and alcoholic rage. Sometimes the camera goes from close-ups of her brooding face to the hysterical features of Squeaker and from there to her faithful dog which is as inscrutable as she is. We feel her stubborn determination to hold on to their property in spite of her helplessness. Only in two moments of truth

does she show her intensity of feeling. On the first occasion she wakes from a nightmare in which she relives the tree falling on her and she bellows in terror like a slaughtered bull. Her scream contrasts with her normal impassivity and is expressionist and surreal in nature. On the second occasion she finally achieves the revenge for which she has been waiting a full year. Before we discuss this revenge, let us consider the second woman, the fancy woman whom Squeaker brings home to replace her. Woman as object able to be replaced.

In the story by Barbara Baynton, it is made quite clear that this woman was pregnant by another man before she even met Squeaker and that she was using him for temporary shelter. This is not so clear in the film and one wrongly assumes that she is expecting Squeaker's child and that she has every intention of staying with him permanently. In fact, in the film she actually bears the child in Squeaker's camp and looks after it in the washing basket.

I thought that more time needed to be put into the motivations of the fancy woman in the film. Not long after she arrives, she walks over to the bed-ridden Squeaker's mate and offers to help look after her. By the end of both story and film, however, she is planning to commit the dastardly act of stealing the crippled woman's bowl of drinking water. Baynton's story has a long build-up of tension in order to ensure that her pre-meditated moral crime will be well motivated. This is not true of Baker's film in which insufficient stress is laid on the fancy woman's terror of the cripple's guard dog. Perhaps, however, her terror of the snakes in the creek is sufficient explanation for her change in attitude. The film does have a scene in which Squeaker is actually bitten by a snake, although he doesn't seem to suffer any ill-effects from the bite. In the story, however, he only pretends to be bitten by a snake so that he will have an excuse to drink rum. In this sense the film provides better motivation for the fancy woman's terror because we know that there really are snakes by the creek and she knows it too.

In the final scenes of the film Baker makes a big change from Baynton's story. He has Squeaker bludgeon his first mate to death with a pole. She dies while he is trying to ward off the attack of her faithful dog. He survives this terrifying attack, though exactly how is not made clear. In the last shot of the film Squeaker is standing where he was standing at the beginning of the film, relieving himself. He then turns around slowly to face the camera with his fly half-open and groans. It seems to be strongly hinted that the dog has mauled his genitalia. I certainly can think of no other explanation for this final shot in the film. It is curious that Baker did not simply end the film with the dog killing him by slashing away at his throat.

Squeaker's Mate is a memorable and horrifying film and fully realises the director's intention of satirising the old Australian myth of mateship. Instead of giving generous help to his mate in times of need while pioneering, Squeaker betrays and reviles her, taunting her to commit suicide. The weakness, the cruelty and the treachery of self-indulgent Squeaker are all visually realised and the savage contrast between man and woman is etched in my mind.

On the other hand the woman does express another ideal of the outback, namely stoic endurance. While she is healthy, she is strong, laconic and hard-working. After she is crippled, she is silent and uncomplaining. She is as inspiring as Henry Lawson's *The Drover's Wife*.

The Story: *The Union Buries Its Dead*, by Henry Lawson

This is a brief sketch of a young man's funeral in outback New South Wales. There is a desolate air of waste and futility to the funeral, a spiritually depressing feeling that in this life we are all strangers to one another. There is little solace offered for the loneliness of life in the outback and the ultimate solitude of death.

Henry Lawson's purpose in writing this sketch is to satirise and parody the specious romanticism with which funerals are often depicted in literature. Very few men attend the funeral, even though it is the funeral of a member of the General Labourers' Union. There is no union solidarity or companionship. The members of the union are too drunk to give a respectful farewell to the young man. Booze is the only religion and the only solace for men who work in the heat, the dust and the desolation of the dreary, semi-arid land between Bourke, Cobar and Wilcannia. It is ironic that the young man drowned in the only water to be found within hundreds and hundreds of miles, the Darling River.

The men are generally irreligious and sarcastically refer to the priest as the devil. There is a further satire on the "*ignorant and conceited*" publican who tries to present himself as "*a great and important pillar of the Church*" by holding a hat over the priest's head during the service. Lawson communicates farce and nervous anxiety about observing the decent proprieties in this funeral. It is not a bourgeois concern for hollow conventions that move him, but a sad determination to send off the dead young man with dignity and respect.

The story is filled with Lawson's powerful vision of grimness, futility and nihilism. When the hard clods of clay bounce on the shabby cloth of the coffin, he says, "*It didn't matter much – nothing does.*" The story culminates in Lawson's contemptuous parody of cheap, romantic solace:

I have left out the wattle – because it wasn't there. I have also neglected to mention the heart-broken old mate, with his grizzled head bowed and great pearly drops streaming down his rugged cheeks. He was absent – he was probably 'Out Back' ... I have left out the 'sad Australian sunset' because the sun was not going down at the time ... we shall not be able to give any information to heart-broken Mother or Sister or Wife ... for we have already forgotten the name.

Henry Lawson, the apostle of mateship and the celebrator of the lonely battler, offers us little inspiration in this the grimmest of all his stories. The conventional romanticism of facile tears is spurned. We are left with the sardonic toughness and stoic endurance of the bushman narrator.¹

Footnote

1. What I have termed "stoic endurance" in this chapter corresponds in some measure to what John Carroll in *Intruders in the Bush* calls a "dark strain of scepticism". Carroll's passage is worth quoting in full:

Enough has been said already in this book to deflate the bushman, and his egalitarian-mateship traits, as the representative of what is typically Australian. I wish to propose an alternative character trait ... I refer to scepticism. Australian scepticism has two strains, one dark and deeply pessimistic, without the dignity and idealism of tragedy; the other is more epicurean, carrying a jocular light-hearted irreverence towards life.

The dark strain of scepticism is embodied in the theme of failure in Australian culture. It has no more evocative representation than in what is arguably the finest short story in Australian literature, Henry Lawson's Water Them Geraniums.

(John Carroll, ed., *Intruders in the Bush. The Australian Quest for Identity*, Oxford Univ. Press, Melbourne, 1982).

The Film: *Three In One*, directed by Cecil Holmes, introduced by John MacCallum

This film is a collection of three short films, all of which are expressions of the Australian myth of mateship.¹

The first film is entitled *Joe Wilson's Mates* and is based on Henry Lawson's story *The Union Buries Its Dead*. The second film is based on a yarn by Frank Hardy and is called *A Load of Wood*. The third short film is based on a contemporary short story by Ralph Peterson and is called *The City*.

When John MacCallum introduces *Joe Wilson's Mates*, he voices the accepted tradition that early settlers found Australia to be harsh, back-breaking country and that they found they could help each other out of the rough spots by being mates and sticking together. John MacCallum and Cecil Holmes are so eager to demonstrate this theory that they completely misinterpret Henry Lawson's story, *The Union Buries Its Dead*. As Lawson meant the story, there was no mateship-solace in the funeral. Everyone is a stranger to everyone else and rural Australia is populated by drunkards who don't care about anything other than who's "shouting" the next beer. Out of this grim story Cecil Holmes has made a heart-warming comedy in which all the men of the Australian Workers' Union leave the bar to provide a "good send off" to the dead stranger. The story becomes, by implication, a celebration in film of workers' solidarity and unionism in Australia. The film was made in 1957 and creates a sombre mood with its black and white photography of the horse-drawn hearse toiling up the bare hillside to the cemetery. There is almost an Ingmar Bergman sensation of space, sky and emptiness as the funeral cortege is outlined against the horizon on a bare ridge.

Contrasted with this melancholy mood are scenes of farce and simple bush hilarity that seem straight out of Steele Rudd's *On Our Selection*. The characters in the country pub called the Wool Pack Hotel licensed to Patrick Rooney wear a variety of strange headgear and play even stranger musical instruments. The hats range from a bowler hat and a top hat, somewhat the worse for wear, to various pieces of battered felt and an old swaggy's hat with burnt corks dangling around his face. The music consists of choral renditions of Click Go The Shears and The Road to Gundagai with accompaniment provided by a one-string "guitar" comprised of a fishing line tied to a tea chest, a rake covered with little bells, and a penny whistle. One presumes that this musical ensemble was "all the go" in the outback pubs of the 1890s.

The other home-made entertainment at this pub consists of tall stories. For example, a farmer couldn't stand the galahs making so much noise in his favourite gum tree, so he covered the whole tree with bird lime and waited till the

galahs came in the evening to roost. He then fired off his rifle and the galahs took off, lifting the gum tree out of the earth by its roots. The gum tree was last seen five hundred feet up disappearing through the clouds. All of this is very amusing, but of course completely irrelevant to Henry Lawson's story *The Union Buries Its Dead*.

When the film finally returns to the lines of Henry Lawson's sombre story, it does use some of Lawson's details such as the vulgar publican who tries to hold a hat over the head of the catholic priest while he reads the burial service. All the mourners are full of sympathy for the unknown dead man and his membership card of the Australian Workers' Union is passed around among them as though it were a sacred icon. At the end, the old swaggy recites a Henry Lawson poem, enunciating carefully through his fringe of burnt corks and then walks off down the dusty track alone. The send-off that the union mates have given to the dead man is also in a sense the send-off they have given to the lonely, old swaggy who, as they say, has known in life only "the school of hard knocks".

The second film in *Three in One* is called *A Load of Wood*. It is based on a story by Frank Hardy. The story has a predictable ideological bias and consists of a heart-warming tale about a worker called Darkie who, in the 1930s depression, decides to help his mates, all of whom are like himself, unemployed. Darkie's way of helping his mates is to break the law. He persuades one of his mates, almost all of whom are timid and frightened of the majesty of the law and the inviolability of private property, to accompany him at midnight on a wood-stealing foray. It may sound rather strange that Hardy should base the pathos of his story on little children and widows freezing to death in Australia of all places. But Hardy has set the story at Jindabyne in Australia's Snowy Mountains "where the hills are twice as steep" and the mercury plummets in the winter. Darkie in fact plans to steal from the rich and give to the poor. He is a modern equivalent of Ned Kelly and Robin Hood. The devotion of his life to mateship is beyond criticism. He distributes the wood that he steals to widows, to poor families with little children, and to his fellow unemployed mates who didn't have his courage to take action.

Darkie speaks harsh words to his elected member of Parliament. Democratic representation in a multi-party democracy is not exactly given a boost in this film. In fact the member of Parliament who obviously represents the rich, hard-hearted bosses, arrives in an expensive new motor car and feels nothing but disdain and irritation for the unemployed who pester him. Small wonder that this film is screened in the Eastern Bloc of Europe to show members of the communist party what living conditions are really like in capitalist Australia!

This short film stars Jerome Levy as Darkie and Leonard Teale as his timid mate. The acting is somewhat naive and exaggerated by contemporary standards. Leonard Teale's "fruity" Oxford accents sound strange on an unemployed worker in the Great Depression. Nevertheless *A Load of Wood* is an amusing and likeable enough film within the limitations of its purpose as propaganda.

The third film is based on a story by Ralph Peterson called *The City*. The plot is a recreation of the legend of Romeo and Juliet set in the working-class slums of Sydney in 1956. Ted spray-paints Holden cars on an old-fashioned assembly line. Kathie sells cheap cotton print dresses. They cannot get married because they do not have enough money for the down-payment on a house. Ted has a drink with his older workmate who solves Ted's economic love-worries in a trice. And here is the theme of the film, the theme that relates it to the other two short films in this trilogy: Ted's mate will pass around the hat at work. The mates will all "dob in" and Ted will have enough money to put a deposit on a block of land and build his own house. It is imperative to bear in mind that Henry Lawson once wrote a story about passing around the hat in a country pub and that he inclined ideologically to mateship as a brotherhood of would-be socialists. This trilogy of films traces a trade-union, socialist tradition of working-class solidarity in Australian art.

Footnote

1. Seen ideologically, mateship can be interpreted as solidarity of the workers against the ruling classes. It is therefore not surprising to hear Tom Weir remark, "A nod of sympathy and respect is due to works like Cecil Holmes's *Three in One* (which seems to be paying for itself mainly from exhibitions in Iron Curtain countries)" in "No Daydreams of Our Own: The Film as Natural Self-Expression", *Nation* 22 November 1958. Also in *An Australian Film Reader*, ed. by Albert Moran and Tom O'Regan, Currency Press, Sydney, 1958, page 147.

Squeaker (David Mitchell) bludgeons his mate to death while his fancy woman tries to tear herself loose in Squeaker's Mate, directed by David Baker.



Squeaker's Mate (Myra Skipper) challenges the worm-eaten tree that becomes her nemesis in *Squeaker's Mate*, directed by David Baker.



CHAPTER THREE

Pom Bashers, Anzac Martyrs and Trade Unionists

The Film: *Gallipoli*, directed by Peter Weir

Gallipoli is inspired by Weir's admiration of Archy's and Frank's determination to win. He shows them driving their bodies past endurance. Each is loyal to his own talent in running, as well as loyal to his mate. Both are motivated to find the meaning of their lives in achievement. Against their youth and their determination to achieve, Weir pits the cruel meaninglessness of classical Greek fate. It is an unequal contest. Archy and Frank are doomed to failure and death in a dubious cause. Archy's innocent trust in patriotic idealism and Frank's loyal mateship are romanticised by Weir as are the qualities of youth, vigour and joy in life's adventure.

The tragedy is twofold: firstly there is the grim sacrifice to fate of a young man who is endowed with the divine grace of Melville's Billy Budd. Secondly there is a bitter sense of waste for us viewers in the 1980s because we know with the advantage of hindsight that Archy has died in an ignoble war of imperialist greed. His idealism was misused. He was an insignificant pawn easily sacrificed for a corrupt political power that was not even the government of his own country¹.

Noticeably absent from the characterisation of Archy is any sign of worldliness or understanding of international politics. Frank has certain insights into politics and the lies of propaganda. These insights spring from the questions he has about his Irish family's poverty and the Irish struggle for freedom from the British. It should not be forgotten that the Irish rebellion against the British began in Dublin in 1916 and that the Irish were negotiating for military assistance from the Germans at this time. The Anzac Gallipoli campaign was fought shortly before in 1915. But Frank's glimmer of political understanding does not help him against the power of fate. His intelligent cynicism is brushed aside and he is swept forward into war by an irresistible tide of ignorant patriotism and youthful enthusiasm for adventure. Today's Australian patriots might do well to reflect that the same misguided emotions that motivated Archy to go to war caused many young Germans and Japanese to volunteer for their country's military forces in the 1930s. Conversely, the resistance of many young Australians to conscription for the Vietnam war may well indicate a more comprehensive socio-political education of our youth.

The mateship of Archy (Mark Lee) and Frank (Mel Gibson) begins competitively with sprint racing. Their race is repeated joyfully around the pyramids of Egypt. It is enacted tragically for the last time in the trenches of Gallipoli in the Turkish Dardanelles. Their mateship crosses class and ethnic barriers in a demonstration of Australian egalitarianism. The Anglo-Saxon Anglican Archy who is born into Australia's wealthy propertied gentry becomes a

mate of the Irish Catholic Frank who is born into urban poverty. When Archy finally gets Frank admitted to the Light Horse, he has helped Frank to class-climb from the proletarian infantry to the prestigious cavalry. But in this film anyway, there is no inherent snobbism in the Australian variety of prestige. All the Anzac soldiers in Cairo make common cause to mock the British officers. They mount donkeys, don monocles and mimic the British officers' Oxford English. They are celebrating the myth of a classless Australian society by mocking the affectations of the English upper classes.

In Cairo this mockery of the British is only harmless sport. In Gallipoli the tension between the Australians and the British becomes tragically serious. The film shows Australian soldiers being sent to their certain death while British soldiers have cups of tea on the beach. The film shows a tyrannical British officer disregarding the pleas of an Australian officer in the field and re-ordering a suicidal charge at a nest of entrenched Turkish machine guns.

There were many battles in Flanders in WW1 in which Australian and Canadian colonial troops were used as expendable cannon fodder. British casualties at Gallipoli were, however, quite high and in this regard the film *Gallipoli* might well be regarded as tendentious. Mythically, through this film, Australians are revenging themselves on two centuries of smug English condescension; they are over-compensating for two centuries of feeling inferior about their history as a convict settlement for English rejects and Irish riff-raff. This is why the film *Gallipoli* alleges that some British officers were arrogant and cowardly whereas Australian officers fought beside their men and were brave unto death.

In his farewell letter, just before he sprints hopelessly to his death, a mindless but magnificent leopard for the very last time, Archy writes: "We hope to give a good account of ourselves and our country." This is really an echo of the Ned Kelly myth: "*Such is life. Tell them that I died game.*" What a pity that these heroic Anzacs did not have even the rudiments of a political or a historical education and what a pity that they didn't think to do what the Russian soldiers did in 1917: perform a collective mutiny against incompetent leadership and walk away from a war of capitalist greed.

How peculiar it is that an ill-conceived English military campaign in far-away Turkey could have produced a national Australian myth. It is even more peculiar that this myth is still revered by the majority of Australians today, some seventy years and two or three wars later. The Australian soldiers were not fighting to defend their country in Turkey. They were fighting for England. England was fighting in a squabble of European countries for more colonies in the southern hemisphere and more capitalist profits. The only way in which Gallipoli can reasonably be salvaged as a patriotic myth for new generations of well-educated Australians is to deplore the purpose of the war and restrict our celebration of the Gallipoli campaign to a legend of gallantry and mateship in defeat.

It is significant that over three-quarters of this film is not really about war at all. It is a celebration of bushmanship and the myth of the tall, lanky,

sun-bronzed sportsman. There are thematic links, for example, between the early parts of the film *Gallipoli* and the recent movie *Coolangatta Gold*. There is the same celebration of fitness and determination, the same heroic approach to sport, not as a game but as a sacred, religious rite of initiation into true manhood. One of the features that distinguishes *Gallipoli* from the trite melodrama of *Coolangatta Gold* is its humour. For example, the myth of bushmanship in *Gallipoli* is illustrated by Archy's natural ability with horses and his much vaunted talent for navigating across a saltlake desert by using his watch as a compass. But this heroic myth is satirically undercut when they are saved in the desert by an ancient camel driver who treats them to steak, water and bush yarns about his life in the real outback.

The camel driver has the best joke on Australian nationalism in the whole film. He is told that Australia is fighting in a war on the other side of the globe in order to stop the Germans there from crossing to our side of the globe, invading Australia and taking our country away from us. He looks slowly around at the revolting saltpan and the mile after mile of arid sand, heat and flies and says quietly, "*They're welcome to it.*"

There is similar humour to undercut the pathos of mateship. The Anzacs stick up for each other in Cairo and insist on a fair go in the bazaar. But their self-congratulatory feelings of triumph disappear when they discover that they have revenged themselves on the wrong stall-keeper. Their satirical mockery of the English officers on horseback is also carried out with the irrepressible jo-caricature.

The wit of some of the film's one-line jokes reveals the script-writing talents of playwright David Williamson. The line I liked best occurs when the albino boy is almost rejected as a volunteer by the military medicos because his teeth are so bad. He replies indignantly, "*Yer s'posed to shoot the enemy, mate, not them.*"

As one has come to expect of a Peter Weir film, the mood-photography is superb. The open ranges of West Australia, the mystery of the Sphinx and the pyramids in Egypt, and the night-landing on the beaches of Gallipoli are all captured with exquisite beauty. But the key to this film is its romanticism. The young men are in love with adventure, careless commitment, generosity, mateship, self-sacrifice and death. The pathos of their noble, premature deaths is shown to be spiritually superior to our own egotistically over-planned and sceptically uncommitted lives.

Footnote

1. This interpretation of *Gallipoli* as tragedy is developed from the persuasive argument of Sam Rohdie in his article "Gallipoli, Peter Weir and an Australian Art Cinema" as quoted in Albert Moran and Tom O'Regan (eds), *An Australian Film Reader* (Currency Press, 1985), pp. 194-197. Rohdie says: "The film in part ... is pure *Boy's Own*: sharply outlined handsome heroes doing good deeds, brave, courageous, noble, romantic, pure of spirit. But something else is at work in the film ... some other force ... (which) sweeps them both (Archy and Frank) ... to Gallipoli and to actions and courses they cannot understand, nor control, nor alter".

The Film: *Breaker Morant*, directed by Bruce Beresford

This film invites us Australians, some one hundred years after the Boer War, to predicate our contemporary patriotism on "Pom-bashing". The English are satirised for the spit and polish of their military discipline in contrast to the informal mateship and democratic manners of the Australian soldiers. The English are further satirised for their murderous hypocrisy in making convenient scapegoats of Australian guerilla fighters. It is suggested that the Australian troops are used to do the dirty work of fighting for the English and are then sacrificed to political convenience. The English need to keep the Germans out of the Boer War; they are not willing to share the diamond wealth of the South African colony with the land-hungry Germans. The Australians have allegedly killed a Lutheran missionary. The Germans see this as an excuse to enter the war to uphold the dignity of their national religion. The Australians must be sacrificed so that the English can propitiate the Germans.

The Australian guerillas are defended in the court-martial by an Australian country town solicitor played with anger and integrity by Jack Thompson. The Australian lawyer demolishes the prosecution's case. He may not have the right university degree or a courteous manner, but his passion for truth is overwhelming. The hearts of Australian viewers are thrilled by this plain-speaking, democratic Australian challenge to English hierarchy and tradition. Whether this film is close to historical fact or is a highly biased piece of myth-making is irrelevant to the psychological needs of the film director and the viewers. The trial of Breaker Morant could well be Australia's Dreyfus-case¹, a watershed case in the conflict between justice and propaganda, truth and political expediency.

The three Australian martyr-soldiers in this film fall into three mythical categories. Breaker Morant (Edward Woodward) plays the black sheep of noble English parentage seeking his fortune in the colonies. Lt. Peter Handcock (Bryan Brown) plays the small-town larrikin, the kind of honest larrikin² who has limited aesthetic sensibilities but a big heart. Capt. Alfred Taylor (John Waters) plays the hapless Australian innocent, a victim-patriot who has swallowed all the pseudo-rhetoric about King and Lord Kitchener and loyalty to the Empire. All three are perfectly cast and give performances which have Australian viewers aching with outrage at the dishonest British hierarchy.

For Breaker Morant to star as the tragically flawed hero of truth and duty and as a democratic guerilla fighter, it is necessary that the English appear as cowardly, snobbish, hypocritical, condescending, deceitful and always prepared to sacrifice a mere colonial if it is expedient.

Linguistically, the Australians are given lines of aggressive slang to speak in order to emphasise their difference from the pretentious accents of the English officers. "*Come outside and we'll settle it, mate. Anytime*", "*Hold your horses*" and other such phrases contrast in the formal court-martial with the legal jargon and the high English of the court judges and the prosecution lawyer. The Australian country-town solicitor is referred to contemptuously as "*my learned colonial colleague*". These techniques are unsubtle but emotionally very effective.³

It is interesting that Australia, at the time of the Boer War, had just succeeded in winning Federation as a nation and a measure of independence from England. So too were the Boers trying to establish themselves as a nation and defend their land against the English invaders. But no attempt is made in this film to establish common cause between Australians and Boers. The Boers are depicted as cruel, shaggy ruffians, as cowards who kill sneakily from ambush, who hide behind priests' robes and who mutilate captured prisoners before executing them. The Australians are shown as brilliant fighters who are good enough to save the lives of the English court martial officers from a Boer attack but not good enough to be given a pardon for their gallantry. The English policy of expedient lies and slimy double-dealing underlines the romantic contrast between the Australians who are honest, virile soldiers and the English officers who are treacherous, hypocritical politicians.

Part of the Boer War involved commando fighting behind the lines. Terrorism, sabotage, and guerilla warfare were carried out by non-uniformed men, women, children and priests. The parallels between the Boer War and the Vietnam War are close. It is therefore doubly regrettable that the patriotic Boer nationalists were not given a braver image. It is particularly ironic when you think that the South African location shots were filmed in South Australia which has landscape similarities with the Boer homeland and also once provided refuge for Lutheran emigrants.

Ethically it is interesting that the Australian soldiers used as their defence the plea that they were following orders. This plea was rejected at the Nuremberg war-trials of German war-criminals. Nevertheless this defence-plea serves to mount a passionate charge against Lord Kitchener, who ordered that Boer prisoners of war be shot but refused to take moral responsibility for his order.

The film gains great pathos and emotional depth by its flashbacks to scenes of fighting and by further flashbacks to peaceful scenes of love and high hopes before the war. The lyric beauty of these scenes contrasts starkly with the grim, bare walls of the courthouse. There is no way out of the Australians' predicament but death.

The historical character of Breaker Morant may or may not have been quite as gallant and as unimpeachable as he is presented in the film. Certainly his outback ballads are as romantic as any of Banjo Paterson's. Breaker Morant was

a daring bushman and drover and helped to establish the romantic outback myth of the 1890s in such poems as *Westward Ho!*

*There are chops upon the embers, which same are
close-up done,
From as fine a four-tooth wether as there is on
Crossbred's run;
'Twas a proverb on the Darling, the truth of which
I hold:
'That mutton's ay the sweetest which was never
bought nor sold.'*

*Out of fifty thousand wethers surely Crossbred
shouldn't miss
A sheep or so to travellers – faith, 'tis dainty
mutton, this –
Let's drink a nip to Crossbred; ah, you drain it
with a grin,
Then shove along the billy, mate, and squatted,
let's wade in.*

Harry is echoing the myth of the swagman in *Waltzing Matilda* in this poem

Near the end of the film, Harry is offered romantic escape by a sympathetic brother-officer in the English army. A horse will be waiting and sympathetic guards will turn a blind eye. Harry refuses. His sense of courage and honour now in the court martial are as strong as was his passion during the war. Beresford almost destroys the emotional impact of his film's ending, however, when he shows Breaker Morant holding hands with the larrikin as they walk through the dawn to their execution. Surely this is a "high-camp" anachronism. The Breaker's final commitment to anti-Christian paganism is much more in keeping with his image as dashing iconoclast. The larrikin's immediate conversion to paganism provides a last touch of gallant humour to lessen the film's heavy pathos.

Equally in keeping with the Breaker's breezy dash is his toast on the night before his execution: "*You can't always choose which side you fight on. Here's to the Bushveldt Carbineers – best fighters in a bad cause!*"

Footnotes

¹ In 1884 Captain Alfred Dreyfus was wrongfully convicted of treason and deported to Devil's Island in French Guiana. In 1898 the French writer Emile Zola made a passionate defence of Dreyfus. Zola accused the upper echelons of the French army of seeking out a scapegoat in order to conceal their own corruption. Zola was imprisoned for a year but Dreyfus was found by a new court to be innocent in 1899 and promoted to major.

² Ronald Conway recognises the larrikin as an archetype in the Australian character. Conway labels the larrikin-category as "fraternalist-anarchic" and says: "in it rightly belong the psychological heirs of the early felons, bushrangers and currency lads -- the soldiers who took violent pride in refusing to salute any 'bloody officer' [the bush mates who 'humped their bluey' but could never settle to home or hearth] ... they were distinguished from the interests of the bourgeois father by their carelessness about possessions, their lack of interest in social stature as opposed to a contradictory envy and abuse of others for having it. The breed is very familiar because it has contributed an almost Jungian archetype to the unconscious life of most Australians, appearing as much in the jaundiced statements of intellectuals as in the complaints of primitives." (Ronald Conway, *The Great Australian Stupour, An Interpretation of the Australian Way of Life*, Sun Books, Melbourne, 1985, p.56.)

³ Robin Wood claims that *Breaker Morant* is "arguably Beresford's best film. The most fully achieved and authoritative, apparently sharing the radical position of *Don's Party* and *The Getting of Wisdom*". Wood says that *Breaker Morant* "firmly established Beresford's international reputation and led to his being invited to make films in America". (Robin Wood, "Quo Vadis Bruce Beresford?" in Albert Moran and Tom O'Regan, *An Australian Film Reader*, p.199).

The Film: *Sunday Too Far Away*, directed by Ken Hannam

It would be difficult to see this film and ever again indulge in cheap denigration of Australian trade unions. *Sunday Too Far Away* is a romantic glorification of the Australian itinerant worker, the shearer, but it is a glorification of him as he really was.¹ In this sense the film continues the tradition of Henry Lawson's stories about the indigent working class in the 1890s and Kylie Tennant's stories about the itinerant fruit pickers in *The Battlers* (1941). The film is also related to that nostalgic idealisation of Australia's seasonal cane cutters, *The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. It is the rhythm of these men's lives, their pride in their youth and strength and the good salary they can earn with their strength, their endurance and their unbelievably hard work that impresses us pen-pushing urban bureaucrats today.

But as is made all too clear in both *The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* and *Sunday Too Far Away*, the strength and high spirits of youth do not last for ever. The shearer and the cane-cutter are seasonal workers in remote parts of Australia. If they get married, they are isolated from their wives and families for up to six months a year. The price for the mateship-bond among these workers is the loss of family life and probably a self-destructive addiction to alcohol. As Foley, the hero of *Sunday Too Far Away*, puts it, shearers never get rich. They arrive at middle age with "the arse hanging out of their trousers". Foley and his fellow shearers watch old Garth, the former "gun-shearer" of the sheds some twenty-five years ago, gradually give in to the feebleness of old age, the ravages of rum and finally death. Before he dies, old Garth reveals that he was once married and that he has a son who is about twenty-years-old working as a window-dresser in Sydney. Garth relates how he went down to Sydney and spent months looking in shop windows for his son whom he has lost for ever. As he says quietly to Foley, "You know, there are a bloody lot of shop-windows in Sydney." There is a lot of this genuinely Australian dry humour in the film; the humour is the visible tip of the iceberg that conceals the pathos and the hurt lurking below the surface. Foley insults old Garth while he is still alive by calling him "a fucking alcoholic". Foley is scared that Garth's loneliness is the fate that awaits him after another ten years of shearing. When old Garth dies, Foley sits in the pile of dead wood that looks like dead men's bones and cries bitterly, for himself as well as for old Garth.

Sunday Too Far Away emphasises the class-gap in Australia and reminds us that the solace of mateship is only open to the working classes. Contrasted with the shearers' easy-going, rough companionship is the rich "cocky" or owner of the sheep station who has so many sheep it will take the shearers six weeks to shear them all. There is much humour and even some satire at the expense of the rich property owner because he is so worried that his expensive rams, which cost

\$10,000 each, may be accidentally castrated by inexperienced shearers. As Foley so heartlessly says after he has called a meeting of the shearers' union in the shed, "Tell 'im to go home, put his feet up and count his money. If he stays here in the shed, the place'll be ankle-deep in pedigree (ram) balls."

The director manipulates us effortlessly to identify with the group of contracting shearers and with their rough union-democracy and solidarity. The property-owner protests to his daughter, "I'd forgotten what scum they are. My God, they need taking down a peg or two". But his elitism and his resentment of the men's democratic union power are satirically undercut by the shearers' sense of humour. They mock his anxious attempts to protect his immense wealth. Their freedom from the burden of materialism is guaranteed by their lack of capitalist possessions and property. The shearers' daughter is only minimally more tolerated by the shearers. She is allowed after yet another lightning quick union-meeting to observe one round of shearing, but otherwise she is banned from the shed. She shyly says "Thank you". But she is ignored and ostracised by the shearers. We envy the shearers their mateship and their togetherness but feel very sorry for this lonely girl whose only sin is that her father is wealthy.

The theme of this film revives the class-division inherent in Australia's unofficial national anthem, *Waltzing Matilda*. In *Sunday Too Far Away* the itinerant shearers see the squatter as their class enemy. This becomes increasingly clear as the film goes on because the squatters use their influence with the courts to have the shearers' wage reduced. The shearers, led in this small town by Foley, go on strike. As the film text notes with quiet pathos and triumph at the conclusion of the film: "The strike lasted nine months. The shearers won. It wasn't the money so much, it was the bloody insult." The style and the ideology of David Williamson are evident in this brilliantly scripted film. It is difficult to believe that the events of this film occurred as recently as 1955, a mere thirty two years ago. The widespread hostility of the media and much of Australia's public today to unionism and strikes for workers' rights give this film a difficult task if it wants to convert viewers to sympathy with the shearers' strike. But somehow, whatever your political ideology today, it is impossible to deny affection and admiration for Foley and his democratic shearing mates in this film. We see too much of their intimate, private lives, the pathos of their aimlessness, their lack of family and their lack of future, to deny them our sympathy.

There is a good deal of genuine Australian humour in *Sunday Too Far Away*. It is partly at the expense of the property owner but also at the expense of the sullen, filthy, alcoholic cook who gives the shearers inedible food and gets drunk on bottles of lemon essence. The plan which union representative Foley devises to get rid of the much-hated and much-feared hulk of a cook is the very stuff of Australian bush yarns at country pubs.

The myths that this film is celebrating – mateship, union solidarity, and the competition among the men to be "gun-shearer" of the shed – are presented at times with gentle mockery. Foley frequently tells his mates to "get stuffed" but he always comes back to lead them through union meetings and the big strike.

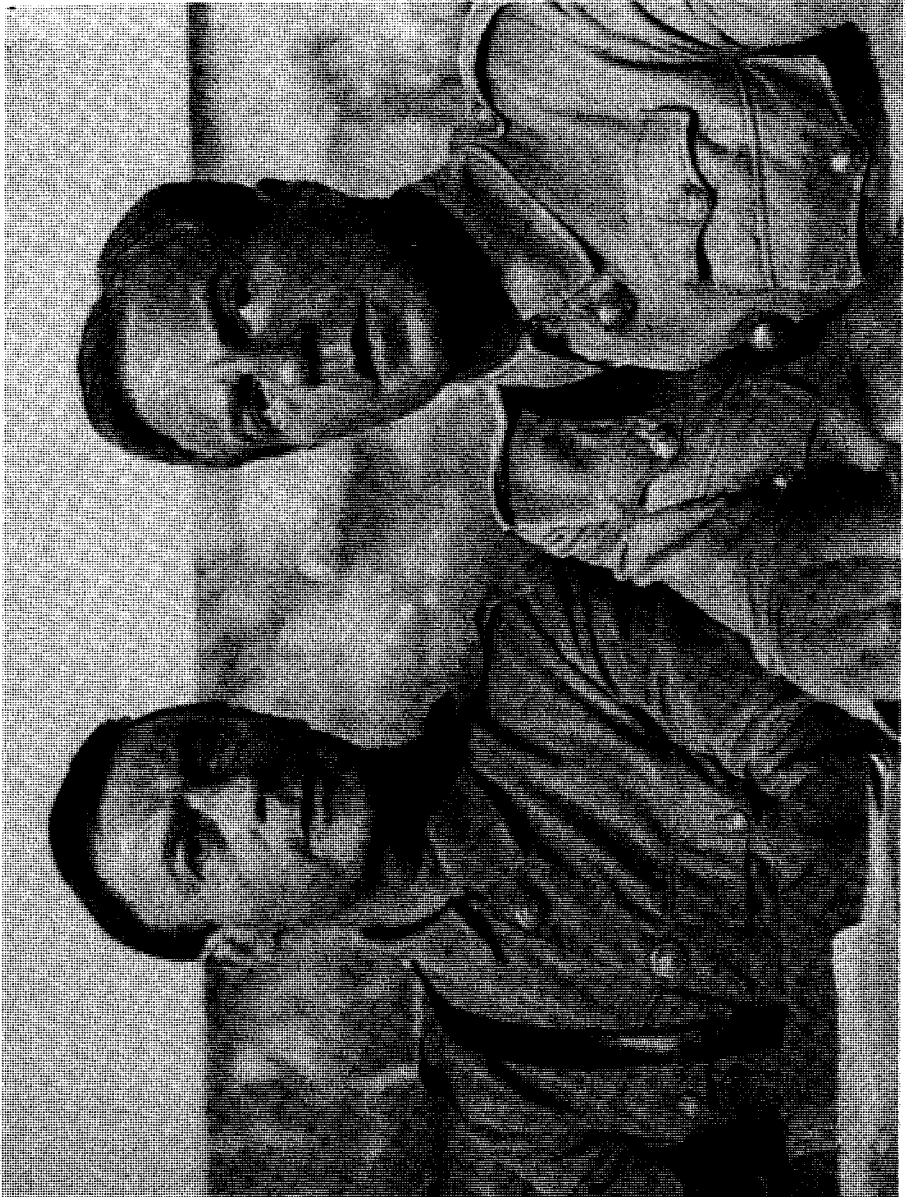
Foley's boastful arrogance about always being gun-shearer is destroyed when he loses to Arthur Black after a run of ten years without a loss. But he accepts his loss with pride and wry whimsy.

The myth that the men are only waiting for Sunday so that they can at last enjoy their freedom is utterly destroyed in this film. The men go through unspeakable boredom and misery when Sunday finally comes around and they can't think of a single thing to do except go and look at Monday's sheep. These men lead emotionally impoverished, aimless lives with no future. From the security of our bourgeois lives we reach out to these men in sympathy and admiration for their pride in themselves and their skill.

The film ends appropriately with a close-up of Foley's fist smashing out in rage at all his enemies; not only at the smug face of scab labour but at his own lack of future, at the loss of his modest dream to retire to the coast because he has once again got drunk and gambled away his wages. The folk song that Foley sings at the beginning and the end of the film mournfully says it all: "*Sundays are the only days I own.*" These men are wage-slaves because they don't know how to save their money and because they can't face the boredom of Sundays when they are tormented by a freedom they don't know what to do with.

The true theme of this film is the disillusionment of maturity. Foley learns to know his own limitations but he fights against the rest of the world to compensate for his own faults. As Foley sings it: "*And the dreams I thought were true, are now mud beneath by footprints and Sundays are the only days I own.*" Mateship may be celebrated in this film, but in the end no one escapes from the loneliness of his personal defeat and failure. There is more than a hint of Henry Lawson's celebration of stoic endurance in this film.

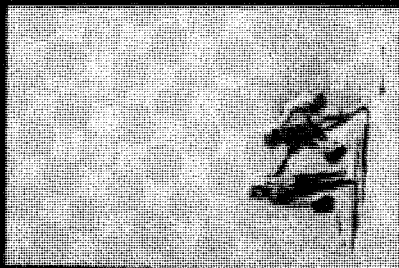
Breaker Morant (Edward Woodward) and his lawyer (Jack Thompson), realise that the English court martial is not looking for justice, but for scapegoats in Breaker Morant, directed by Bruce Beresford.



Archy (Mark Lee) and Frank (Mel Gibson) compete as mates in Australia's Anzac Army in Egypt in Gallipoli, directed by Peter Weir.



From a legend
we'll always
remember,
comes
a story you'll
never forget.



Footnote

¹ Foley the shearer seems closely modelled on Russel Ward's "typical Australian". Ward says:

According to the myth the 'typical Australian' is a practical man, rough and ready in his manners and quick to decry any appearance of affectation in others. He is a great improviser, ever willing 'to have a go' at anything, but willing to be content with a task done in a way that is 'near enough'. Though capable of great exertion in an emergency, he normally feels no impulse to work hard without good cause. He swears hard and consistently, gambles heavily and often, and drinks deeply on occasion. Though he is 'the world's best confidence man', he is usually taciturn rather than talkative, one who endures stoically rather than one who acts busily. He is a 'hard case', sceptical about the value of religion and of intellectual and cultural pursuits generally. He believes that Jack is not only as good as his master but, at least in principle, probably a good deal better, and so he is a great 'knocker' of eminent people unless, as in the case of his sporting heroes, they are distinguished by physical prowess. He is a fiercely independent person who hates officiousness and authority, especially when these qualities are embodied in military officers and policemen. Yet he is very hospitable and, above all, will stick to his mates through thick and thin, even if he thinks they may be in the wrong. No epithet in his vocabulary is more completely damning than 'scab', unless it be 'pimp' used in its peculiarly Australasian slang meaning of 'informer.' He tends to be a rolling stone, highly suspect if he should chance to gather much moss.

(Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend*, Oxford Univ. Press, Melbourne, 1958, pp.1-2)

CHAPTER FOUR

The Innocent Convict and the Eureka Revolutionary

The Novel: *His Natural Life*, by Marcus Clarke

It could be argued that *His Natural Life* is not an Australian novel but an English Victorian novel about Englishmen in the early 19th century who by choice or compulsion undertake the voyage to Van Dieman's Land and the colonies of Victoria and New South Wales. But this would be a superficial and incorrect argument. *His Natural Life* becomes archetypically Australian as its author Marcus Clarke passionately exposes the brutality of the convict system and with equal fervour evokes the democratic origins of modern Australia in the uprising at the Eureka Stockade. These are still two of the foundation myths of Australian society today.

Nevertheless it cannot be ignored that *His Natural Life* is filled with the clichés of the Victorian popular novel, both in plot and in style. There is a wealthy old gentleman who dies before he can make a new will in which he petulantly wishes to disinherit his defiant son. There is a wicked nephew trying to get the will made out to himself. There is a quick-tempered but innocent hero wrongly convicted of murder and transported to the Colonies because his honour forbade him to disgrace his family name by telling the truth about his somewhat melodramatic circumstances. In fact Marcus Clarke endeavours to hold the readers' attention throughout his saga with overwritten mystery, dread, bad omens, suspense and overdone intrigue. For our modern taste the villain is too ludicrously villainous to be realistic and the hero is obliged to repeat his struggles against doom and malevolent fate for almost a thousand pages before he and his patient admirers are finally rewarded with an ending that is just as contrived as the beginning.

Notwithstanding these negative comments, it remains true that *His Natural Life* is a great work of literature. As Stephen Murray-Smith puts it in his introduction:

Much has changed in literary taste and literary judgement in the past seventy years, but on one issue we may stand with our forefathers: that His Natural Life is unambiguously the greatest novel to emerge from ... colonial Australia Taken alone this could be merely a parochial assessment of little more than antiquarian significance. Today it is more relevant to say that Marcus Clarke's one major work remains alive for two reasons: because within the literature of its time it was a work of power and originality of vision; and because ... it transcends its temporal placement and carries its qualities forward into modern life.¹

Marcus Clarke himself seemed to be the most inappropriate man on earth to write this gloomy, moralising epic about heaven and hell. He was in real life a

bumptious English journalist living in Melbourne with a bohemian life style and a talent for witty satire. Within ten years of completing the first version of *His Natural Life* Marcus Clarke had been twice bankrupted and was dead of pleurisy at the age of 35 in 1881².

Marcus Clarke wrote his novel in serial form for a Melbourne newspaper during the 1870s. The suspense at the end of each chapter shows the structuring required of the popular serial. The techniques required of newspaper serials in the 1870s are very similar to the techniques required of TV serials in the 1980s. Mass audiences in Victorian times were pleased to gasp with horror at villainy, evil and crime and to worry if the wronged hero would ever receive his just reward. Modern TV audiences have a similar fascination with the treacherous intrigue of the villain against the innocent hero and heroine. The need of human nature to boo and hiss at the bad guy while trembling with excitement and terror as they identify with the good guy has not changed. That is one of the reasons why *His Natural Life* was so popular when it was made into a TV series in the 1980s.

The text that we are reading here of *His Natural Life* is based on the original newspaper serial version published in *The Australasian* in 1870–71. This original serial is almost 140,000 words longer than the much revised novel that was finally published in Melbourne in 1874. It was not until 1886, five years after Clarke's death, that the novel was published with the longer title, *For the Term of his Natural Life*. For the 1874 edition, Marcus Clarke made enormous sub-editing cuts to the opening and the concluding chapters. As Goodwin puts it:

*The original book I of the serial form, amounting to 40,000 words, was replaced by a 3000 word Prologue. This disposed of the garrulous and implausibly melodramatic explanation of how Richard Devine, under the pseudonym of Rufus Dawes, came to be unjustly transported. At the end of the serial another 10,000 words were jettisoned. In them Dawes survives the Norfolk Island hurricane and assumes a new life as shepherd, store-keeper and man of property. The events cover the period after the ending of transportation, including the Eureka Stockade rising on the Ballarat goldfields in 1854. In the end ... Dawes returns to England to assume his rightful propertied inheritance. In the book-form-revision he drowns in the hurricane with his companion Sylvia.*³

This revised ending that highlights the double-death of hero and heroine in each other's arms was doubtless very satisfying for gloomy, sentimental Victorian matrons who could shut the novel with a good cry. The novel's shorter ending also saved 10,000 words of foolishly contrived happy ending.

His Natural Life is in its structure a framework novel. The frame that encompasses the action in Australia is a murder mystery which forms the

beginning and the end of the novel in England. This English plot-frame has the suspense of a whodunnit-mystery in detective fiction. It is not until the confession at the very end that the murder mystery is solved and the murderer is revealed to be the owner of the tavern. This entire framework is really quite superfluous and extraneous to the convict essence of the novel in the penal colony of Australia. The framework does, however, contribute to the mythology of Australian resentment of English upper class authoritarianism with a breezy satire on the coarseness, opportunism and ruthlessness of a man who likes to portray himself as a "*fine old English gentleman*". The life style of this "*fine old Englishman*", Maurice Frere, is determined by the conventions of Victorian fiction as much as by Marcus Clarke's satire. These conventions call for the deaths of shady millionaires and the suspenseful reading of their last will and testament by even shadier solicitors. You obviously weren't really alive in 19th century England unless you were participating in some way in these rituals. Either you had to be ceremonially cursed and melodramatically disinherited or you should be living in daily expectation of coming into your inheritance. The inheritance had the same social significance for this life as religious salvation and damnation had for the next life.

The delineation of the mythically Australian character of Richard Devine alias Rufus Dawes is achieved by an overdone contrast with his cousin Maurice Frere and with much use of dramatic irony and coincidence in the plot. These two cousins and rivals for the millionaire's inheritance cross each other's paths so often that it becomes funny. There are only mysterious hints at first that they almost recognise each other and this too is romantic nonsense. But a reader can enter into this melodramatic spirit of things in the same way as an audience enters into the spirit of a music hall melodrama: it is entertaining and allows one the naive joy of cheering for the cheated hero and booing the nasty villain. This is a much underestimated pleasure and one rarely accorded to readers of fiction today. That Rufus is transported as a convict on the same ship on which his cousin Frere struts around as lieutenant and that Frere strikes convict Rufus in a cowardly way is bound to produce gasps of vicarious horror from sympathetic readers at the fickle finger of fate.

The plot structure of *His Natural Life* is predicated on the implacable enmity of the cousins and the principles that they represent. In Maurice Frere and Rufus Dawes the irreconcilable forces of English authoritarianism and the indomitable Australian will to democratic self-assertion are held up for scorn and admiration respectively. This character contrast is particularly highlighted in the episode much later when both men are marooned and Rufus Dawes saves them all with his ingenuity and determination. The contrast is highlighted again by Rufus's escape from the murderous dictator of Norfolk Island, an escape which must win him the title of Australia's answer to the Count of Monte Cristo. Finally on the egalitarian gold fields at Ballarat Rufus wins commercial success through innovatory self-help and the English villain is dispatched to eternal hellfire.

There are many minor differences in the plots of the newspaper-serial *His Natural Life*, the revised novel *For the Term of his Natural Life*, and the contemporary TV serial of the same name. But such changes in the details of the plot are really quite insignificant. What remains unchanged is the nature of the plot-structure. The convoluted and improbable machinations of the plot are grafted on to Marcus Clarke's diligent and informative research about the penal colonies in Port Arthur and the west coast of Van Dieman's Land .

As John Barnes puts it:

*Clarke's skill lay in scene-painting rather than in the delineation of characters in their relationships, and the convict records gave him the human facts which he could dramatise. The improbability and involution of the romance which Clarke invented has been commented on often enough. He was not involved, creatively, with this fabrication, which has a makeshift air about it, as if he improvised as he went along, with one eye on the serial readers. The contorted, sensational plot indicates the quality of Clarke's imagination without the stimulus of actual documents. When he writes about episodes of convict life, he is still sensational, but the effect is to deepen our sense of the inhumanity of the system.*⁴

The fanciful and unnecessarily complicated events of the plot in *His Natural Life* are based on what scholars of Shakespeare have traditionally called a comedy of errors. That is, the errors and the confusion of mistaken and secret identities, which may seem near-tragic at the time in terms of the suffering caused to the main players, are finally cleared up in a masterly denouement of grand revelations in which most participants fall around one another's necks sighing and sobbing words like "dear father" or "beloved wife" or "long-lost cousin". To this is added the moralising dimension of the conventional Victorian novel in which the villain, after a series of effortless triumphs and apparently rewarded acts of tyranny and evil, is finally dispatched to his eternal punishment in hell. Conversely, the innocent hero, after a lifetime of undeserved suffering, is at last restored to his good reputation and of course to his waiting inheritance. In the plot-conventions of this kind of novel the re-establishment of a good moral reputation must inevitably be accompanied by God's financial reward in the here and now. How else would people know that God's in his heaven and all's right with the world? The only real objection to all this fairy-tale nonsense for grown-up children is that the reader has had to wait almost one thousand pages, presumably in unbearable suspense, while he waits for the happy ending he knows he has a right to expect.

In any of the many versions of the plot of *His Natural Life* superficial entanglements abound. The plot is like a skein of knotted and twisted wool which must eventually be unravelled and restored to good bourgeois order. There is no psychological depth or complexity to the characterisation, so the reader's interest

has to focus on what is offered, namely the moral clash of good and evil, or the horribly unjust suffering of the good Mr Dawes. Marcus Clarke has created the myth of the innocent convict who eventually escapes his hell-hole and makes good through his own honest efforts as a hard-working shepherd and shop-owner on the Ballarat gold fields. That villainous "fine old English gentleman", Maurice Frere, has been suitably murdered by the convicts whom he had so foully tormented. The archetypal myth of the Australian convict who proves himself morally superior to the English gentry has been established with much blowing of trumpets. It is somewhat perplexing for Australian patriots that this first Australian now reverts to being an English gentleman who returns to live in England for his remaining life-span, but then, he hadn't really experienced Australian society from its very best side, had he?

Whether Marcus Clarke wrote *His Natural Life* in a Christian moralising tone or with too much melodrama is a matter of cultural taste. It was the cultural taste of his age in both Australia and England to write this way. Our age disapproves aesthetically because many of us today incline, with equal subjectivity, to perceive the purpose of life as amoral pleasure-seeking and irreligious cynicism. If, however, we put these cultural differences aside, we can enjoy Marcus Clarke's authentic portrayal of convict life in the colonies of Australia from the 1830s to the gold rush of the 1850s. We can enjoy the emotional richness, the theatrical fluency and the sonorous grandiloquence of Marcus Clarke's style. Clarke seems to have adapted his style to suit the savagery of his convict theme and the wildness of the pristine landscape of Van Dieman's Land. Few writers today would dare to write a passage of such shameless rhetoric as the following excerpt featuring a daring convict escape by longboat:

Suspended on the brink of the wave, the Commandant seemed on the summit of a cliff, from which he saw a wild waste of raging sea scooped into abysmal troughs, in which the bulk of a leviathan might wallow. At the bottom of one of these valleys of water lay the mutineers' boat, looking, with its outspread oars, like some six-legged insect floating in a pool of ink. The great cliff, whose every scar and crag was as distinct as though its huge bulk was but a yard distant, seemed to shoot out from its base towards the struggling insect, a broad, flat straw, that was a strip of dry land. The next instant the rushing water, carrying the six-legged atom with it, creamed up over this strip of beach; the giant crag, amid the thunder-crash that followed upon the lightning, appeared to stoop down over the ocean, and as it stooped the billow rolled onwards, the boat glided down into the depths, and the whole phantasmagoria was swallowed up in the tumultuous darkness of the tempest. (p.545).

This passage may well have caused shudders of terror in Victorian audiences. For Australian audiences of today who live as most of us do on the coast, the passage evokes hilarious overtones of a rough day at a surf carnival!

We can also enjoy in Marcus Clarke's *His Natural Life* the opulent, outsize canvas a la Reubens of action which is violent with adventure and derring-do. As with Reubens' *The Rape of the Sabine Women*, the plot action is bigger than life. There are mutinies on sailing ships, fires at sea, shipwrecks and survival a la Robinson Crusoe, convict escapes and suicides, floggings, murders, hangings and cannibalism, violent waterspouts and typhoons, slave labour in the virgin forests and the coal mines and a battle for democratic mateship and equal rights for all citizens in the battle of the Eureka Stockade. These block-busting events are given integration in the novel's theme when Clarke relates them to the contrasting development of a handful of central characters, who admittedly are kept extremely busy! Richard Devine, Maurice Frere and John Rex have many more lives than the proverbial cat, but that is all part of the entertainment.

Marcus Clarke also unifies his novel with a pronounced tendency to moralise. But the moralising has such a gloomy passion to it that it cannot fail to have an emotional impact, even on today's hardened readers. Take the following passage which evokes John Rex's harrowing night alone in an eerie, underground cave into which he has been swept by a giant waterspout:

But the convict's guilty conscience, long suppressed and derided, asserted itself in this hour when it was alone with Nature and Night. The bitter intellectual power which had so long supported him succumbed beneath imagination – the unconscious religion of the soul. If ever he was nigh repentance it was then. He deemed all the phantoms of his past crimes arising to gibber at him, and covering his eyes with his hands, he fell shuddering upon his knees. The brand, loosening from his grasp, dropped into the gulf, and was extinguished with a hissing noise.

As if the sound had called up some spirit that lurked below, a whisper ran through the cavern.

'John Rex!'

The hair of the convict's flesh stood up, and he cowered to the earth. (p.543)

Some of the novel's sententious passages are of course less physically evocative than this. But then the passages in which the Reverend Mr North examines his guilty conscience and confesses the evil that his drunkenness and lust have caused others, these passages are genuinely harrowing, even for contemporary readers.

There are two main myths in *His Natural Life* which are of special relevance to this book: the first myth is that of the collective image of the convicts who are seen by many people today as our political and psychological forefathers. Many attempts have been made to trace the Australian derision of political authority and resentment of police authority back to convict society. This has given rise to a democratic anti-snobism along the lines that if you can't be born an aristocrat

then you may as well find virtue in that lowest class, the transported convicts. Marcus Clarke may have a main character, Richard Devine, who is innocent and wrongfully convicted not once but two or three times. But Clarke's portrayal of the convicts as a class is in no way idealised. He does not show them as transported because of some strifling misdemeanour such as stealing a loaf of bread. Most of the convicts are seen as treacherous beasts, an atheistic, cursing, bashing, sodomising, cannibalising mob of thugs. With a few notable exceptions they are as suited to their lot as the slaves of hell as the horrible creatures of Breughel are suited to their surreal scenes of hell. Clarke's convicts provide wonderfully horrifying material to give shudders and thrills to his genteel middle class readers. In *His Natural Life* Marcus Clarke has really re-created the myth of heaven and hell according to pious Christian ideology. Heaven is by implication a prosperous and harmonious family life in which women and children are chivalrously idealised and lead idyllic, thoroughly insignificant existences. Heaven is set preferably in England, twelve thousand miles away from Hell which is the convict settlement in Van Dieman's Land. The evil scum of the earth are concentrated here and this, added to the brutal tyranny of the convicts' tormentors, makes it Hell. The experience of Hell is so harrowing that it causes poor Richard Devine to disbelieve in the existence of God. This may make little impression on today's godless readers, but in the late 19th century, it would certainly have caused shudders and pious prayers.

The other myth of *His Natural Life* which is central to this book is the notion that the convict system ended symbolically in the gold miners' rebellion against privilege and property at the Eureka Stockade. Clarke shows the revolutionaries drawing up an "order of war" and hoisting the flag of the Eureka Stockade as the flag of "*the Republic of Victoria*". The fact that governmental authority is represented by that tyrant over the convicts, Maurice Frere, adds emphasis to the interpretation that this uprising is a democratic repudiation of the English authoritarians who conceived the evil convict system. Clarke presents the scene with passionate rhetoric:

And the blue silk standard, with its silver cross, floated presently from the top of a pole eighty feet high.

A thousand stalwart men, breasts aflame at injustice and folly, surrounded it. McGrath, with his left hand grasping the rifle, uncovered his head and kneeling down at the foot of the standard, raised his right hand to heaven.

'Let him who fears to join, depart,' he said. 'We want no skulkers!'

The crowd but shifted closer.

'WE SWEAR BY THE SOUTHERN CROSS TO STAND TRULY BY EACH OTHER, AND FIGHT TO DEFEND OUR RIGHTS AND LIBERTIES!'

A firm Amen burst from every throat.

McGrath, looking down upon those thousand honest hands outstretched in fealty towards him, those earnest faces of so many types of nationalities, those shaggy beards, those brown and muscular arms, and catching the magnetic fire of those upturned eyes devouring the glorious spectacle of the floating banner of their new-born freedom, felt his breast throb with the most terrible of prides – the pride which belongs to the 'kings of men'. (pp.780–781)

In this passage we are witnessing in literature the birth of the Australian myths of mateship, egalitarianism and defiance of unjust authority. These myths were developed by Henry Lawson and led further to the Anzac myth of Gallipoli. It is a mark of how deeply these myths sit in the Australian consciousness to see that today, one hundred and forty years later, the emblem of the Southern Cross is still considered by many to be the appropriate symbol for an Australian republican flag.

Footnotes

1. Stephen Murray-Smith, Introduction to Marcus Clarke, *His Natural Life*, Penguin, 1970, pp.17–18. All page references are to this edition of the text.
2. Stephen Murray-Smith, *Introduction*, p.12.
3. Ken Goodwin, *A History of Australian Literature*, p.29.
4. John Barnes, "Australian Fiction to 1920" in Geoffrey Dutton (ed), *The Literature of Australia* (Penguin, 1985) p.162.

The TV Serial Film: *For the Term of his Natural Life*, directed by Rob Stewart

It was inevitable that the archaic rhetoric and moral sanctimoniousness of Marcus Clark's 19th century novel would be toned down for a 1980s TV serial film. On the other hand, the director has not hesitated to retain the melodramatic clash of good and evil, to revel in the grim ironies of fate, and to highlight the chivalrous, romantic love of hero Rufus Dawes for Sylvia Vickers. Rufus meets Sylvia on the convict transport ship to Australia; he meets her again when he grows a flower garden for her father Major Vickers; he saves her and her mother when they are marooned by mutineers; he sees her again when, disguised as Reverend North, he escapes from the dreaded Norfolk Island. (She then becomes an accomplice after the fact to his illegal escape.) Finally, after the overthrow and murder of the tyrant Frere, the widowed Sylvia returns home to England and marries the long-suffering Rufus, who is now the wealthy Richard Devine. In case we may overlook this heart-rending romance the director underlines it with the recurrent symbol of the red rose. Rufus first sees the red rose at the beginning of the film in the garden of his parents' country mansion in England. He recreates this rose in the flower garden he grows in Van Dieman's Land. The flower is stolen by Lieutenant Frere, just as Frere later steals the love of Sylvia by deceit and treachery. Finally, at the end of Rufus's saga of suffering, he receives a red rose as a message from Sylvia that she has recovered her memory and is yearning to bestow her childlike affection on her true saviour.

This is the stuff of sentimental melodrama. It is certainly no recommendation for the artistic quality of the film. To take another example of excessive sentimentality: on one of her solitary walks Sylvia meets two grubby convict waifs on top of an awe-inspiring cliff. She kisses them with tender intensity; she shares with them a feeling of being unwanted, of having been despotically oppressed. After her departure, the two children kneel in pious prayer, tie themselves together and hurl themselves off the cliff to the blessed relief of death. Incidents like this do not incline modern audiences to take the grim documentary aspects of the convict system seriously and this is a pity. As a genre, this TV film encourages us to indulge in an infantile dream. We contract as audience to suffer through a series of episodes in which the same stereotyped characters repeat the same basic plot conflict over and over. This has the advantage of reassuring dull viewers that the world is predictable: there are goodies and there are baddies. The baddies string together an effortless series of gloating triumphs until finally the goody is miraculously restored to prestige, power and wealth. This trite and artificial happy ending is presumably the fulfilment for which the frustrated audience has been patiently waiting. The TV film therefore accentuates the myth of the innocent, noble-minded convict, wrongfully convicted and finally re-elevated by God to hard-earned happiness.

Scriptwriters for the contemporary TV serial have opted to use the shorter Prologue of the revised novel but retained most of the protracted happy ending of the original newspaper serial. Perhaps the scriptwriters sensed that today's Australian audience would not be edified if innocent Rufus Dawes were to be deprived of his reinstatement and his just reward. Many Australians today have chosen to identify as a matter of national pride with the myth of the innocent convict wronged by England's cruel ruling classes. This is an amusing reversal of traditional English moralising and class snobbism. Alexander Harris, for example, writing in 1847, expressed the prevalent 19th century moralising attitude to the convicts and the lower classes of Australia when he said:

Drunkenness, profanity, dishonesty, and unchastity are the prevalent habits which the class has acquired. What else can be expected? The original stock is the very lowest; the blood-stained hand and ruthless heart from the most barbarian parts of Ireland; the professional depredator from the vilest haunts of London; the lowest slaves of profligacy, inebriation, violence and lust.¹

T. Inglis Moore, in quoting this piece of purple rhetoric, tries to trace a deplorable legacy from these convicts all the way to certain social types in contemporary Australia. Moore says:

Did not this general coarsening of the social fibre contribute towards such cruder elements, persisting throughout the Australian society until the present day, as lawlessness, larrikinism, drunkenness, vandalism, hostility towards the courtesies of civilised life, suspicion of anyone or anything revealing qualities of refinement, and that 'lowbrowism' which Sidney J. Baker found to be such a marked characteristic of Australian speech?²

If it is true that many Australians today are lowbrow and that Australians tend to cheer for the underdog, it is understandable that we have chosen Rufus Dawes for our representative hero. It also explains why the TV scriptwriters have changed the emphasis in the characterisation of Rufus Dawes. They have changed his character from a bad-tempered, wilful, sullen and violent man, to whom the Victorians could say "Tut! Tut!" and feel morally superior, to Rufus Dawes, the cheerful and courageous innocent who is loyal, chivalrous, ingenious and thoroughly admirable. Australia needed a convict-hero who could become a figure-head of self-assertion in order to end the cultural cringe to England. The script-writers gave them Rufus Dawes, a man of the people. The TV film *For The Term of his Natural Life*, fulfils the same mythological function as the contemporary films *Breaker Morant* and *Gallipoli*. All three films revolt against the English exploitation of Australian colonials as inferior and expendable creatures, useful only as pawns to be sacrificed to England's greater glory. All three films celebrate the martyrdom of the representative Australian hero. In

Breaker Morant and *For the Term of his Natural Life* this Australian hero is the disinherited black sheep of an upper class English family. All three films celebrate the Australian foundation myths of democratic mateship: together the Australian mates thumb their noses at the English pose of superiority, condescension and authoritarianism.

The TV film tends to bowdlerise the ghoulish horror conjured up by the novel. For example, within the novel a whole chapter is devoted to the escaped convicts Vetch and Gabbett who murder their fellow escapees and eat them. The following quotation sets the mood:

Dalton, seeing them approach, knows his end has come, and submits, crying. 'Give me half an hour to pray for myself.' They consent, and the bewildered wretch kneels down and folds his hands like a child. His big, stupid face works with emotion. His great cracked lips move in desperate agony. He wags his head from side to side, in pitiful confusion of his brutalized senses. 'I can't think o' the words, Jem!' 'Pah', snarls Vetch, swinging the axe, 'we can't starve here all night.'

The TV film shows none of this five-day orgy of cannibalism. It allows itself only one ghoulish joke in retrospect. The recaptured convict Gabbett is sentenced to ten lashes for every convict who escaped, making a total of fifty lashes. He grins with the sly satisfaction of the survivor and says, "Well, I guess all four of the convicts are really embodied in me now, aren't they?"

It seems clear that Marcus Clarke philosophically shaped his material to reveal that injustice and the tyranny of the convict penal settlement are really metaphors for universal suffering. The question about the validity of religion is raised by these inhumane conditions. The same question was raised in the Holocaust: how could any Christian God countenance such evil and such tyranny? Rufus answers this religious question on two separate occasions. No one can believe in God here, he says to Reverend North. And on another occasion he says there may not be a heaven, but there certainly is a hell. On the other hand, the eventual happy ending of this grim tale and the appearance of the red rose symbol seem to imply divine providence after all.

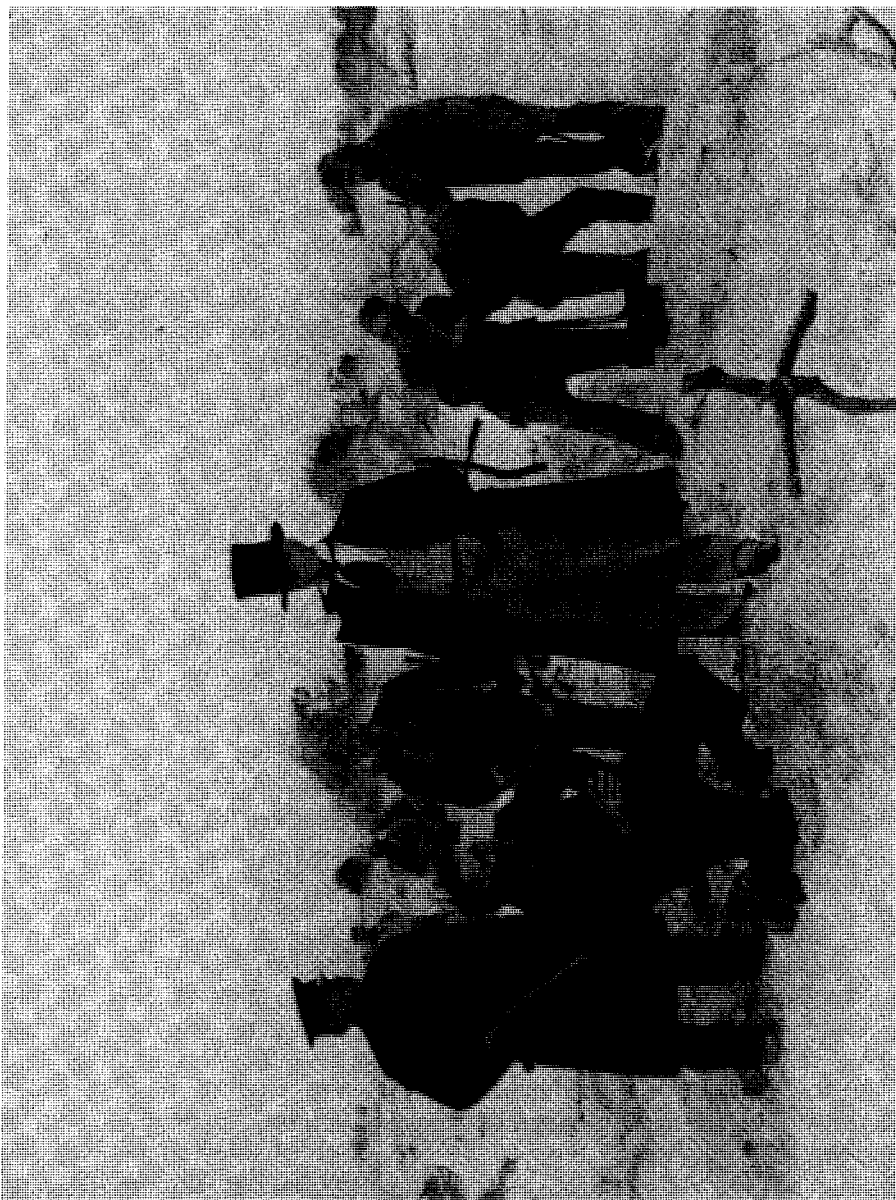
It is also instructive to reflect on the role of poetic justice in this film. On the convict ship coming out to Australia, Rufus Dawes helps a little boy-convict learn arithmetic. Fifteen years later this boy, Blinky, although he is hindered by a wooden leg as a result of an accident he sustained as a child-slave for the much hated villain Frere, nevertheless manages to shoot Frere dead and to save Rufus from his arch-enemy once and for all. This is like a romantic re-writing of Aesop's fable of the mouse and the lion! It all implies that in the end, after many trials, virtue will be rewarded and good will triumph. The shooting of the tyrant Frere is also a triumph for the lower classes. Their solidarity and mateship triumph over the solitary dictator.

For us as a relatively sophisticated modern audience there are many features of this TV film which cause us great mirth. These same incidents may have moved 19th century audiences to tears. There is, for example, the grief-stricken mother who hunts for her missing son for over two decades and then allows herself to be tricked by the imposter John Rex pretending to be her son. This notion may have been part of Victorian sentimental conventions; for us it is hilarious. The Victorian joy in villains is also not part of our literary conventions today. The incessant gloating of Frere in scene after scene does not rouse modern audiences to a fury of indignation but rather to bored yawns. The villainy of John Rex is somewhat more in line with our contemporary expectations of evil because he is cunning and hypocritical and has a rascally sense of humour. In fact, Rex's escape with his possessive mistress Sarah, reminds me of the escape of the two confidence-tricksters in the film *The Sting*. There is something anarchistic in most of us that makes us chuckle happily at a conniving rogue who beats the system and thumbs his nose at conventions without causing too much evil and suffering to people.

Perhaps the best way for us to interpret the character of the TV hero Rufus Dawes is as a combination of the Count of Monte Cristo and Superman with a bit of Robinson Crusoe and Papillon thrown in for good measure. Rufus defends his mother's good name and sticks up for the misused convict Kirkland, paying for this act of charity with fifty lashes. He performs amazing feats such as escaping from Grummet Island while manacled. He saves the villain Frere when they are all marooned and he does so with ingenuity and without thoughts of revenge. He is, as required by snobbish 19th century audiences, scholarly and well educated with a "good accent". He has an extraordinary capacity to endure suffering. His escape scenes are every bit as good as those of Papillon and, most important of all, he stays magically young. He doesn't scar physically, mentally or emotionally.

In spite of these words of criticism of the TV film, I did enjoy many scenes in it. The photography of the rugged sea-coast of Tasmania was awe-inspiring, the costuming and settings at sea and on land all seemed authentic, and the acting was of high professional standard. Frere, Rex, Vickers, Rufus and North were all excellently portrayed. The close-up shots of Rufus in unbelieving despair at life's injustices and North in agony of remorse had great emotional power. The scenes of convict labour in the forest, in the coal mines and on the infamous slave railway were informative and fascinating. *For the Term of his Natural Life* is a superior TV film, but it only occasionally achieves the gloomy power of the novel.

A shallow grave on that fatal shore. . . Convicts in Van Dieman's Land in For the Term of his Natural Life, directed by Norman Dawn.



Villainous Lieutenant Frere (Dunstan Webb) tyrannising sweet Sylvia (Eva Novak) in *For the Term of his Natural Life*, directed by Norman Dawn in 1927.

AUSTRALASIAN FILMS LTD Present
An Adaptation of
MARCUS CLARKE'S
Immortal
Story—



"YOU'LL KEEP AWAY FROM
DAWES, OR I'LL . . ."

"For the Term of his Natural Life"

Directed and Produced by
NORMAN DAWN

It was the brutal Lieut. Frere speaking, but always some strange unseen force threw Sylvia continually across the path of Rufus Dawes. Always that wistful, silent appeal seemed to echo from his heart. What dim secret did the past hide from her? Who was this man?

Photographed by
LEN H. ROOS A.S.C.

A UNION MASTER
WORLD PRODUCTION



Footnotes

1. Alexander Harris, *Settlers and Convicts*, (as quoted in T. Inglis Moore, *Social Patterns in Australian Literature*, Angus & Robertson, 1971, p.38).
2. T. Inglis Moore, *Social Patterns in Australian Literature*, Angus & Robertson, 1971, p.39.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Feminist as Flirt and as Artist

The Novel: *My Brilliant Career*, by Miles Franklin

It is ironic that *My Brilliant Career*, which has often been regarded as the first genuine Australian novel, was not published in Australia but in Scotland. The year of publication was 1901. Even though 1901 was the proud year of Australian Federation, it seems that many Australians thought it wasn't respectable to be seen reading an Australian novel, a novel from the backward colonies, unless it had received the official seal of approval from the aesthetes and publishing houses of England and Scotland.¹ Miles Franklin certainly thought very poorly of the opportunities for a female novelist in Australia and from 1906 to 1933 she lived abroad in the USA and England. Her novels with settings in the USA or England lack the passionate authenticity of *My Brilliant Career*, and it was not until she returned to Australia in 1933 that she produced her great novel *All That Swagger*.²

Miles Franklin's real name was Stella Marie Miles Franklin. She wrote under the male pseudonyms of Miles Franklin and Brent of Bin Bin because she was convinced that the Australian public would not buy the works of a female author. For the same reason Ethel Florence Lindsay Robertson wrote under the male pseudonym of Henry Handel Richardson. Robertson lived her entire life in Europe married to a Scottish professor of German Literature. This is all very ironic when seen socio-historically, because now in the 1980s Australian publishers are churning out anthologies of Australian women writers, partly because there are some very good women writers today, but partly because it is now fashionable to be seen taking affirmative action on behalf of women as an oppressed social group.

Miles Franklin wrote *My Brilliant Career* when she was a mere sixteen year old in 1895. It was another six years before she found a publisher in 1901. She sent her unpublished manuscript to Henry Lawson in 1901 just before he himself left for England on an abortive mission to seek his literary fortune there. Henry Lawson wrote a very generous preface to *My Brilliant Career*, an excerpt from which reads as follows:

She (Miles Franklin) is just a little bush girl, barely twenty-one yet, and has scarcely ever been out of the bush in her life. She has lived her book, and I feel proud of it for the sake of the country I came from, where people toil and bake and suffer and are kind; where every second sun-burnt bushman is a sympathetic humorist, with the sadness of the bush deep in his eyes and a brave grin for the worst of times, and where every third bushman is a poet, with a big heart that keeps his pocket empty.

These words tell us more about Henry Lawson than about Miles Franklin; they represent his tragic vision of poverty in the Australian bush. Miles Franklin's view, as it is expressed in *My Brilliant Career*, is not a tragic portrayal of Australian bushman up the country in the Lawsonian manner.

My Brilliant Career is filled with the rage of a teenage narcissist ranting against rural isolation, boredom and the enslavement of the female in marriage. When Ms Franklin writes of the squalour, the grinding poverty, and the adult male alcoholism of life "up the country", her writing is authentic and depressing. The scenes of poverty are located among the small dairy farming selectors around the Goulburn district during the drought and the depression of the 1890s. There is a grimness to these pictures of heart-breaking work as the farmers try to save their animals from starvation. One almost feels the stinging sand everywhere as the scorching wind blows away the top soil in the drought. These are passages that have a lot in common with Lawson's grim vision. They also have a lot in common with scenes from John Steinbeck's *The Grapes Of Wrath*, a tragic novel set in another depression, another drought and another country some forty years later. Perhaps the best literature can only grow out of the suffering of the people and the identification by an author with these people.

It should be noted that Miles Franklin is not protesting against the romantic aspect of life "up the country" – fighting bushfires, droving sheep and cattle down the long paddock, coping with floods or mustering on horseback. She was obviously a high-spirited girl with a tomboy dash to her that made her love the ballads of Banjo Paterson. In fact Miles Franklin idealises the life of the rich squatters in the mountainous Tumut country which was her birthplace and which Banjo Paterson celebrated in *The Man From Snowy River*. But these squatters were rich in lush, irrigated acres and mountain pastures. They also had hired labour, including gentlemanly jackaroos from England. Miles Franklin romanticised the dash and the grace of their life style in her portraits of her grandmother's horse and cattle station at Caddagat. Here ladies were ladies and not lower class beasts of labour, bearing and supporting thirteen children in a lifetime. Nor do the ladies of Caddagat have to contend with alcoholic husbands as the women do in the outback blocks of the small time selectors. At Caddagat among the rich squatters the ladies wear décolleté, go to balls and perform on the pianoforte. Their uncles take international trips to New Zealand and Hong Kong. Rich stations like Caddagat and Five Bob Downs were located in a celestial sphere of grace and culture that was barely touched by the great drought and depression of the 1890s. At the most they saw large mobs of cattle and sheep being driven through in the search for pasture to keep them alive. Sybylla helps to ensure that one of these mobs is hurried through their property and out the other side before the sheep can eat the valuable grass.

The second way in which the drought impinges on the rich squattocracy is also described by Miles Franklin. Sybylla gives handouts to a ragged army of what she calls "tramps". She means "jolly swagmen". These were often men who had been sent bankrupt by the drought and the depression and now in the 1890s

wander the tracks up the country from station to station seeking part-time work or simply handouts. Sybylla interviews fifty tramps per week on rich Caddagat and hands out tons of flour, sugar, tea, potatoes, broken meat and foul-smelling tobacco. As Sybylla puts it:

What a great army they were! Hopeless, homeless, aimless, shameless souls, tramping on from north to south, and east to west, never relinquishing their heart-sickening, futile quest for work...Some in real professional beggars' style called down blessings on me; others were morose and glum, while some were impudent and thankless, and said to supply them with food was just what I should do for the swagmen kept the squatters – as, had the squatters not monopolised the land, the swagmen would have had plenty. A moiety of the last-mentioned – dirty, besotted, ragged creatures – had a glare in their eyes which made one shudder to look at them, and, while spasmodically twirling their billies or clenching their fists, talked wildly of making one to 'bust up the dam banks', or to drive all the present squatters out of the country and put the people on to the land. ³

Sybylla responds to this problem with anger and puzzled concern. She asks:

In a wide young country of boundless resources, why is this thing? ...Why can she (Australia) not bear sons, men! of soul, mind, truth, godliness and patriotism sufficient to rise and cast off the grim shackles which widen round us day by day? (p. 86)

There is a measure of empty rhetoric and youthful naivete about Sybylla's question, but in essence it is the same question being asked today, almost a hundred years later, in the dragging recession and the national debt of Australia in the 1980s.

My Brilliant Career is a mine of information for amateur social historians. It reinforces our knowledge that even back in the 1890s Australia was not an egalitarian democracy, but a plutocracy with a very definite class structure. Miles Franklin is equally entertaining and convincing in her portraits of three distinct milieux. There is her parents' drought-stricken dairy farm at Possum Gulley, the filthy farm of the philistine M'Swats at Barney's Gap, and the opulence and elegance of the squattocracy at Caddagat and Five Bob Downs.

On this authentic social background Miles Franklin has grafted a love story which has a great deal of similarity with a Mills and Boon romance. In fact, fifteen years later Miles Franklin did publish a novel about "a liberated New Woman" with Mills and Boon.⁴ The romantic foreground of *My Brilliant Career* is presumably what Henry Lawson referred to as "*the girlishly emotional parts of the book*". It is full of melodrama, hackneyed cliché and adolescent silliness.

Literary sociologists have long since established the structural pattern of Mills and Boon romances. The tall, dark stranger is conceited and arrogant and arouses envy, rage and defiance in the girl. There is a strong sado-masochistic

element of repressed passion present in the affair which is not consummated. The girl rebels by teasing, by flirting with other men and by resisting the sexual advances of the tall, dark stranger with melodramatic clichés and very loud protestations of inviolable virginity. Take this passage from *My Brilliant Career* as an example:

I looked up at his face, which was blazing with passion, and dark with a darker tinge than Nature and the sun had given it, from the shapely swelling neck, in its soft well-turned-down collar, to where stiff black hair, wet with perspiration, hung on the wide forehead.

'Unhand me, sir!' I said shortly, attempting to wrench myself free, but I might as well have tried to pull away from a lion.

'Unhand me!' I repeated. (p.142)

This is all a ploy by the female to lead the male on, to admire him as he works himself up into a lather of passion. She can thus congratulate herself on having overcome his pose of detached arrogance. Even if he leaves bruises on her “soft white shoulders and arms” (p.148), she goes to bed, alone and chaste, thoroughly happy. Further steps in these strange courtship rituals include the female getting herself very wet so she can show off her figure beneath her voluminous petticoats. The male wooer, who is by now humbled, describes himself as “a beggarly cur” (p.154) even after she has struck him with a horse whip across the face. How could mere sexual intercourse hope to compete with such passionate games of power-play?

At the end of the novel Sybylla is woefully inadequate at explaining to Harry and to us her need to be alone and independent in order to pursue a literary career. Her final pose as a noble soul defeated by life is pure bathos. It is hilarious that a sixteen-year-old girl should write the following line: “*To weary hearts throbbing slowly in hopeless breasts the sweetest thing is rest.*” (p. 231) But suddenly the perspective opens out into a patriotic panorama. The rhetoric is still a bit purple, but moving for all that, and the sentiment is laudable:

I am proud that I am an Australian, a daughter of the Southern Cross, a child of the mighty bush. I am thankful I am a peasant, a part of the bone and muscle of my nation, and earn my bread by the sweat of my brow, as man was meant to do. I rejoice I was not born a parasite, one of the bloodsuckers who loll on velvet and satin, crushed from the proceeds of human sweat and blood and souls.

Ah, my sunburnt brothers! – sons of toil and of Australia! I love and respect you well, for you are brave and good and true.
(p.231)

I am sure there are professional speech-writers working for the various political parties today who wish they had penned these courageous and vigorous

lines. They celebrate the independence, the work-ethos and the national pride that are the kernel of the myths of Australia.

Footnotes

1. In *Snow on the Saltbush* (Penguin), Geoffrey Dutton documents Australian readers' neglect of Australian literature in favour of more respectable English classics. This continued right up to the 1960s.
2. In "Australian Fiction since 1920" Harry Heseltine nominates *All That Swagger* (1936) as "the cornerstone of her (Franklin's) achievement." Heseltine calls the novel "patriarchal" and sees it as the romantic "saga of Australia on horseback." (In Geoffrey Dutton (ed), *The Literature of Australia*, Penguin, page 204).
3. Miles Franklin, *My Brilliant Career*, Angus and Robertson, 1986, page 86. All future page references are to this edition of the text.
4. The source of this information is Ken Goodwin, *A History of Australian Literature*, Macmillan, page 54.

The Film: *My Brilliant Career*, directed by Gill Armstrong

The film *My Brilliant Career* celebrates three old Australian myths, but with such twists that they become completely new myths. The three myths are mateship, the classless society and the bleeding battler from Ironbark. The twists are caused by feminism and gender inversion of stereotyped social roles.

The first new myth proposed by Miles Franklin and Gill Armstrong is that mateship is not limited to the friendship between two men humping their swags in the harsh outback. They contend that there should be mateship, that is, platonic friendship between man and woman as partners of equal rank. In the film Sybylla is very hurt because Harry comes back from his business trip but fails to call on her as promised. She drives the Caddogat sulky out to call him to task and succeeds in extracting an apology from him. Harry says, "I'm sorry." Sybylla replies "So you should be. I thought we were mates." This reproof implies that the conventional techniques of courtship, such as seduction and provoking jealousy, should be considered beneath the dignity of their sincere friendship.

Later in the film when Harry confesses that he has lost all his property in the depression, he and Sybylla spend the whole night in intimate discussion, talking the problem over as equals. There are no sexual undertones. The ambience is one of the union of kindred spirits. This night is the closest that Sybylla comes to loving Harry and becoming his wife. This is because she can see a useful function for herself in his life. She feels that she can help him. He needs her. What Sybylla cannot bear is to be reduced to being a wife without an independent identity, a wife who is only a social ornament or a boudoir support for threatened male self-esteem.

The main obstacle to platonic mateship between the sexes is not so much social convention as sexual desire. After Harry has learnt the hard way not to condescend to Sybylla and not to take it for granted that she will be grateful to marry him, he gradually becomes sexually and emotionally dependent on her. When after the stipulated two-year waiting period she rejects him,¹ she has in a sense not kept the faith required of a good mate. She excuses herself with two reasons, neither of which is convincing. Her first reason is that she doesn't want to be a wife out in the bush bearing a baby every year. She wants to be a writer. But Harry is rich again now. His property Five Bob Downs could easily be made a centre for social gatherings of considerable elegance. Harry is both civilised and fair and would ensure that she did not have to bear a baby every year. He is also sensitive and would encourage her to write.

Sybylla's second reason for not marrying Harry is that she doesn't love him, she is only "*so near to loving him*". What Sybylla has not realised at this stage is that she cannot love any man sufficiently to give up her independence. Probably

she cannot ever love with full commitment because she is narcissistic and androgynous. She is narcissistic in spite of her conviction that she is plain, or even ugly. She compensates for her fears about her ugliness by setting her cap at Harry because he is the most eligible bachelor available and because she needs to prove herself more attractive than her competitors, the belles of Melbourne. Her techniques for flirting, for making Harry jealous and for leaving him dangling are not the acts of mateship. They are the acts of a woman engaged as much in sexual warfare with herself as with men. When she over-reacts to Harry's kiss by slapping him across the face, she betrays her real self. Her real self is androgynous. That is, she combines feminist traits with tomboyish self-assertiveness and competitiveness. She also often contradicts her sensitivity of feeling by being deliberately larrikin-like. She drives horses and sings crude bar-room songs with a gusto that was then normally the prerogative of a man.

When she flirts with Harry, she escapes from the dangers of sentiment or tenderness by reverting to rough horse-play: either she tips him in the lake or she buffets him in a boisterous pillow-fight. She is happy with any interaction which arouses the spirit but avoids sexual kissing or fondling because she is afraid of a sexual relationship and has convinced herself that she doesn't need it. She is an androgyne who realises her deepest narcissistic passion through self-expression in art. She cannot bear for this passion to be diverted or weakened by having to devote even a part of herself to loving Harry.

In this sense Sybylla's notion that there should be and can be platonic mateship between the sexes is both utopian and self-deceptive, at least in terms of the behaviour patterns in which she has presented it.

The second myth proposed by Miles Franklin and Gill Armstrong is the classless society. Both women are of course aware that there is no such thing. Both are aware of the yawning chasm that will separate Possum Gully from Five Bob Downs. What is really proposed is that the middle class intelligentsia should declare solidarity with the working classes. This is why in Miles Franklin's novel Sybylla gives hand-outs to the impoverished swaggies during the depression of the 1890s and why she forms mateship with the drovers pushing their mobs of sheep down the long paddock in the drought. It is also the reason in Gill Armstrong's film that Sybylla prefers to dance Irish jigs with the servants than quadrilles with the snobbish gentry. This is why Sybylla returns in the end to her parents' poor hut. She is declaring solidarity with her "*sunburnt brothers! – sons of toil and of Australia*" (p.231) with a passion worthy of Henry Lawson. In her film Gill Armstrong seems to be endorsing this view in a modern context by implying that the middle-class female artist must jealously guard both her sexual and her political independence and not sell out to Australia's rich establishment.

The third myth proposed by Miles Franklin and Gill Armstrong is the bleeding battler from Ironbark. In the 1890s this battler was the hero of Henry Lawson, Banjo Paterson and Steele Rudd. He stuck grimly to his small, impoverished selection in spite of drought, depression, bush fire, isolation and poor soil. The variation on this heroic myth proposed in *My Brilliant Career* is

the proud determination of the artist to remain true to her "selection", that is, to her artistic talent, even if this should cost her the solace of companionship in marriage and the comfort of wealth.

The main difference between the novel of the 1890s and the film of the 1970s is that Gill Armstrong has steered clear of the teenager Miles Franklin's addiction to Mills and Boon sado-masochism and to melodrama. The other difference between Franklin and Armstrong is best illustrated if we compare the endings of novel and film. Franklin cannot resist the temptation to have the nineteen-year-old Sybylla strike the absurdly inapposite and affected pose of a defeated soul yearning for the release of death (cf. pp. 230-232). She even quotes:

*But the toughest lives are brittle,
And the bravest and the best
Lightly fall – it matters little;
Now I only long for rest.*

Sybylla is deceiving herself. She has just overwhelmed Harry in a power-struggle between the sexes and completed her first novel well before she is twenty. There is nothing remotely defeated or broken about her. Armstrong has the good taste to be open and honest about it. In the concluding scene of the film Sybylla walks out to the old farm letterbox with the sun of dawn full in her face and posts off the manuscript of her novel. The music swells in volume to an orchestral triumph and Sybylla spreads her arms wide to embrace the sunrise and the future. What can you say? There's a woman who certainly knows what she wants from life. The exultant ending is in fact a beginning.

We live today in a society that has replaced excessive child-bearing with the anti-baby pill, and domestic drudgery with miraculous servant-machines. We also live today in a society that claims to believe in unisex, equal opportunity for women and affirmative action. Why, then, are we watching a film that shows the imprisonment of women in marital submissiveness in the 1890s? To answer this question, we need to remind ourselves of a few of the strange conventions of the 19th century.

At the turn of the century upper-class girls were destined for only one fate: marriage. If they were pretty, modest, self-effacing, submissive, and flattered men's egos, they made a successful match. Their dignity and status in snobbish society were entirely reliant on how rich a man they could snare. When the girl is poor, as Sybylla is, this kind of marriage match was vitally important. All the wise old heads in the film counsel her according to conventional wisdom: that is, she has the choice between being a servant or a governess on the one hand, or she can sell herself like a bird into well-fed marital captivity where she will sing songs to thank her benefactor husband.

It is inadvisable, counsel the wise old heads, to marry for love. Sybylla's mother and aunt did this and both marriages ended in social disaster. The mother is married to an incompetent, alcoholic failure. She has been dragged down

through her marriage of love to poverty, isolation, menial drudgery and the burden of endless child-bearing.

Sybylla's beautiful aunt has done no better. She has been left by her skirt-chasing husband for another woman. Nowadays we take divorce very much for granted and see no shame attached to it. But the conventions of the upper classes at the turn of the century dictated that Sybylla's aunt had been shamed. She had been taken and then discarded by a man and was therefore not suitable for another man according to the puritanical conventions of the time. She really lives in a kind of luxurious convent as a nun with a tyrannical old mother.

It is therefore small wonder that Sybylla rebels against the idea that because she is a female she must submit to a man as a superior being and make herself dependent financially and socially on him. Sybylla's attempts to form a liberated society unhindered by the chains of class prejudice or gender prejudice are spontaneous and defiant both. For example, when she astounds the guests at an elegant dinner party by making sexual jokes about bulls keeping cows happy, she usurps the male prerogative to make that kind of remark over port and cigars after dinner. When she decides to liven up a party by singing dirty ditties about maids losing their maidenheads (a song which she picked up at country pubs while extricating her drunken father) she is deliberately violating upper-class shibboleths about ladylike behaviour. When she leaves the stuffy grand ball and goes out to join the servants dancing Irish jigs, she is seeking their vitality and their unpretentious joy in life. She hopes to incorporate their vitality within herself as a free-thinking artist searching for a utopian ideal. *My Brilliant Career* is in this sense a humorous, touching and ultimately tragic celebration of one of early Australia's most famous literary feminists.

Tomboy Sybylla (Judy Davis) gives Harry of Five Bob Downs (Sam Neill) a buffeting with her pillow in My Brilliant Career, directed by Gill Armstrong.



Footnote

1. McFarlane remarks that Harry is a foot shorter in the film than in the novel but "is not reduced as a prospective husband" (sic!). For the sake of short men everywhere, I hope not! I would have thought that Sybylla was more interested in character than height (See McFarlane, *Words and Images*, page 125).

CHAPTER SIX

Aping the English: The Conventions of 19th Century Gentility

The Novel: *The Getting Of Wisdom*, by Henry Handel Richardson

Two possible fictional traditions suggest themselves as appropriate frameworks for the interpretation of *The Getting of Wisdom*. The first tradition is the disguised autobiography of the young artist. The second tradition is the German Bildungsroman or Novel of Apprenticeship, in which the protagonist grapples with adolescent extremism in a pilgrimage towards social maturity and adopting an adult place in a conservative social hierarchy.

Let us first consider *The Getting of Wisdom* as the fictional autobiography of a young artist developing through self-doubt and experimentation towards a firm conviction of his/her talent as a writer and his/her rightful place in a civilised society. Perhaps the most famous examples of this sub-genre are James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Dylan Thomas's parodistic *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*. Thomas Mann's youthful work *Tonio Kroeger* also springs to mind.

What Henry Handel Richardson examines through young Laura and what Thomas Mann examines through young Tonio is the self-doubt of the artist as child, the shameful knowledge of the child that he/she is very different from conventional children, that the imagination is somehow too exuberant, too intense, too extreme. The artistic child tries desperately to conceal this deviation from normalcy and to win the respect of the children leading the conventional majority. This leads to self-abasement and humiliation.

The artistic child asks himself/herself: Are the fantasy lies of the imagination any more sinful than the lies and hypocrisies of real life? Or are the lies of the imagination "beautiful deceptions" expressing how life might have been or should have been?

The artist as young child also suffers from sexual confusion about gender identity and about homosexuality. He/she feels passion for a conventional person of the same sex. The passion is returned only superficially for a short period of time. This passionate outpouring of self without proper direction or hope of fulfilment is what characterises the young loves of both Tonio Kroeger and Laura Tweedle Rambotham. Laura's love for the sophisticated and beautiful Evelyn causes her almost unbearable suffering but is also the main instrument of her spiritual maturing. Both *Tonio Kroeger* and *The Getting of Wisdom* end with no resolution of the conflict. The artists venture forth into the maelstrom of life determined to be free of conventions and to have the courage to be themselves. As adults they are fated to be passionate but self-concealing and frequently lonely. This is, after all, the paradigm of the intellectual artist in the 20th century.

Laura's "sin" was to weave erotic fantasies around her purely fictitious relationship with a reverend gentleman. She is punished when her audience finds

out she has lied to them. They claim that her fantasies are as evil as stealing or cheating or fibbing. They ostracise her. Later, much later, the mature Evelyn reveals to Laura that this ostracism was merely a revenge of the conventional group on her for having tricked and made a fool of them. This revenge was hypocritically disguised as the punishment of a sin. For a while, Laura herself believed it was a sin and went through an exaggerated religious phase seeking divine forgiveness for her imagination and her ambition to tell stories that amaze and delight an audience of passive listeners.

When the time comes for Laura to put her fantasies into writing, she blunders awfully from bloodthirsty imitations of Shakespearean melodrama to cloak and dagger romance à la Walter Scott. She searches for an appropriate literary form which she finally finds as an ironic combination of realism with a dash of fantasy for entertainment. Laura finds this at the end of chapter twenty one with these words:

In your speech, your talk with others, you must be exact to the point of pedantry, and never romance or draw the long-bow; or you would be branded an abominable liar. Whereas, as soon as you put pen to paper, provided you kept one foot planted in probability, you might lie as hard as you liked: indeed, the more vigorously you lied, the louder would be your hearers' applause.

And Laura fell asleep over a chuckle.¹

The Getting of Wisdom is also an apprenticeship novel, a spiritual pilgrimage from ignorance through ostracism to a conviction of one's own worth as an eccentric but gifted individualist. This is an apprenticeship in the sense that Laura is "getting wisdom". She learns how to relate to her fellow human beings who are often richer, more powerful, more beautiful and more conventional than she is. Little Laura has a similar problem to the character Mozart in the film made of Peter Shaffer's play *Mozart*. The artistic genius is spontaneous, childish, perpetually immature, uncontrolled, unguarded and very, very vulnerable. Laura wants to belong to the conventional group but she is not really willing, in spite of all her crawling and toadying, to give up her individual personality and become a conformist.

Laura's exhilarating determination to be herself culminates in the closing lines of *The Getting of Wisdom* when she leaves her school for the last time and throws off the yoke of demure, ladylike behaviour. She rejects the stereotyped convention that has imprisoned her for five long years. In the words of the novel:

Then it came over her with a rush: she was free, absolutely free; she might do any mortal thing she chose.

'Oh, what are you going to do, Laura?' cried Pin in anxiety.

'I'm going to have a good run,' said Laura; and tightened her hair-ribbon. (p.236)

Her high-spirited run through the park is reminiscent of the final scene from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* in which Chief Dan breaks out of the repressive mental asylum and runs away through the forest. The act of running is the symbolic act of casting off society's restrictions and experiencing the ecstasy of spontaneity and animal freedom.

— The education that is forced upon these young upper-class ladies is very limited. They must learn off by heart the birth and death dates of English kings, the rules of mathematics, proverbs from the Bible, the poems of ladylike Wordsworth (rather than licentious Shakespeare), and the grammatical rules of French and Latin. It certainly never occurs to the teachers to approach literature or history as a means to expand the imagination, because that would expose the bigotry on which the school is founded. The other things required of the girls are manners and accomplishments. The aim is to give the girls graces with which they can adorn their future husbands's drawing and dining rooms. Laura's revolt against these conventions is the beginning of her personal search for a different kind of wisdom. She will find her wisdom through bitter experience, conflict with more conventional girls, lonely reflection, and the discipline of creative art. It is an ironic end-note that the conventional girls who are models of propriety at school are in no wise successful after they leave school. The morally haughty M.P. goes back to her insignificant country township, marries and reproduces frequently. And gifted Cupid? *"Cupid went a-governessing, and spent the best years of her life in the obscurity of the bush"* (p.233). Only Laura's intemperate curiosity and wilful determination will ensure that she does something with a splash, — that she gets *"to see things — yes that most of all. Hundreds and thousands of things. People, and places, and what they eat, and how they dress, and China, and Japan ... just tons"* (p.233). Laura will eventually attain wisdom, in spite of her schooling.

In this school the girls live sequestered from boys, and their teachers live spinsterish lives without men. And yet the real purpose of the school is to prepare the girls to be socially graceful upper-class wives. The spinster teachers who cannot find husbands are the proof of their own failure. This paradox gives rise to a further paradox: the girls are horrified when they learn about their future sexual fate in marriage. And yet they adore men as superior creatures. These paradoxes are ironically presented in the following passage:

For out of it all rose the vague, crude picture of woman as the prey of man. Man was animal, a composite of lust and cruelty, with no aim but that of brutally taking his pleasure: something monstrous, yet to be adored; annihilating, yet to be sought after; something to flee and, at the same time, to entice, with every art at one's disposal. (p.114)

The correct art of enticement — *"sighs and simpers, the winged glances, and drooped, provocative lids"* (p.131) — is never mastered by poor Laura, partly because she is tomboyish and partly because she is too immature. It is fascinating

to compare these courtship rituals for upper-class girls in Melbourne at the turn of the century with the courtship rituals for (lower) middle-class girls in Sydney in the 1980s as explained in *Puberty Blues*. The female is still required to be passive. She must adore the male while he surfs, rather than while he preaches, and she must submit to his sexual "brutality". Sex, however, is not restricted to holy matrimony but occurs at drive-ins in the smelly back of a panel van.

There is one teacher who gives Laura a glimpse of how she might leave the stereotype of femal inferiority behind her and attain a proud independence. Miss Hicks loses patience with the beautiful but lazy Inez and says:

'I'll tell you what it is , Inez', she said; 'you're blessed with a real woman's brain: vague, slippery, inexact, interested only in the personal aspect of a thing. You can't concentrate your thoughts, and, worst of all, you've no curiosity – about anything that really matters. You take all the great facts of existence on trust – just as a hen does – and I've no doubt you'll go on contentedly till the end of your days, without ever knowing why the ocean has tides, and what causes the seasons. – It makes me ashamed to belong to the same sex.' (p.77)

This particular feminist theme is not present in the film. Laura will need Miss Hicks' advice as she trains her powers of observation to become a novelist. But she will never find it easy to go without the comforts of belonging to the conventional herd. This will be the price she pays for independence.

Laura's school is based quite openly on class distinction. Just like the school in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, the purpose of this school is to ensure that the girls under no circumstance marry beneath their station in life. Laura's poverty and the fact that her mother takes in sewing and embroidery to pay for Laura's school fees would be sufficiently shameful to have her ostracised and belittled for ever, if word were to get around. The girls are themselves little beasts of merciless snobbery. They demand to know what the father's job is and how much he earns. And these young "Colonials" – as Henry Handel Richardson calls them – have inherited enough English snobbery to proclaim that the family fortune cannot come from "trade" (p.97). Such were the affectations of upper-class society in Melbourne at the turn of the century. What a shower of cold water after the passion of Henry Lawson for democratic mateship and an Australian republic! Laura would doubtless have viewed Henry Lawson's poverty and alcoholism in the way that she views the lower classes left over in the goldfields of Ballarat:

She hardly knew what drunkenness meant; she had hitherto associated it only with the lowest class of Irish agricultural labourer, or with those dreadful white women who lived, by choice, in Chinese camps. (p.64)

Perhaps, however, after Laura has drawn enough of the "magic circles" (p.220) of eccentric passion around herself, she may in maturity discover

Australian literature, even if she has to write it herself. Perhaps too after she has understood Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (see her initial reactions to this play on p.191), she will find a role model in the resoluteness of the famous Nora as she slams shut the front door of her family home for ever. Nora slams the door on her female enslavement as a sexual plaything. Laura slams the gate on her imprisonment in a puritanical, unimaginative school and bursts into a liberating run. But the parallels for female emancipation are clear.

Footnote

1. Henry Handel Richardson, *The Getting of Wisdom*, Heineman, 1978 p.196. All future page references are to this edition of the text.

The Film: *The Getting of Wisdom*, directed by Bruce Beresford

There are no Australian myths celebrated in *The Getting of Wisdom*. On the contrary. Many of our favourite myths are contradicted. At the school, which we can see as a microcosm illustrating the flaws of Australian society, the underdog Laura is not given a fair go. She is subjected to the pretentiousness and snobbism of a supremely class-conscious and money-conscious society. There is no celebration of loyal mateship. Instead there is petty tyranny and Laura's self-abasement in her efforts to be accepted by the conformist group. In the end Laura expresses suffocating and jealous lesbian love. She learns nothing remotely resembling the non-sexual mateship which, for example, Sibylla strives for in *My Brilliant Career*.

The Getting of Wisdom is based on the anti-myth of Australia's cultural cringe to Edwardian England. Supreme importance is attached to formal dress and formal manners as ways of advertising one's superior class. Individuality and extremism of any kind are frowned upon because they go against the grain of this conformist group which is trying to produce replicas of the Edwardian lady.

The Edwardian lady realised herself in decorum, in submitting to the authority of the male head of the household, and in restricting herself to being an adornment to her husband's hearth and home.

The films *The Getting of Wisdom* and *My Brilliant Career* both evoke a girl's painful adolescence at the turn of the century. Both girls are worried about being ugly frumps; both come from impoverished families that have fallen on hard times and are seeking a new path to class-upward-mobility. Laura Tweedle Rambotham in *The Getting of Wisdom* and Sibylla in *My Brilliant Career* both rebel against the stultifying imprisonment of convention by being impetuous, outspoken, and behaving like iconoclastic larrikins. Both girls continue the revolt of their adolescence by becoming artists in their young adulthood. Sibylla becomes an independent novelist and rejects an offer of marriage which she fears would inhibit her freedom. Laura becomes an accomplished pianist after confirming her unconventional lesbian passion for Evelyn. Both girls mature to become strong-willed outsiders, but they will force the conventional majority to respect their artistic talent.

Bruce Beresford's film *The Getting of Wisdom* differs from Henry Handel Richardson's novel significantly only in the ending. Richardson has her protagonist Laura leave the school defiantly but on the whole ignored. Laura runs through the park after her release from her term in this prison-school, expressing her irrepressible, spontaneous high spirits. She is undefeated but unacclaimed. Beresford, however, borrows an excerpt from Richardson's own life and ends the film with Laura's public triumph as a concert pianist. Beresford's Laura is no longer a square peg in a round hole. She has arrived at her first artistic maturity.¹

The film *The Getting of Wisdom* also bears comparison with the film *Picnic at Hanging Rock* as expressions of our contemporary social history at the turn of the century. Both films are set in hermetically sealed private schools which exude a hothouse atmosphere of puritanism and sexual repression. In this sense both films can also be compared with *The Devil's Playground* which features an identical theme in a boys' school. All three films show that the attempt by authoritarian teachers to impose sexual repression on adolescents results either in outbursts of sexual hysteria or in lesbianism and homosexuality. All three films feature a successful revolt by the children; their untamed, high animal spirits find expression and a way out of their confining prisons. Laura in *The Getting of Wisdom* finds lesbian love, independence as an artist, and an unladylike run through the park. Miranda and Sarah in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* find romanticised, lesbian love; Miranda escapes confinement by vanishing into another dimension of time, Sarah escapes in suicide. Tom Allen in *The Devil's Playground* experiments with guilt-laden homosexuality and then runs away to the normal world of football, beer and honest self-expression.

These three films invite us to compare schools at the turn of the century with our school system now. We have taken our pubescent girls out of girdles and whalebone corsets and in *Puberty Blues*, we have put them into school uniforms, which are meant to be classless and even dowdy, but which often feature mock-innocent miniskirts. We no longer require girls to show demure, ladylike behaviour or submission to males. Nor do we expect our girls to find their life fulfilment exclusively in marriage and child-bearing. We no longer preach fire and brimstone sermons to tyrannise the young into pious obedience. Our teachers no longer have the bullying control over young students that they had then. Our students demand changes in the curriculum to achieve more relevance to contemporary society, and our teachers respond to their demands. The teaching careers of many of our contemporary pedagogues have been halted because they simply cannot cope with classrooms of liberated young animals who have scant respect for book learning. Our children are showing a widespread hostility to school and a tendency to worship the instant glamour that comes from professional sport and rock music on T.V. Perhaps we can find as many flaws in our educational system today as we can in the prudish Edwardian system of 1900. We have revolted against tradition, but the price of our liberation may have been permissiveness and anti-cultural anarchy.

The Getting of Wisdom opens with the arrival of a steam train, evoking a form of travel that we now regard as romantic because we no longer have it and because we associate it with spaciousness in first-class carriages, luxurious wealth, polished wood and servants. For the same reasons we feel nostalgia for the ivy-covered halls of learning at this prestigious girls' school in Melbourne. The staircase and the wood panelling of the dining-hall are magnificent, as magnificent as some ladies' dress fashions that are no longer with us. The film highlights the fact that we have opted in today's world for a more democratic spread of wealth in housing, education, clothes and modes of travel. We are in the age of mass consumerism and it is often difficult to tell the difference between

the moderately wealthy and the average lower middle classes. This dramatic sharing of wealth is no doubt ethically praiseworthy but the price has been a loss of graciousness and of aesthetic style in the upper classes. Our nouveaux riches have ostentatious splendour, but they no longer incline to build monumental neo-Gothic school buildings with lugubrious polished wood interiors. Perhaps we are best advised to view nostalgia ironically.

While it is true that Australia is not laden with aristocrats as her parent Britain still is, we nevertheless have always had a class system in Australia. At the turn of the century the class system was based on vast, rural property and inherited wealth. Today it is based on conspicuous consumption and profession. If your father was a grocer or a chemist or your family didn't have enough money to pay private school fees or provide the right clothing and the requisite invitations back home to a sumptuous mansion, then you were ostracised and put back in your lowly place. This is the hard lesson that Laura Tweedle Rambotham and the chemist's daughter soon learn. The headmistress reinforces this snobbery with her reiteration of the supreme importance of breeding. By breeding she means inherited wealth that gives a certain arrogance and self-assurance to the social manners and graces. The chemist's daughter tries to buy her way to acceptance by the conformist herd of rich girls and she steals in order to achieve this goal. She suffers the ignominy of public denunciation by the self-righteous headmaster and expulsion.

Laura uses a similar method in her strenuous and persistent efforts to be accepted, "*to belong*". She offers her menial services with unpacking. She also tries hard to impress the girls with her talent. This is unsuccessful because the mediocre herd resents genuine talent and will revenge itself whenever possible. Laura and the chemist's daughter are at this school because Australian families inherited a belief from the British that a private school education would help their children to class-climb. This belief is still widespread in Australia today in spite of the obvious fact that tertiary education is the path to class-climbing and not snobbish distinctions in secondary education.

The children in this film are automatically vicious to any newcomer or outsider. They are protecting their privileged position against usurpers. They are proving that they are a special group that is not accessible to just anybody. Their vicious mockery certainly belies the veneer of Christian sanctimoniousness embellishing the public rituals of this school. Christian ethics have no effect whatsoever on the real behaviour of children.

In the film *Picnic at Hanging Rock* the isolation of the young females and sexual repression lead to tragic hysteria and unsolved mystery. In *The Getting of Wisdom* the result of sexual repression is comedy. The girls gossip about the horrifying secret facts of life and what men do to married women. They adore male superstars preaching in the pulpit and they occasionally form lesbian love attachments. Literature – especially Wordsworth – is used as a flowery, euphemistic substitute for heterosexuality. The girls are taught to express a flowery universal love for nature. Talented and cheeky girls like Laura can, of

course, find sexually explicit passages in revered works of literature such as the Bible. When she quotes from the Bible to the Reverend Strachey: "...and my bowels were moved for him ... I opened to my beloved" she has the reverend gentleman over an ethical barrel. She is quoting from the Good Book but she is clearly expressing dangerous indecencies (as they would have believed at the time). Similarly Shakespeare is dangerously explicit sexually and Laura also loves to quote some of his more physical passages such as "*She is unsexed*". This is why the Victorians prepared a bowdlerised edition of Shakespeare in which sexually explicit passages were expunged.

The female teachers all seem to be frustrated spinsters yearning for husbands, any husbands. One of them reads trashy sentimental novels as a substitute for sex. None of the teachers provides a role-model for the girls to imitate. The headmistress has made herself into a tyrant and a snob and is certainly not worth imitating. By contrast the powerless deputy-headmistress is perhaps the only truly kind and generous woman in the film. The male teachers are pompous, strutting peacocks. The Reverend Robby Shepherd, the object of all the girls' hero-worship and adulation as he preaches from the pulpit ("*Dearly beloved, let us go forth and love one another*") is at home a spoilt baby and a conceited, ill-mannered boor. He is also a secret drinker. Part of the disillusionment that comprises the rites of passage from adolescence to maturity is the realisation that the teachers have feet of clay. But the teachers in *The Getting of Wisdom* and *The Devil's Playground* seem made of low-grade clay all over. Their deficiencies are very much part of the satire on Australia's zealous but misguided educational system at the turn of the century.

*Laura Tweedle Rambotham (Susannah Fowle) holds her peers spellbound with her "mash" on heartthrob Robbie the chaplain in *The Getting of Wisdom*, directed by Bruce Beresford.*



Footnote

1. McFarlane criticizes Beresford because he gave Laura a much more positive development at the end of the film than Henry Handel Richardson gave Laura at the end of the novel. McFarlane claims, with dubious logic, that the *The Getting of Wisdom* is a failure because it "loses coherence" in the ending (McFarlane, *Words and Images*, p.57).

I personally found Laura's development quite coherent and plausible. Laura develops from a gauche, brash and impetuous country bumpkin through a passionate quasi-lesbian love to a fierce independence and a determination to realise her ambition as a concert pianist. As an artist, Laura is following the example of her original creator, Henry Handel Richardson, who graduated from a Melbourne private school with a scholarship as a pianist to the University of Leipzig conservatorium of music.

Robin Wood says that Beresford has given *The Getting of Wisdom* "a marvellous ending that quite transcends the awkwardness and overstatement of much that preceded it." Wood explains that Laura performs the Schubert Impromptu instead of the scheduled Beethoven as an act of defiance of this conformist school. It was the Schubert Impromptu that Laura had played together with her lesbian lover earlier in the film. Laura is allegedly asserting her sexual unconventionality through her choice of music in this final concert performance. (Robin Wood, "Quo Vadis Bruce Beresford?" pp.201-202 in Albert Moran and Tom O'Regan (eds.), *An Australian Film Reader*).

CHAPTER SEVEN

Gender and Race Taboos in the Top End

The Novel: *We Of The Never Never*, by Jeannie Gunn

In 1902 Mrs. Jeannie Gunn accompanied her husband to the remote Elsey Cattle Station near the Roper River in the Northern Territory. Jeannie Gunn wrote a series of letters about her life in the outback to her family and friends back home in the South. When she returned to live in Melbourne after the death of her husband, Aeneas, she converted her letters into books. Her first book, *The Little Black Princess*, was published in 1905 and her second book, *We of the Never Never*, was published in 1908. A reviewer for *The Sydney Morning Herald* says of the two books:

As far as the bush folks are concerned the literature of the North is represented by the books of Mrs Gunn ... The name of the authoress of We of the Never Never is revered by every bushman in the country.

Jeannie Gunn had a very keen sense of observation and an irrepressible liveliness. She recorded with precise detail and great humour the annals of her confrontation with the all-male world of the Top End. She also recorded her friendship with the lubras, the piccaninnies and even the old king of the blackfellows, Goggle Eye. What she reported is now a matter of history. The way of life of both the white man and also the Aborigine at the turn of the century has been irrevocably changed by the advent of technology, by the internal combustion engine and international mining for minerals. We can look back nostalgically on the way of life that she describes, for it will never come again. The Northern Territory is no longer the fairy-tale of *Never Never*, it is the bustling, commercially hustling *Top End*.

We of the Never Never is not really a novel. Jeannie Gunn has simply adapted a series of letters or diary entries. There is no development of plot and no deepening of character. There is no movement towards a climax or denouement. Jeannie's observations are keen but disjointed. Her overly jocular sense of humour pervades her accounts. She uses a jaunty, old-fashioned slang so that we know she is "a good egg"! There is of course nothing affected or pompous about Jeannie, but her humour is laboured and over-embroidered with hyperbole. The result sometimes resembles a mixture of girl's gushy enthusiasm and boy's ripping adventure yarn.

Jeannie is more than a little narcissistic. She enjoys the homage paid to her by the shy giants of the Never Never, men's men of few words and much tough action. All this makes for amateurish writing from the point of view of high art. But from the point of view of intimate history and informative observations, *We of the Never Never* still makes fascinating reading.

Jeannie Gunn's text explores the adaptation of the English language to the primitive frontier. Mrs. Gunn has faithfully learnt Pidgin English, as it was

inflicted on the Aborigines, and its variations by the Chinese cook, Cheon, and she has transcribed these exotic tongues accurately onto the printed page. This Pidgin English is the source of a great deal of humour for modern Australian readers who are entirely unfamiliar with it. Cheon brilliantly evokes his preparations for his enormous Christmas pudding when he proudly proclaims "*Four dozen egg sit down!*".¹ When he serves duck "*Cully and Lice*" for breakfast while wishing everyone "*Melly Clisymus!*", this has an undeniable charm. Equally charming are Jeannie's misunderstandings in Pidgin with the Aborigines. Her misinterpretation in *The Little Black Princess* of "*kill him alonga quart pot*" and "*kill him dead fella*" (page 190) leads to farcical hilarity.

There is a further variation from standard English and that is the special slang spoken by people of the Never Never at the turn of the century. They speak this jargon presumably in order to keep their spirits high in the face of a very difficult climate and environment. Sometimes their language amounts to a kind of "in-joke" and is annoying. Jeannie Gunn self-consciously overdoes the cuteness of it all. For example, the train from Darwin going south is "*up-country somewhere, billabonging in true bushwhacker style*" (page 1). And all the stockmen have cute nicknames. All the characters are noble, courteous, hospitable, kind, gentle and good-tempered. We can thank Jeannie's charitable eye for seeing positive qualities in her fellow human beings. Nevertheless there is a decided lack of depth to the characterisation.

This diary-documentary novel is based on a word-play about two different kinds of education. Most of the stockmen have been too busy educating themselves on survival in the outback bush to worry too much about reading and writing. They do not have the civilised education possessed by Aeneas Gunn as a librarian or Jeannie Gunn as a woman of culture. But the stockmen turn the tables against book-learning education by proving effortlessly how very ignorant Jeannie is about bush lore. We have one of Australia's great myths here in print. Jeannie has portrayed the real Australian as a tough, laconic bushman who knows his horses and his animals and wants nothing to do with urban civilization. He believes he is where the real world is, where God is, where beauty is, in the remote bush. This kind of romanticism is usually written by people like Jeannie Gunn and Banjo Paterson whose actual number of days in the bush is very limited. They saw what they wanted to see, briefly, and left as soon as practicable for the comforts of urban civilisation. But this kind of paradox need not disturb us greatly. We are not talking about the ability of Australians to endure the deprivations of the outback. We are talking about how the presence of the outback has affected the collective folk-imagination of all Australians. As C.E.W. Bean puts it:

It seems essential to remember that the (city dwelling) Australian, one hundred or two hundred years hence, will still live with the consciousness that, if he only goes far enough back over the hills and across the plains, he comes in the end to the mysterious half-desert country where men have to live the lives of

*strong men. And the life of that mysterious country will affect Australian imagination much as life of the sea has affected that of the English.*²

When Jeannie wants to build a proper, closed-in dining-room on the Elsey Cattle Station, the head stockman comments, "*Never saw a dog making its own chain before*" (p. 89). That is, Jeannie is depriving herself of the glory of freedom, of camping out in the open, of being, like the Aborigine, a part of nature. Jeannie, however, learns what she wants to know by an extraordinary ability to get to know people and to listen to them talk. This is the main source of her information in this diary-documentary. Much of what she learns cannot be fitted into Igor Auzins' film. For example, she hears the detail of the Mail Service from "the Fizzer" who provides an astonishing eight mail services per year and regularly risks death in the long stretches of desert in the Dry.

Jeannie also gives us a feeling for the changing of the seasons in the Never Never: the difference between the Wet and the Dry which most urban Australians will never experience. Jeannie evokes the waiting for the great Wet with these words:

Every day was filled with flies, and dust, and prickly heat, and the South-east Trades skirmished and fought with the North-west Monsoon, until the willy-willys, towering higher and higher, sped across the plain incessantly, and whirled, and spun, and danced like storm witches, in and out and about the homestead enclosure, leaving its acres all dust, and only dust, with the house lightly festooned in creepers now, and set in its deep-green luxuriant garden of melons, as a pleasant oasis in a desert of glare and dust. (p.129)

Jeannie's other education comes from her friendship with the Aborigines. Here, because she is not contemptuous or condescending, she wins the confidence of the lubras and of little Bett-Bett and even of old King Goggle Eye. She learns a lot about their style at that time, as menial servants and camp followers of the big cattle stations, waiting for trivial handouts. About the wild Aborigines who lived then still in tribal unity outside of the white man's borders Jeannie is unfortunately not equipped to tell us. Charles Chauvel tries to re-create the magic incantations and the religious rituals of the Arunta tribe in his film *Jedda*, but his vision is implausibly melodramatic and romanticised.

Jeannie Gunn creates an inspiring myth in *We of the Never Never* about "one great brotherhood" of Northern Territorians grappling bravely and cheerfully with their difficult environment and helping each other with courtesy, tact and humour. I see no purpose in being so mean as even to want to attack this myth. It is an example of an ideal for which we should all be striving as a corrective to our selfish, materialistic urbanisation, our legal wrangling and our political squabbling in today's Australia.

Footnotes

1. Mrs. Aeneas Gunn, *We of the Never Never*, (Angus & Robertson, 1983), p. 138. All future references are to this edition of the text.
2. C.E.W. Bean, *The Dreadnought of the Darling*, (Sydney, 1956) p. 222. (As quoted in T. Inglis Moore, *Social Patterns in Australian Literature*, Angus & Robertson, 1971. p. 74)

The Film: *We of the Never Never*, directed by Igor Auzins

We of the Never Never is one of the most lyrically beautiful and thoughtful films ever made in Australia. And yet I have often heard friends denigrate it because it is allegedly too slow-paced. It is not slow, it is intense.

The film begins with some very quick-paced action and dramatic excitement of a superficial kind. As it explores its themes of outback isolation, racial confrontation, the place of a woman in a male-dominated society, and the possibility of enduring love as the only answer to death, it slows down. Igor Auzins has created an adagio movement in a symphony, rich with the tragedy of life and death.

We of the Never Never rises to a tragic climax in its treatment of three deaths. Death is a taboo subject in our frigid, neurotic society. We don't talk about it, we barely acknowledge its existence. We are an irreligious, frivolous society that seeks refuge from death in luxurious materialism. We have no time to contemplate on the place of death in our lives and we tend to reject art works that bravely do this act of contemplation for us.

We are also a nation of men who have been taught not to show emotion. This notion is expressed in a heated debate between Aeneas Gunn (played by Arthur Dignam) and Jeannie (played by Angela Punch McGregor). Jeannie protests that if only men would let themselves show their emotions, their joy and their suffering, women would help them to create the solacing intimacy of love. Men and women would together build a community which was not based on separating the sexes in different activities. Igor Auzins is showing us that male repression of emotion and male fear of losing dignity are the motivating forces that hinder true communication and sharing relationships in our Australian society. Aeneas Gunn is the exception to these conventions of macho-men: he is a man of the future.

What makes Australian men respect and like each other? In the film *We of the Never Never* the stockmen mistrust Aeneas Gunn because he has been a librarian. They have no respect for him until he has established his credentials as a horse rider, a man who can gallop after steers and pull them to the ground by their tail. In Australian history there has always been a deep-grained mistrust of egg-head intellectuals. The mateship of the illiterate stockmen is founded on presenting a common front against the intrusion of all civilisation and all technology. The stockmen are also united in their contempt for the Aborigines and their hostility to the intrusion of women in their macho-male world. Jeannie is eventually accepted by them provided that they can condescend to her. If Jeannie tries to be accepted as their equal and to make criticisms of their way of life, she is put back in her place and banished to the homestead.

In the films *My Brilliant Career* and *We of the Never Never* both the heroines conduct a revolution against male supremacy. Sybylla does it with a tomboy

frontal attack on male prerogatives in courtship and marriage. Jeannie makes her protest in a very feminine way. First she wins the acceptance of the men with her enormous sensitive eyes and winning smile, and then after she is settled in, she lashes out in rage at what she sees as their wrong-headed approach to life. She resents the female stereotypes that are imposed on her. She refuses to have her sphere of influence limited to giving the rundown station house "*a woman's touch*". She does do this, but she wants more from her marriage: she wants to alter male behaviour patterns. Jeannie revolts against men's fear of women and their subsequent emotional impoverishment. Jeannie's mother gives her stern advice at the beginning of the movie: "*Don't try to be his mate.*" But Jeannie does do exactly this. Indeed she must do it, if she is to achieve true intimacy.

Jeannie refuses to be resigned and fatalistic the way the men in this film are. She is determined to improve things while she is on the face of the earth, and that doesn't mean improving the technology of machines and economic efficiency, it means improving the quality of love and friendship and communications between people of different beliefs and different coloured skins and different gender. Jeannie's unconventional ways earn her the love of the Aborigines, both of the women and children and also of poor Goggle Eyes.

Jeannie is defeated three times by death. She is defeated by the death of one of the two mates on the track who don't want a woman to interfere. She is defeated by the death of old Goggle Eyes who takes off his annoying white man's trousers so that he can die in comfort. Jeannie could not persuade him to defy the superstition of an Aboriginal foe who had sung him to death. Finally Jeannie is defeated by the tragic death of her loving husband Aeneas Gunn. And yet after she has collapsed in grief and despair, she picks herself back up again and in the final scene of the film she is shown walking resolutely and uprightly into her future. As a companion and solace beyond the grave she has been given the magic return of little Bett-Bett who has returned from her walkabout, perhaps to replace the child Jeannie never had. Bett-Bett asks "*Can I sleep alonga house?*"¹ and Jeannie is re-motivated to caring and educating and reforming. She is accompanied by music that swells triumphantly to a rich organ symphony. The music contains within its resolute rejoicing the tragedy of defeat that is inevitable in life.

Because *We of the Never Never* was made very recently, and because our attitude to Aboriginal culture has changed dramatically in the eighty years since the novel was written, Igor Auzins has been able to give his Aboriginal actors some very funny lines as modest satiric revenge on the white man's arrogance. These jokes are a sign of how much we are gradually moving towards accepting Aboriginal culture as ethically our equal and ecologically in some ways our superior. For example, at the first funeral in the film, two blacks ask each other why the whites are putting the body in the ground. In general they feel sorry for white man's ignorance and his stupid customs, and so they say in their own language, with English subtitles: "*Maybe next time he [the corpse] will come back*

as a black fellow." That is, better luck with your next ticket in the reincarnation lottery. We hope you win first prize with us at the top of the evolutionary ladder.

Another really funny line satirising white man's arrogance occurs during a campfire dialogue between the white stockman and Aboriginal Goggle Eye. Goggle Eye says that blackfella stars were made when a great spirit cut up the moon into little bits and threw them all over the sky. He then asks who made white fella stars. Jeannie replies that God didn't just make whitefella stars, he made all the stars. Whereupon Goggle Eye, after a pause for meditation upon this cultural arrogance, says, "*If whitefella God made all the stars, how come he never made the whitefella some bush of his own?*" With these words Goggle Eye undermines the religious arrogance and the land-imperialism of the white conqueror.

Jeannie shows her unprejudiced curiosity and her sympathy with Aborigines in many ways. Like her husband she attempts to learn their language instead of forcing them to use demeaning Pidgin English. Jeannie is enraged at white paternalism and condescension to Aboriginal culture. This condescension is best symbolised in the film when two stockmen interrupt a sacred corroboree by shouting "*Long Live King Edward!*" and firing their pistols in the air to frighten the Aborigines. Subsequently Jeannie rages at her hapless husband Aeneas about white attitudes to Aborigines:

Jeannie: YOU think they're inferior.

Aeneas: They should be left to their own ways.

Jeannie: Why can't we live together?

Aeneas: The more we have to do with them, the more we destroy them.

Aeneas means that we destroy their nomadic way of life, we destroy their pride and their self-sufficiency by handing out tobacco and flour and sugar, and we give them European diseases against which they have no resistance.

The only way in which the Aborigines can re-assert their old pride and independence is to "*go walkabout*" in honour of their nomadic past. On walkabout they re-establish their old ecological and religious contact with the creatures of nature. There is a similar unbridgeable gap between white and black attitudes towards work. The white man works systematically and regularly in order to make a lot of money through profit. The black man sees no need for money or profit and works according to his whim and his immediate need. The black man thinks that the white man ruins life with overwork, and the white man thinks that the black man is lazy because he lacks the WASP work ethic. Jeannie is seen in this film as being one of the first whites at the turn of the century to regard Aboriginal culture as equal to ours and poetically inspiring in its creation-mythology.

We of the Never Never is a magic nostalgic trip to pre-industrial Australia. Part of our delight in this film is to study, not just the strange ways of the

Aborigine, but the even stranger ways of our great-great-grandparents in the days before industrial technology. The film is set in 1900, after the steam locomotive but before the internal combustion family car. We are fascinated not only by the mustering of horses and cattle but also by the role of wedges and saw pits in the building of a house. We look with envy on the custom of having Chinese cooks. We look with amusement at turn of the century fashions in women's underwear and outer wear. We look with sadness on the Aboriginal corroborees that we have all but destroyed.

We of the Never Never is a film that begins with dramatic confrontation and wild adventure in the outback. It then retreats to an intense adagio that is sustained, with a few comic interludes. These comic interludes range from Jeannie being dunked in the river while on the flying fox, to the violent dispute between the rude Chinese cook and his wonderful replacement. Further comic scenes feature Jeannie climbing up a tree to escape a mad bull, Jeannie trying to persuade the Aboriginal woman to find mops, and Jeannie going swimming with the lubras. Some of the comic lines from the novel survive in the film. There is, for example, the old pub owner who compares well-rounded Jeannie with his own scrawny wife and says, "*You's'd knock the spots off her sideways!*". Much humour is wrung from Jeannie's recipe for escaping from starvation in the outback: "*I'd catch a cow and milk it!*" and from the description of the rundown house as "*a commodious station homestead*".

Director Igor Auzins shows an outstanding photographic ability to make romantic joy out of the dubious attractions of much of the Northern Territory, whether in the Dry or the Wet. Cattle mustering in the heat is also successfully romanticised in soft focus shots of dusty sunsets or dramatised with didgeridoo beats and the thunder of the horses' hooves.

Photographically, this film is really a series of alternations between close-ups and panoramic sweeps. There are close-ups of Jeannie's big, dewy brown eyes and also of the cadaverous-melancholy visage of Aeneas, who is represented as the man of sorrows. These close-ups are alternated with panoramic aerial shots of sunsets, wild scenery and horseback action. The soundtrack adds enormously to the mood. *We of the Never Never* has the magic of atavism and romanticised primitivity for us over-civilised urban neurotics.

Jeannie Gunn (Angela Punch McGregor) learns the approved way of catching lunch from her Aboriginal friends in We of The Never Never, directed by Igor Auzins.



Jeannie Gunn (Angela Punch McGregor) bids a poignant farewell to Aeneas Gunn (Arthur Dignam) in the hours before his death in We of the Never Never.



Footnote

1. The film *We of the Never Never* thus stresses the solace that Jeannie finds in this reunion with Bett-Bett. But the novel *The Little Black Princess* ends with the sweet sadness of Bett-Bett's separation from Jeannie because she is "bush-hungry". Bett-Bett's final words to Jeannie in the novel are: "Missus, me want walkabout. No more longa you, Missus, longa blackfellow." (*The Little Black Princess*, Angus and Robertson, 1983, p. 228). This does not mean that the film is therefore unfaithful to the intention of the novelist. Nor does it mean that the film is inferior to the novel. It is simply an example of how a film director can take liberties with a novel's text and create an inspiring new effect.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sacrifice of the Vestal Virgins to the Phallic Rock

The Novel: *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, by Joan Lindsay

Picnic at Hanging Rock is another nostalgic novel harking back to school days at the turn of the century. Like *The Getting of Wisdom* and *The Devil's Playground* it is morally ambivalent in its nostalgia. It can thus both rejoice in the stylish grace of bygone days and also revile the twisted puritanism and authoritarianism of this Edwardian age. Joan Lindsay's novel was not written until 1967 and in this sense her novel is a deliberate period romance. The contemporary reader is transported back to days when gentlemen were gentlemen, and preferably at least colonels with a touch of the gout, and ladies were ladies who never ventured out of their boudoirs without first donning their armour of French whalebone corsets.

Comparisons may be odious but it is necessary to point out that in contrast to Richardson's *The Getting of Wisdom*, Joan Lindsay's novel is lightweight in theme and character–interaction. Lindsay tries very deliberately to substitute mysticism for the development of a substantial theme. But because there is very little mood preparation for the catastrophic disappearance of the schoolgirls and because there is no hint of a solution to the mystery of exactly what happened on the monolith of Hanging Rock, the result for a rational reader is one of irritation and boredom.

The novel *Picnic at Hanging Rock* provided an excellent script for a beautifully romantic motion picture because it gave film director and viewer an uncomplicated opportunity to adore the female teenage virgin without complex or profound dialogue to interrupt the flow of adoration. The visual imagery of the film combined with the music from Mozart and the pipes of pan is vastly superior to the cold printed word as a medium for evoking moods of wistfulness and mystery.

Joan Lindsay has created well differentiated characters in the headmistress of Appleyard College, the French mistress and the mathematics mistress. The cheerful Irish servants are perhaps somewhat stereotyped. Lindsay sentimentally accentuates in Dickensian fashion the distinction between the privileged childhood of the rich girls and Sarah's upbringing in the orphanage where they shaved the hair off her head if she seemed rebellious. The social background of the novel, in which parents are inevitably on safari, shooting tigers in the Himalayas or trout fishing in New Zealand, is also snobbishly overdone.

Similarly the sharp contrast drawn between the Hon. Michael Fitzhubert and Albert the coachman who is "*rough as nails*" is crudely exaggerated. Their mateship transcending class barriers is as artificial and as unconvincing as the over-differentiation between their manners of speech and their attitudes towards females. Michael is Pre-Raphaelite in his adoration of the female whereas Albert

is lip-smackingly vulgar. When Albert turns out to be the long-lost brother of the poor orphan waif Sarah, the plot has well and truly entered the holy precincts of Victorian melodrama. This kind of co-incidence and sentimentality have no place in contemporary literature.

The spectacle of the tyrannical headmistress who becomes an alcoholic as her college is destroyed by scandal is unintentionally funny rather than moving. It is melodrama when she finally climbs up the Hanging Rock and throws herself to her death from the precipice. As she leaps, she is haunted by a vision of her victim, the orphan Sarah Waybourne "*in a nightdress, with one eye fixed and staring from a mask of rotting flesh*".¹ This is 19th century writing and belongs in the works of Edgar Allan Poe. In fact the whole mystery of the girls' disappearance at Hanging Rock does not fit well with Lindsay's realistic delineation of their all too earthly characters.

If one chooses to ignore the would-be mystery, one notices that Lindsay has a talent for malicious wit and that her descriptions are stylistically very clever. Here is her description of the headmistress in her heyday:

Now an immense purposeful figure was swimming and billowing in grey silk taffeta on to the tiled and colonnaded verandah, like a galleon in full sail. On the gently heaving bosom, a cameo portrait of a gentleman in side whiskers, framed in garnets and gold, rose and fell in tune with the pumping of the powerful lungs encased in a fortress of steel busks and stiff grey calico.
(pp.12-13)

This description combines colourful metaphor with accuracy of observation. The description of the mathematics mistress is equally witty: "*the well known church-going toque and black-laced boots, together with the puce-coloured pelisse, in which her bony frame took on the proportions of one of her Euclidian triangles*" (p.12).

Even wittier is Lindsay's description of the tasteless St Valentine's Day cards received by governess and girls. For example, Tom's Valentine's Day card for Minnie is "*a bleeding heart embedded in roses and obviously in the last stages of a fatal disease. Minnie was enchanted...*" (pp.10-11).

But this wit, delicious though it is, runs counter to the need of the novel to work towards evoking a mood of supernatural mystery. Joan Lindsay should have prepared readers for the girls' strangely compulsive behaviour at Hanging Rock later on that same day by emphasising the element of sexual repression among some of the girls. The novel is too down-to-earth and too realistic to give its supernatural climax a chance to seem credible. Joan Lindsay even refers specifically to Appleyard College's "*outdoor dunnie*" (p.11). It is small wonder that later attempts in the novel to paint the Rock as a supernatural monolith, a phallic God demanding female virgins as a sacrifice to its primaeval power, are not at all convincing.

This mysterious conclusion of the novel is also spoilt because it has too many contrived coincidences. It is just too much of a coincidence that ugly Edith Horton and exquisitely beautiful Irma, Countess de Latte-Marguery, both lose all memory of what they have seen and experienced on the Rock. When the Hon. Michael bangs his head and also loses his memory, the plot becomes very silly indeed.

In March 1987 the publishers Angus and Robertson finally released the concluding chapter eighteen of the novel which they coyly entitled *The Secret of Hanging Rock*. John Baxter reviews this resurrected chapter 18 with these words:

Expecting revelations of bloody murder, alien kidnap or time travel, the reported 10,000 people who bought this booklet, not to mention those who will presumably snap up a rumoured 10,000 reprint, must be feeling a little disappointed. And here, surely, is the best evidence against the theory of a forgery; any faker worth his salt would have come up with something more startling than this.

I suspect Joan Lindsay dropped Chapter 18 because it did not equal in interest the book which preceded it.²

What exactly is the explanation of the mystery that Joan Lindsay proffers in Chapter 18? Firstly the girls succumb to the primaeval, phallic power of the monolith. As Marion Quade puts it:

The monolith. Pulling, like a tide. It's just about pulling me inside out, if you want to know.³

In the demanding presence of the monolith, the girls strip off their artificial corsets and throw them over the cliff. But the corsets do not fall, they mysteriously float, "*stuck fast in time*". Finally the girls discover not a hole in the rocks, but "*a hole in space*". Merely to contemplate this hole brings the shantih of spiritual peace. The girls slither into it in radiant ecstasy, convinced that they are arriving at their life's destiny. Only Irma loses courage and is left behind. It is all dismayingly as though Joan Lindsay had set out to re-write the German legend of the Pied Piper who lured all the children (except for one lame child) into the magic mountain to eat candy for the rest of their lives.

It is therefore small wonder that an orthodox search party couldn't find the girls. They were in another dimension of time, whatever that may mean. Joan Lindsay would have needed the stylistic mastery of Patrick White to carry off this dubious mysticism. I doubt very much whether it will satisfy anyone. Readers are far more likely to enjoy Yvonne Rousseau's *The Murders at Hanging Rock* (1980), in which five different, plausible explanations are given for the girls' disappearance.

In any case, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is certainly a novel that is aesthetically surpassed by its film adaptation.

Footnotes

1. Joan Lindsay, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, Penguin, 1967, p.187. All page references are to this edition of the text.
2. John Baxter, "Some mysteries are best left as such", *The Weekend Australian Magazine* 17, March 14-15, 1987.
3. Joan Lindsay, *The Secret of Hanging Rock*, Angus and Robertson, 1987, p.24.

The Film: *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, directed by Peter Weir

How very strange it is that Australia in the 1980s should on the one hand proclaim itself to the world as the land of mateship, classless democracy and hedonism and on the other hand should acclaim Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* as one its greatest films. This film celebrates Victorian English snobbism, a sharp division between the classes and the conditioning of upper class females as passive sex objects kept in bondage in corsets and mounted motionless on pedestals ready for worship from afar.¹ Even the view of the Australian bush is most un-Australian: either the bush is the dangerous home of poisonous snakes and poisonous ants, as Mrs. Appleyard sees it, or it is the place where young girls dive headfirst into black holes in space and vanish into timelessness. I wonder what Henry Lawson or Banjo Paterson would have thought of that.

Like the novel, the film *Picnic at Hanging Rock* anchors itself in a basis of pseudo-historical documentation in order to make its supernatural mysteries seem more plausible. But where the novelist contradicts her mysterious purposes by adopting a tone that is partly mundane and partly witty, the film director is consistent in using every technique at his disposal to create mystery and other-worldliness. Perhaps the enormous box-office success of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* indicates that today's Australians are dissatisfied with their drab materialism and their unimaginative worship of sensual self-indulgence; that in secret they yearn for a more complex, if more perverted, civilization and an escape into nostalgia for 19th century Victoriana.

Peter Weir creates mood magnificently. It is just as well that he is brilliant with mood because *Picnic at Hanging Rock* has nothing to recommend it other than its mood.² Weir specialises in an otherworldly mood that is inspired by his need to adore the spiritual beauty of a Botticelli Madonna. If the Botticelli Madonna, Miranda, proves that beauty is goodness, light and truth, then the Hanging Rock proves that this ideal is mysteriously menaced by the primeval forces of darkness, by the irresistible magnetism of the phallic monolith. Just as the monolith has the power to destroy civilized, social order by stopping all the clocks, it also has the power, as Joan Lindsay herself put it, of "*pulling (the girls) inside out*" (p.24). The monolith lures the girls to an erotic self-sacrifice to the male phallus and a consummation which involves them merging through a black hole with Mother Earth. The monolith does to Miranda in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* what daemonic Marbuk does to innocent Jedda in Charles Chauvel's film *Jedda*. Innocence is lured on by curiosity and destroyed by the demands of the instincts.

Peter Weir's techniques to evoke mood include soft-focus, slow-motion photography, soft, lisping voices as through from far away, appropriately spiritual music from Georgie Zamhir's haunting pipes of pan, suggestive symbolism and an

unashamed romanticisation of the girls' youthful beauty and virginally white, 19th century costumes. To appreciate fully the impression that this is calculated to make on contemporary audiences in the 1980s, we only need to contrast the mood and content of Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* with Beresford's representation of today's female teenagers in *Puberty Blues*. How unspeakably crass and soulless the confused girls in *Puberty Blues* seem. Weir has escaped from a vulgar present to take us on a male voyeur's nostalgia-trip to a sexual utopia for neo-Victorian necrophiliacs. This is why there are such lingering shots of the girls being laced into their corsets or breaking out of bondage by shamelessly discarding their corsets, their black stockings and shoes.

The film hints strongly that the explanation for the girls' disappearance is to be found in sexual tension. It is stressed that when Irma is found five days later, she has her dress on but her corset is missing. The doctor, however, finds her to be virgo intacta. The puzzle is increased by the fact that the elderly school mistress for science is observed running up Hanging Rock clad in nothing but pantaloons. The conclusion to which the film impels rational viewers is that the girls and their teacher were seized by sexual mass hysteria caused by a repressive schooling which did not allow them to express their natural, animal urges. In this sense the film is very similar to Aldous Huxley's *The Devils of Loudun* in which sexually repressed nuns are gripped by fits of daemonic eroticism and are thought to be possessed by Satan.

Picnic at Hanging Rock offers many contrasts between the demure behaviour expected of the girls and the primaeval wilderness of bush and boulder. It is an enormous tribute to the camera work in this film that the real-life Hanging Rock, which is a boring collection of uninspiring stones just off the prosaic Melbourne-Adelaide highway, could be so transformed into a menacing monolith. To make a comparison again with Chauvel's *Jedda*, a film which also specialised scenically in the wild magnificence of rocky cliffs and precipices: Chauvel was obliged to take his camera through three-quarters of the gorges of the Northern Territory and ended up at Govett's Leap in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales while maintaining the fiction that he was still with the Arunta Tribe in the Northern Territory! Weir, on the other hand, is able to stay on the one location and make magic out of a few boulders on a small hill. From these few boulders Weir is able to create the Druid-like illusion of an Australian Stonehenge.

This sexual interpretation of the film is given further justification by the symbolism, the representation of lesbianism³ and the sharp differentiation made between the sexual conventions of the upper classes and the lower classes. The white swan conjures up, in a rather hackneyed convention, the symbol of innocence and purity: Wagner once constructed a whole opera around the symbol of the swan. Somewhat more Australian is the myriad of exotic parrots which rise squawking an ominous warning to the girls to stay away from Hanging Rock; the girls are frightened but at this stage are too rational to understand the warning. There is the colour symbolism of the contrast between glaring sunlight

and the mysterious darkness of the caves. There is the further colour symbolism of the contrast between the virginal white of the girls' dresses and the passionate red dress of Irma after she has passed through the rites of initiation into womanhood. Finally there is the image that sets the tone for both the novel and the film: beloved Miranda is compared with Botticelli's painting *Venus Born From A Sea Shell* hanging in the Uffizi gallery in Florence. Botticelli's representation of Venus is of an untouchable Lorelei, wistful, otherworldly and as remote as a vision of the holy grail. Sarah, who has re-channelled her sexual drive into a lesbian adoration of Miranda, constructs a religious altar to her which features Botticelli's painting. When Sarah loses Miranda and is threatened with having to return to the lower-class world of the orphanage, she commits suicide.

Sarah's spirited revolt against the school's tomb-like decorum forms the second theme of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. Sarah's tragic suicide is connected to the mystery at Hanging Rock both by Sarah's lesbian love for Miranda, without which she will not live, and by the idea of supernatural telepathy. The upper class boy from England, Michael, is driven on to renew his search for Miranda by telepathic messages he receives from her in another dimension. Similarly, Sarah, in the hour before her death, seeks out the spirit of her long-lost brother Bertie who had alone made her childhood in the orphanage bearable. It is a ludicrous piece of romantic coincidence that providence has placed her brother Bertie so near and yet so far from her, as he works nearby as a lower-class gardener and stablehand. Bertie actually senses her astral presence for a brief moment before she crosses over into the other world to be reunited, we presume, with her beloved Miranda who has gone ahead. It is amazing that this kind of romanticism has appealed to today's materialistic Australians.

The society represented in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is based on two sets of double standards. The first double standard is the difference between the sexual freedom permitted to men and the chastity expected of a lady. The second double standard is the difference in behaviour patterns of the upper-classes and the lower-classes. The upper-classes are fully devoted to a cultural cringe to Victorian English society; the gentlemen affect the English top hat, three piece formal suits and cravattes while the ladies allow themselves to be trapped in corsets, long white gowns and parasols.

The lower classes, who are just as un-Australian as the upper classes, enjoy incomparably more freedom with their dress, their speech and their sexual behaviour. The maid and the gardener are seen in bed together twice, having a merry romp. Similarly, when Bertie sees the girls in white, his response is to speculate about how, underneath the concealing dresses, the girls' legs go all the way to their derrieres. In contrast, his upper class friend from England, Michael, remains a romantic fetishist who returns from his quest for the sexual holy grail clasping what appears to be a torn piece of Miranda's white dress. He would rather worship this piece of dress than transfer his sexual affections to a living woman. Freud called this phenomenon libido-fixation; we call it unconsummated romantic love from afar. Peter Weir seems to hint very strongly in *Picnic at*

Hanging Rock that only the spiritual energy aroused by this devotion to unconsummated love can give the characters an entry ticket to "*the black hole in space*" and the divine bliss of transcendence to another dimension.

Corsetless maidens mesmerized by the phallic rock in Picnic at Hanging Rock, directed by Peter Weir.



Footnotes

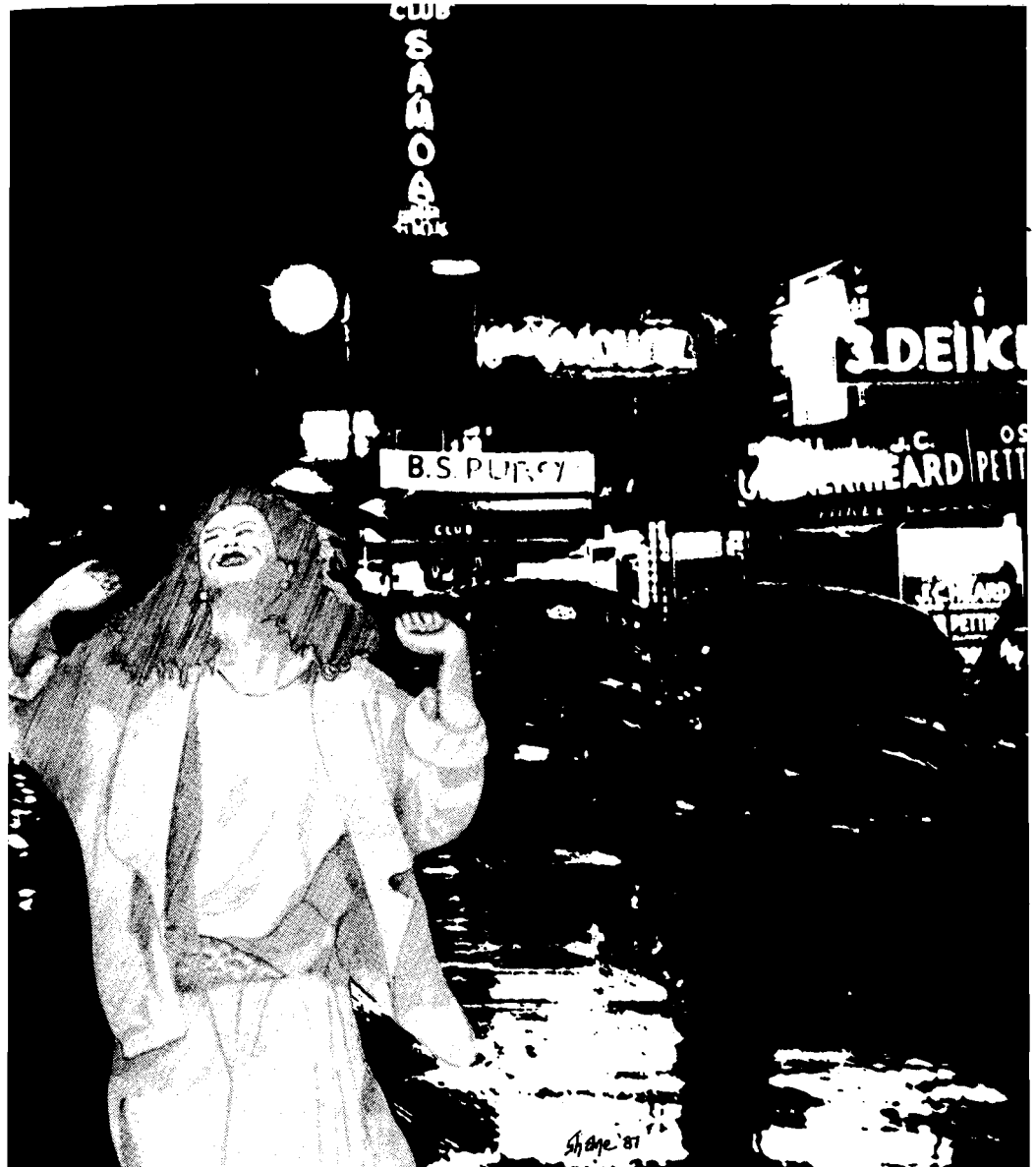
1. Ian Hunter, in his savage satire entitled *"Corsetway to Heaven: Looking Back to Hanging Rock"*, says this about the perverted ideal of female beauty in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*: *"Binding the female body, preventing its free movement, hopelessly deforming it, was the way the culture enacted the myth of the young girl as spiritual redeemer of society. The ideal beauty is corpse-like; Ophelia has a great social vogue and Peter Weir's leading ladies are possessed of the same pale, fey beauty as pre-Raphaelite maidens"*. (As quoted in Albert Moran and Tom O'Regan (eds), *An Australian Film Reader*, p.191).

2. Andrew Tudor in his essay on *"The Aussie Picture Show"* says: *"Though he (Peter Weir) has proved to be a skilful creator of atmosphere, he has also been much too willing to sacrifice narrative coherence and characterisation to a taste for flamboyant effects and heavy symbols."* (As quoted in Albert Moran and Tom O'Regan (eds), *An Australian Film Reader*, p.211).

3. On the subject of lesbianism in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* Ian Hunter says: *"Lesbianism is in the film in the same way as the disappearance is, not to be thought about as a human reality, but as an emblem of the girls' otherworldliness. An emblem drawn from Victorian art, from Coleridge's Christabel or Rossetti's The Bower Meadow The lower classes, on the other hand, are pictures of guilt-free, rollicking eighteenth century heterosexuality. This is fun, the film suggests, but likely to result in rustic idiocy and good-natured brain damage."* (As quoted in Albert Moran and Tom O'Regan (eds), *op cit*, p.192.) Hunter's wit is delicious but I do not agree with him that *"the film is bloody awful"*. Weir's vision may be limited but he creates a beautiful, if perverse, illusion within those limitations.

PART TWO

The Self-Satirising Present: Slaughtering the Sacred Cows



CHAPTER NINE

Female Virgin on the Rampage

The Story: *The Night the Prowler*, by Patrick White

The opening pages of this story are carried along by a satiric impulse that is joyful, energetic and impish. As usual, Patrick White begins his story much more light-heartedly than he ends it, and with the emphasis much more on a narrative that is both realistic and dynamic. His endings, by contrast, incline towards surrealism, frozen stasis, and sombre, grotesque representations of insanity, old age, disease, physical hideousness, and death.

Like so many of Patrick White's other stories, this one too begins *in medias res*. There are no introductions to characters or scenes; these emerge in the course of the action. The story is dealing with the aftermath of some catastrophe and White is gleefully keeping the mystery of this catastrophe up his sleeve while at the same time mocking the hysteria of Mrs. Bannister over the event. It quickly becomes apparent that this woman is the representative target of White's satire. She is another of his middle-aged, North Shore matrons ensconced in her solid Home Beautiful, devoting her life to upholding WASP-mores with their emphasis on insipid niceness and a puritanical, inhibited family life. She makes a pitiful attempt to hide both from embarrassing failures in a competitive society and from the inexorability of decay and death behind the illusory protection of the high walls of property.

The catastrophe before the beginning of the story is that Mrs. Bannister's daughter has been allegedly raped. White deliberately presents this event through the eyes of Mrs. Bannister, transforming something unpleasant to a fast-punching farce. All that the rape means to Mrs. Bannister is that it may bring social disgrace upon her. The import of the rape is that she is obliged

to discover the limits of her own powers: when she had secretly believed that, with the exception of cancer, air disasters, and war, she had circumstances under control.¹

Here White is satirising the passion of the bourgeoisie, once they have gained control of property, to establish an absolute stasis over the dynamics of life itself. With witty economy White establishes Mrs. Bannister's relationship with the silent, suffering Mr. Bannister through one gesture: she is contemptuous of his wasting endless time at the incinerator burning things (p.121).

The satire retains its cracking pace through the telephone conversation of Mrs. Bannister and her friend Madge. They compete with one another in garrulousness, vulgarity and superficiality. White maintains the tautness of the satire by capturing the breathless horror of their expressions and alternating them with two kinds of narrative commentary. The first kind of commentary is Mrs. Bannister reflecting, while pausing for breath, on her friend Madge. White phrases these reflections in such a way that they inevitably rebound satirically on

Mrs. Bannister's own head. For example, "*Of course Madge was incapable of realizing. One had to admit it: she was superficial*" (p.122). To take another example: after Mrs. Bannister has confided in Madge about how one might best go about telling her daughter's fiance of the rape, she is disappointed in Madge's lack of interest, and reflects, "*Perhaps one had launched it too casually: Madge sounded distressingly remote*" (p.123). That is, Mrs. Bannister has made a tactical blunder in the martial sport of gossip and her artillery has failed to make a vital hit. White shows here that the purpose of gossip is for two emotionally starved women to goad each other on to increasing thrills, and ultimately to horror-induced paralysis of the speech-mechanism. They gulp voraciously, and with the safety of vicariousness, at intoxicating droughts of life in the raw in the great outside.

The second kind of commentary interspersed by White in the phone monologue is reflections by an omniscient author. For example, "*Mrs. Bannister could afford to show sympathy: her vision of Madge Hopkirk sitting in a squalor of spilt coffee made her feel superior*" (p.123). The insincerity of this woman emerges when White shows her practising the pose of stoic courage, of a "*Roman matron*" and manipulating her husband with "*an imitation of kindness*" (p.125). This is the kind of woman who looks forward to her best friend's funeral because she knows that she cuts a fine figure in black. White further characterises her through her manner of speaking, through her breathless clichés as she searches for the pose that will give her the most admirable profile. Her great idols emerge through melodramatic pauses and italics, namely the career of Felicity's fiance in the diplomatic corps, her husband's dedication to the stock exchange, and her reverence for anyone in the social hierarchy who is "*high up*" (pp.124-125). Her only other "*highest principles*" are the virginity of unwed maidens, and the dual conviction that all sex is dirty and that every bridegroom has the ethical right to be the first man to dirty his bride (p.124). The climax of her monologue comes when she titillates herself into the thrill of vicariously experiencing her daughter's alleged rape. White's representation of this event culminates in one of the wittiest metaphors:

For one bleeding moment Mrs. Bannister almost underwent the shocking act of violation to which her daughter had been subjected. Though a fairly solid woman she tottered at the telephone, but recovered enough of her balance and voice to cough and grunt farther through the moral labyrinth in which she found herself astray. (p.124)

Not that the pleasures of gossip are limited to Mrs. Bannister and Madge. In fact the "*lustreless lives*" of the whole neighbourhood are illuminated by Felicity's engagement ring (p.137) and when she is allegedly raped they all rush out to buy the scandal newspapers and are aghast with the delight of "*participating in the violation*" (p.138). White's satire assumes the dimensions of indecent farce when he says,

while as for the elderly prostate-stricken gentlemen they drove it home as never before and certainly never after. So it was very terrible for everyone. (p.138)

White has another method for commenting satirically on such gossip: he shows how the makers of the gossip can become the targets. He does this through the plot structure by ironically devising no fewer than three parallel cases where this kind of poetic justice, of turning the tables, is achieved. In the first case of poetic justice Mrs. Bannister becomes the target of her former colleague in the art of slander, Madge. Felicity brings this upon her mother by hanging out after the alleged rape with promiscuous hippies. Now it is Madge who rings up Mrs. Bannister to humiliate her with juicy details of Felicity's promiscuity and Mrs. Bannister who tries to flee from the telephone with its pleasures which have become tortures. The pursuer has become the pursued and she seeks the consolations of the brandy bottle in a most unbourgeois way (p.146).

In the second parallel case of poetic justice, Felicity's father, who has until then been a considerably more passive and likable figure than his wife, is satirised when he shows an unsuspected streak of malice. Just as the neighbourhood has once gleefully preyed upon the scandal of his daughter's rape, now he just as gleefully preys upon the discomfort of his friend, Harvey Makin, whose house has been vandalised. Mr. Bannister says,

'Well, good luck to 'em. I hope they got their thrill. Harvey was always a smooth, self-satisfied beggar, and his house the kind of mausoleum asking for rape.' (p.158)

Mr. Bannister here compounds his malice with two blunders, one of which he realises too late, the other of which he never learns about. He realises that he has unconsciously made a parallel with his daughter's rape in his own house and thereby raised afresh a topic whose painfulness he had been striving to repress. The poetic justice consists in the fact that he has thus punished himself.

Mr. Bannister never learns, however, that it is his own daughter who has raped and vandalised Harvey's mausoleum. Felicity seems to have been motivated to this act as the revenge of poetic justice for her own alleged rape. She also evidently hopes that this act of violence will help her overcome her formerly passive, insipid self through destruction of that representative symbol of the bourgeoisie, the castle-home. She is eventually enraged by the inability of the bourgeoisie to provide her with a satisfactorily masculine lover, to give her the passionate, loving freedom which she is seeking as an antidote to the secure, eiderdowny protectiveness offered by her diplomatic fiancé. She perceives that the bourgeois express their passion, not in physical love, but in greedy acquisition of property. She thus attacks the quintessence of their being in Harvey's house.

Felicity's rape of the mausoleum is a rape of *"all soft, fleshy, successful men"* (p.151). Her act of brutal vandalism is expressed by White in overtly sexual imagery. She takes the phallic knife – and of course she had kept a phallic knife as a memento of the puny and unsuccessful attack made upon her – to the *"leather pretensions of men"* in the guise of the armchair,

riding their thick thighs, still slashing, jerking with her free hand at the reins, sawing at the mouth which held the bit, she was to some extent vindicated, if guiltily racked by the terrible spasms which finally took possession of her. (p.152)

After this coital passion she falls back exhausted, “*only half credulous of what was after its fashion a consummation.*” Here ends the third of the three parallel cases of poetic justice upon which White has constructed the greater part of this novella.

Apart from these striking parallels, the structure of *The Night the Prowler* hinges on a decisive turning-point which occurs exactly in the middle of the story. This turning-point is Felicity’s decision to break her engagement with her diplomatic puppet, John Galbraith. The background to this decision is the landscape of a park which provides its own eloquent commentary. For in the park are mounted police in orderly patterns but “*uneasy in their manliness*” (p.141) and a scurrilous dog-trainer unsuccessfully bullying his Labrador into obedience, but only causing him to revolt against his master with hysteria and “*torn screams.*” The parallels with the foreground are clear. John Galbraith himself is characterised brilliantly by two economic details, and is thus one of the few characters in White’s stories to be presented in true short story fashion: he has only an “*eiderdowniness,*” that is, a dull protectiveness, to offer Felicity, and his mouth is not given to erotic aggression because it “*had been formed by tactful conversation, foreign languages, and the strategic smile, though he enjoyed doing his duty by a kiss*” (p.142). In rejecting him, Felicity decisively rejects timid engagements and respectable marriages and bursts out in a quest for passion. Fittingly, she does not break the engagement, she “*shatters*” it. At this stage, however, her revolt is still almost entirely negative and intuitive. She screams at her reproachful mother, “*Why – WHY? If I knew the answers! But I don’t! I’m not the record you’d like to play!*” (p.144).

Structurally, the last ten pages of the story can be seen as a coda. This coda makes it clear that the story is not a short story, neither in length nor in the multiplicity and profundity of its aims. For if the opening of the story is a social satire, the ending is a mystic allegory. The story could well have ended with the symmetry of Mr. Bannister realizing that his laughter at the rape of Harvey’s mausoleum has painfully rebounded on him. This ending too would have kept the story’s emphasis on the social and family aspects of the alleged rape, which we the readers know with full dramatic irony never took place.

The coda is however brilliant in its own right, and if it tends to make a quest-novella with mystic overtones out of a short story, then so be it. The narrative method in the coda is to terminate the shifting narrative perspectives by taking up Felicity’s point of view solely and sustaining it for ten pages until the end. The main defect of the coda is that it recalls the earlier rape scene with all of its unconvincing sexual psychology and makes Felicity’s sexual characterisation even more ludicrously improbable. It was dubious enough when we were asked to believe that Felicity had punched the insect of a prowler in the mouth and that

his head had dropped with a hiss on the pillow amid a general feeling of “*damp plumage*” (p.153) in a presumable parody of Leda’s rape by swan-Zeus. It is unconvincing when she then tries to force the unsuccessful rapist to drink Daddy’s brandy and smoke a cigar whilst at the same time feeling “*her half-strangled desire ...still squirming around inside her*” (p.155). But now in the coda she viciously boots at naked couples who are described as “*mesmerized*” and “*languid*” (p.161); why they would be languid in Centennial Park at midnight in the middle of coitus is mildly puzzling when one thinks of the bugs, the mosquitoes, and the drunkards who populate the park in swarms. Of course what our heroine Felicity is about here is thematically over-obvious. She is protesting at the inadequacy of normal, insipid, unimaginative coupling. She prefers the company of methoes, who, perhaps only because they are so demonstrably non-bourgeois, are called upon by a fanciful Patrick White to provide her with a mystic “*revelation*” (p.161). Felicity is also required as part of her quest to win a motor-bike chain as a trophy of her physical prowess in a gang fight, and rather like Samson pursuing the Philistines with the jawbone of an ass, to run after a mob of cowardly leather-jackets trumpeting, “*Hold on, youse! P’raps we got somethun to say to each other*” (p.162). This is indeed an eccentric psychological and linguistic descent to the vagrant lower classes in pursuit of the only true revelation.

If the coda is inadequate from the point of view of the realistic characterisation maintained in the earlier stages of the story, it is also marred by an ugly pomposity in Felicity’s quest for meaning. Thus she throws back her “*her pumpkin of a head, ejaculating, ‘I fuck you, God, for holding out on me!’*” (p.164). The coda is also strongly impressionistic and fragmentary, wandering off on trajectories and digressions that are never really integrated.

Nevertheless, there is a finale in the last pages of the coda, which in its tortured alternating between nihilism and barely comprehensible mystic solace is reminiscent of Beckett and Pinter. One crosses the line from loathsome physical reality to metaphysical dialogue and to the dubious religious consolation of a grotesque Pieta. The crossing of this line is not subtle. Like Christ healing the lepers, Felicity offers to wash the diseased old man, and at the same time she triumphs over his “*level of negation and squalor*” (p.166) with a somewhat forced childhood memory of a double-yoked egg, “*twin perfections in gold fold*” (p.167). This gold is linked with the gold of the sun’s light illuminating the scabrous slum room. White’s intention to transcend is obvious enough, but one wonders whether many readers will find that the imagery flows happily and organically from the story. The grotesque Pieta is achieved by a metaphor that is even more forced and for me at least unintentionally amusing in a scurrilous kind of way. That is, the old man find the release in death of being able to piss by himself without discomfort, and as Felicity beholds this flood, she herself is “*flooded with pity*” (p.168). Both floods are seen as a release: the old man is released from the false myth that he will never again enjoy a piss without pain. Felicity is released from the false myth of bourgeois niceness and hygienic, dispassionate marriages inside castle-homes that shut out everything unpleasant

from their inmates' cowardly vision of security as the ultimate happiness. Felicity's big reward then, although it is paid for in "*solitariness, in desolation*" (p.168), is that her quest has enabled her to break out of the prison of stasis, of loveless conventions, to shatter the twin false idols of property and virginity, and to achieve the dizzy intellectual and emotional freedom of "perpetual becoming."

Footnote

1. Patrick White, "The Night the Prowler" in *The Cockatoos*, Viking, p.120. All page references are to this edition of the text.

The Film: *The Night the Prowler*, directed by Jim Sharman

Jim Sharman's film *The Night the Prowler* uses a lot of Patrick White's dialogue. White has an infallible ear for the trite phases of the upper middle-class matrons of Sydney: they are the targets of his merciless satire. Neither White nor Sharman can abide the shallowness, the self-protectiveness and the snobbish prestige-seeking of the philistine upper middle-class of Australia. Equally intolerable are their smug satisfaction with themselves, their false sentimentality about their families, their clichés about conservatism and communism, and their inane conversations about the weather. In other words, they have sacrificed their deeper sexual and spiritual energies in return for a shallow "niceness", a herd-conformism and a determination to keep themselves distant from the foul-smelling lower classes. It is this absence of sexual and spiritual energy that Patrick White and Jim Sharman cannot stand.

Both story and film are humorously entitled *The Night the Prowler*. The title lacks an expected verbal finish. There is no verb because on that particular night the prowler did nothing at all. It was the fact that he did nothing at all that caused Felicity's crisis. Her sexual instincts have not been fulfilled by her polite sexless boyfriend in Australia's Department of External Affairs. Anti-heroine Felicity (a very demanding role played with great sensitivity by Ruth Cracknell) yearns for a sexual attack, that is, she yearns for a tough male who can match the intensity of her physical need for passion. Jim Sharman tries to indicate this with his flashbacks to her infancy and childhood in which she lies in ambush for her Daddy and tries to cling to him, to bite him, and to be cuddled by him while she is naked. She tries to exclude her mother from her drive for sexual possession of her bewildered father who would rather give lectures on the sacredness of virginity and the art of pruning roses. Felicity's mother is dependent on the excitement of gossip with Madge to fill the void in her life. Sex has been entirely repressed from the family's life so that they can all be "nice" to each other together. Jim Sharman's flashback techniques to infancy and childhood are orthodox Freudianism in the representation of the Oedipal urge.

Felicity's non-rape is the crisis point and the fulcrum in a film that is really a biography of her formative years – a kind of portrait of the religious seeker as a young woman. Normally the seeker renounces sex in order to escape from the torments of the flesh and find the way to a purely spiritual God. In Patrick White's and Jim Sharman's world the seeker gives up the sexual repression of the unadventurous middle classes in order to seek overt sexual adventure and through this sexual adventure to seek God in unexpected places.

To understand this film we need to compare the first enactment of the prowler's entry into Felicity's bedroom and the second enactment of the same event. Also, we need to examine the point in this film where it ceases to be farcical and satirical and instead becomes surreal and spiritual.

In the first alleged rape-scene, the rapist is a bogey-man parody of a vicious thug. He is meant to look very silly. Jim Sharman is poking fun at the attempt of the middle classes to protect their precious possessions and their daughters' virginity against outside intruders. Felicity invents the rape story because she is enacting a wish-fulfillment both to satisfy her own curiosity and also to shock her parents and thus stop them mollycoddling her.

The flashback to the second enactment of the rape-scene gives the true account of what actually happened. This true account is as farcical in its own way as the first invented account. Felicity's passion terrified the timid male-intruder who is quite incapable of satisfying her need for passion. Instead he tells a sad story about his wife who has adopted two little girls, presumably because of his impotence. Felicity brutalises and socially rapes her unfortunate intruder, trying to make Errol Flynn out of him by forcing him to do such swashbuckling things as drink cognac and smoke cigars. Subsequently, Felicity is obliged by her frustration to set out on her own exploration for orgasm. The film now begins to become both serious and pretentious about the quest for spirituality. I can accept Felicity engaging in an orgy of destruction and thuggishness. I can accept her wearing studded leather suits and terrorising copulating couples in Centennial Park. This is the repressed male-aggressive part of her personality coming out into the open. Her chumminess with the drunken "flasher" on the steps to the park can even raise a chuckle from us, as it sweeps aside a pet fear of the middle classes about flashers. Her abandoning the educated accents of her upper middle-class schooling and her descent into proletarian gutter-dialect is an amusing reversal of sexual and class stereotypes as an idea. But it is unspeakably silly as an incident in a film. The night scenes in Centennial Park become increasingly surreal. Equally silly is Felicity's terrorising of a naked young man in his flat. When she saves him up to rape him later in the night, the perspective is that of satire through farcical sexual reversal.

Towards the end of this film, director Jim Sharman bravely follows Patrick White into allegorical territory¹ to create a quester-myth for our cynical, experimental age. Felicity rejects gender-stereotypes of sexual behaviour and in this respect is continuing the feminist rebellion begun by Sybylla in *My Brilliant Career* and Laura in *The Getting of Wisdom*. Like Sybylla, Felicity resolutely rejects the temptation to lead a passive life as the dependent wife of a man from the upper middle-classes. Felicity's negation of bourgeois "niceness" leads her through a stage of rebellious thuggishness and brings her face to face with the horrors of nihilism and frigid isolation.

The naked old man, who is dying alone in the condemned slum house, has reduced life to excretory bodily functions. He mutters to Felicity: "*I never loved, not even myself. I believe in nothing. Nothing is a noble faith.*" Felicity reacts to this challenge with the answer of compassion. After she has helped the old man to die in comfort, she walks home thoughtfully in the early morning.

The old man is a spiritual mirror-image of Felicity herself: both have been equally unloving of themselves and of others. Felicity learns to see spiritually and

to understand the need to love. She has had her religious experience like Saul on the road to Damascus. She returns home at dawn, meditative and shocked into maturity. Perhaps she will become an observer of life like her creator Patrick White? What else can her observation of the block of flats mean? Here Felicity observes the different activities of the people in the various flats as they play out their lives on their balconies, oblivious of each other and immersed in their private world. And yet all of their actions are visible and intelligible to the camera and to the eye of the artistic observer. Where will Felicity's life go from here?

Footnote

1. McFarlane correctly distinguishes between the realistic first part and the surrealistic second part of the story and the film. McFarlane says "*the episodes symbolizing the values of upper middle-class respectability are firmly rooted in the realist observation of detail, whereas those encapsulating Felicity's move towards illumination are almost surrealist in their explicit concern with her mental state. The disparity it draws attention to is one that is endemic in White's work. The best of his writing is concrete, visually powerful, rooted in the real; the worst is in the declamatory spelling out of themes that resist dramatisation. In the transposition from page to screen, Sharman has been too much in awe of White, too little ready to provide any commentary on the original. As a result, the latter's faults as well as its strengths tend to be preserved intact.*" (McFarlane, *Words and Images*, p.175). I concur with this interpretation of the film.

CHAPTER TEN

Sexual Equality for the Sisterhood

The Novel: *Monkey Grip*, by Helen Garner

Monkey Grip is an outspokenly honest account of a divorced woman's ecstatic but ultimately very unhappy affair with a heroin addict. No less a magazine than the *New Yorker* reviewed it as "elegant and wry". It is drily funny in parts and very depressing in others. As a reviewer in *The Sydney Morning Herald* put it :

Monkey Grip brings home the fact that there are an overwhelming number of alternatives open to us all in today's world, and that these do not necessarily make life easier or more satisfying. But one makes of it what one can.

In *Monkey Grip* Helen Garner evokes an alternative life style to bourgeois conventionality, monogamy, professional careerism and the competitive amassing of wealth. But this alternative life style seems to have more disadvantages than advantages: it seems to be emotionally ugly and self-destructive. Nevertheless the anti-heroine of *Monkey Grip* does show admirable spontaneity and passion in her opposition to conventional Australia. Her amoral revolution consists primarily of her insistence on her right to take drugs and to be casually promiscuous. She also surrenders herself deliberately to a hopeless love for a narcissistic, egotistic and completely unreliable junkie.

This anti-heroine, Nora, makes both a moral choice and a choice between two ways of life. She opts for intense love and intense loneliness in preference to self-protective moderation and disciplined hard work. She chooses romantic self-abandon and rejects classic self-restraint.

Mature readers who have chosen a life style of moderation and restraint are likely to be irritated by *Monkey Grip*. Teenage readers who are themselves passing through the phase of anarchistic experimentation and sensual self-indulgence are likely to regard *Monkey Grip* as a cult book. It is, however, a credit to Helen Garner's honesty as well as to her skill as a novelist that she shows the lows as well as the highs of Nora's love affair with the junkie, Javo.

Monkey Grip reminds me of a very famous love novel written two hundred years ago by the immortal Johann Wolfgang Goethe. In 1774 Goethe wrote *The Sorrows Of Young Werther*, which at its time was just as shocking to mature, conservative people as is Helen Garner's *Monkey Grip* today. Goethe's Werther fell hopelessly in love with a beautiful country girl who was, however, happily engaged to be married to a successful young lawyer. Werther refused to heed her warning signals; the more obvious it became that she was unattainable, the more hopelessly he fell in love with her. Finally, in a paroxysm of self-induced despair, he took a revolver and blew out his brains. This act of suicide was regarded by the conventional majority of the time as scandalous and sinful. And

yet, all over Europe young men who regarded themselves as similar to Werther, as being hopelessly in love, took out their revolvers, opened their copy of Goethe's novel on the last page, and blew their own brains out. Perhaps this was a final act of homage to the persuasive and suggestive power of art or perhaps they were all just looking for a fashionable way to commit suicide.

One trusts that Helen Garner's *Monkey Grip* will not cause a generation of women to fall hopelessly in love with heroin addicts. The novel must seem seductive to many would-be rebels against stifling Australian conformism. It makes the rock-scene, female emancipation, female promiscuity, the taking of soft drugs like hash and not so soft drugs like cocaine and LSD all seem exciting, liberated and glamorous. In this sense *Monkey Grip* is very much a novel of our times. It depicts the problems of the unemployed urban poor and the collapse of Australian puritanical conservatism and monogamy in these urban slums. *Monkey Grip* is valuable as a socio-historical document of the urban flotsam and jetsam created as the rejects of capitalism.

It is instructive to compare Helen Garner's Nora with the heroine of Henry Lawson's *The Drover's Wife*. Here a lonely woman of the outback fights against fear, aggressive tramps, bushfires and loneliness in order to fulfill her duty to her family and to her husband who is away droving. Her life style is also neither easy nor satisfying. It is based on self-discipline and an unwavering sense of duty. Nora's life style in *Monkey Grip* is based on pandering to the senses and a perverse fixation of the libido called love. The dramatic changes in Australian society over the last one hundred years could not be more clearly demonstrated than in the contrast between the drover's wife and Nora. Helen Garner knows that she has not created a tragedy of inevitability but rather a sentimental "tear-jerker" about self-indulgence. As Nora is told when she consults the I Ching about her misfortune in love:

*It is not immutable fate ... that caused the state of corruption, it replied, but rather the abuse of human freedom.*¹

Australian society has become so rich, so luxurious, so liberated from religion and puritanism that it is in danger of destroying itself in a self-defeating quest for mindless pleasure. What the characters in *Monkey Grip* are revolting against is what the Australian historian Manning Clark calls the Judeo-Christian ethic of individual responsibility. This ethic entails self-discipline, family togetherness, the attempt at monogamy and the WASP doctrine of working for a living and giving a sheltered life to the marriage's children. Helen Garner has deliberately created a novel that is in revolt against this Judeo-Christian ethic by celebrating an anti-heroine who is a promiscuous feminist, an anarchistic kind of pseudo-communist and a chaotic epicurean.

Nora sometimes refers to "the enemy" in *Monkey Grip*. She means all those who are rich and powerful and who govern the country, such as her well-off uncle. She is angry with the capitalist system of unequal distribution of wealth because she cannot afford the tickets for the expensive luxury train from Sydney

to Melbourne. She wants all the perks of the capitalist system without any of the self-discipline and pain of having to work for it. To use Helen Garner's deliberately vulgar term, Nora prefers to loll around "*fucking*" anything in pants that happens to appeal to her at the time. That is, when she isn't pining for the heroin addict Javo who is usually either stoned on a fix or languishing in a Bangkok gaol for theft. Nora spends what money she has on LSD, coke and hash and is then angry that she hasn't enough money for luxurious transport. It is curious that Helen Garner clearly means us to feel sympathy with her female protagonist and yet her effect on middle-aged, middle-class readers must surely be one of irritation and alienation.

The other alienating factor in *Monkey Grip* is Nora's strident feminism. Nora achieves an ironic reversal of the great Australian mateship-myth. A hundred years ago men formed mateships in the lonely outback to help each other survive a hostile environment in which women were traditionally banned, as Jeannie Gunn found out when she accompanied her husband to the cattle station in the Top End. But Nora reserves the term "mate" for her casual sexual partners. She does this in order to emphasise her destruction of the sexual double standard according to which men could be polygamous but women had to be monogamous and above reproach. Nora aggressively insists on being the initiator in most sexual encounters and she refuses to live as a couple with any man. This could be seen as a continuation of the feminist revolt begun by Miles Franklin in *My Brilliant Career*. In this novel Sibylla refuses to tie herself down in marriage to any man because she would then lose control of her freedom. But Nora takes her sexual freedom to bizarre extremes. She insists on having sex with one man while one of her other boyfriends is waiting in the next room. Nora is proud of her "sisterhood" relationship with her female emancipated friends; they ask each other's permission before they have sex with each other's temporary boyfriends. This is the ultimate ironic reversal of male liberation and female enslavement in the late 19th century.

Monkey Grip is a fashionable novel in the sense that it wishes to shock, to dismay, to repel and to infuriate middle class readers, particularly male readers. Shocking the middle classes has been a favourite sport of western drama and literature since the turn of the century when Alfred Jarry created the gross, disgusting and infantile *Ubu Roi* in order to satirise bourgeois pomposity.

Contemporary Australian novelists with the ambition to be taken seriously as artists tend to write about a sub-culture of drop-outs, drug-takers, lower-class mockers of the socio-economic system, Aboriginal fringe dwellers, revolutionary feminists or anarchistic haters of bourgeois power games. They write with surreal black humour or with passion about the neglected point of view of those who are down and out. Here is a typical passage from Helen Garner's *Monkey Grip*:

Stoned, stoned, stoned again. Coke madness. Sitting up in my well made bed, all alone on a Saturday night, my tongue numb from licking up last night's coke crumbs off the mirror, I pondered the nature of dissipation and pleasure. My nose began

to bleed weakly from the left nostril, probably something to do with the quantities of coke I had absorbed into the mucous membrane the night before, first with Jessie in the tower kitchen when I was supposed to be stirring the soup for supper, and again later with Bill, in my room after the show. We were stoned when we got home; but we snorted more and lay back. ...

I remembered the last time I'd been so coked: the night in summer when Javo brought me some and I snorted it, and lay awake all night beside him while he came down hard after days of shooting it. His eye rolled round to me again and again, his face tried feebly to smile.

Bill and I fucked one ordinary, human fuck, and then the coke took over and we were doing something else: my head raced and plunged away into other worlds, and my body flowed on a tide of uncontrollable fantasy, singing sweet and high the while.

I slept two hours barely; and the next day I kept going only by smoking huge quantities of black hash. I went to a party at Eve's. Clive was there.

'Come and stay the night with me, Nora!' he said, taking my hand in his calloused palm; but I couldn't, I was so exhausted.

'I've been fucking my arse off all night,' hissed Eve to me as she passed me a plate of food. Jessie and I made each other laugh until we were nearly sick.

Everybody was out of their heads. (pp.125-126)

There is an air of spontaneity and honesty about this passage which makes it very persuasive as art. The liberation of Nora from bourgeois order through drugs and sex and her achievement of an anarchy of pleasure and fantasy are well evoked. However, when Nora confides, as she does rather frequently, that she is "*suffering pain in the heart*" (Garner's italics, p. 125), readers sense a contradictory sentimentality in the style and they are apt to feel irritated and bored as the novel drags on.²

Footnotes

1. Helen Garner, *Monkey Grip*, Penguin, p.9. All further references are to this edition of the text.

2. McFarlane sits uneasily on the fence on the issue of Nora's limited appeal. He argues that Nora "*does not lose hold of the reader's sympathy despite the fact that the story, as told by her, centres almost wholly on herself and her frustrations. These preoccupations – the constant pondering on what she is feeling, the analysis of what is happening in her successive sexual relationships, the sense of herself as ill-used – ought in the end to be merely wearisome to the reader. And indeed a good deal of this prize-winning novel, with its vestigial narrative, is tiresome*". (Brian McFarlane, *Words and Images: Australian Novels Into Films*, p.129.)

The Film: *Monkey Grip*, directed by Ken Cameron

This film is a truthful, if rather lugubrious and depressing celebration of new myths about contemporary urban Australia. The central myth concerns the attempt by many of the characters to create mateship between the sexes. Nora (played with wistful charm by Noni Hazlehurst) and her friends in *Monkey Grip* are self-consciously trying to eliminate jealousy and possessiveness in sexual love. The characters attempt to avoid what they see as the boredom of conventional suburban monogamy. Their alternative tends to be a sordid and incestuous merry-go-round of promiscuity. One wonders whether the AIDS-virus epidemic and the call for self-protection by the practice of chastity and monogamy have not already made the brave new world of *Monkey Grip* out of date.

There is a painful honesty about the way in which Nora, Martin, Willy, Angela and others accept their chaotic sexual desires. But the tragic lack of harmony between these desires and the yearning of some of the characters for love makes their lives seem miserable and futile.

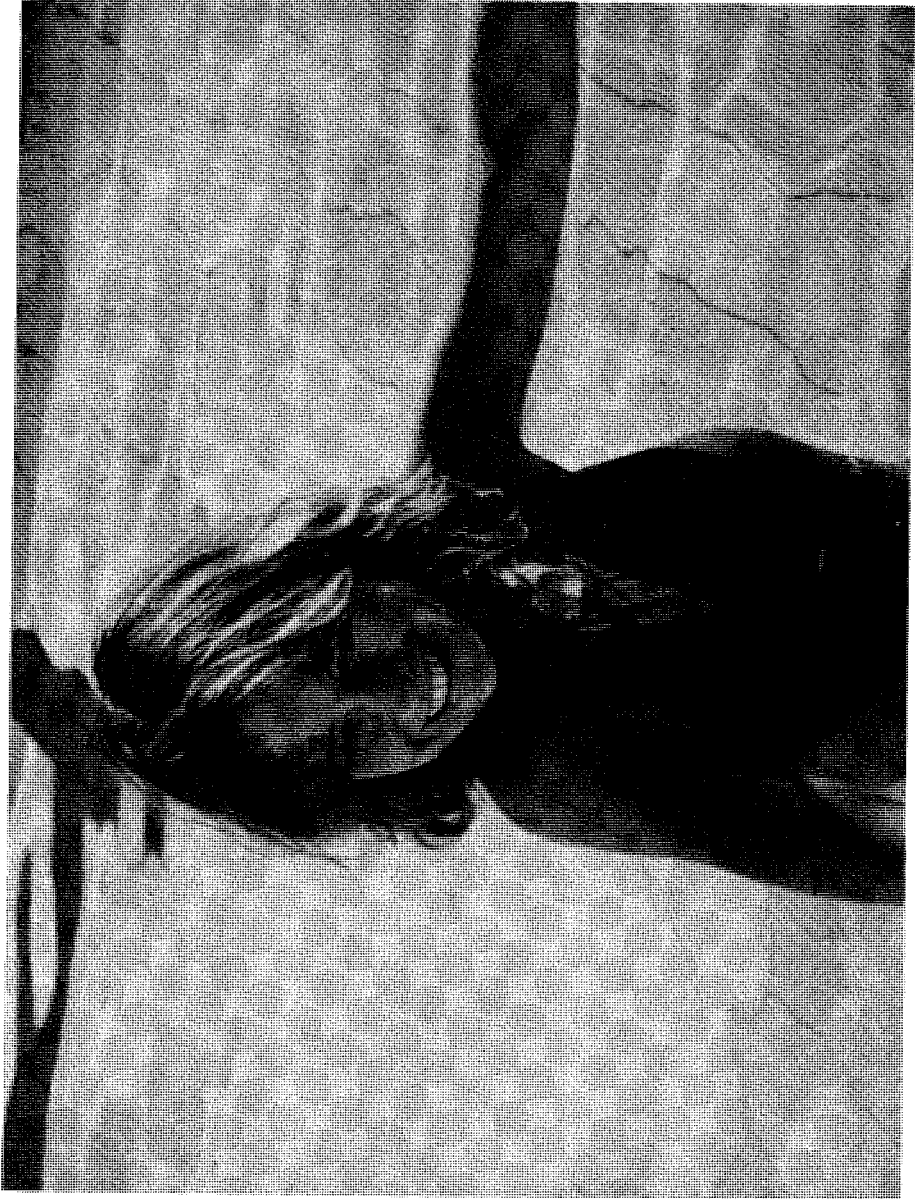
The women try to overcome the inevitable suffering of failed sexual relationships with a new myth which we shall call the solidarity of sisterhood. They try to stick by each other and comfort each other when they are deserted by their male lovers. Occasionally this comes unstuck as for example when Angela accuses Nora of being a voracious sexual predator. This accusation has a measure of truth to it, although Nora has been trying to control herself and to reject Willy's advances because she knows that Angela needs him. In the end the myth of sisterhood triumphs and after shared tears and embraces in the ladies' toilet, the two women go home arm in arm.

Monkey Grip has one final myth. This myth suggests that the only way to overcome the defeats involved in living and loving is dedication to art. There is an ideological and also a creative aspect to this dedication. The ideological aspect is Javo's marxian assertion in the middle class art gallery in Melbourne that "*art belongs to the people*".¹ Nora's and Javo's life style is deliberately proletarian and anti-capitalist. They belong to the urban poor. Javo is presumably unemployable. In the film, however, as opposed to the novel, Nora is committed to her work as a journalist and is indeed shown working both day and night. Nora's image in the film seems significantly different from her image in the novel.

The film also stresses that almost all of the characters are creative artists and that they take their art more seriously than anything else in their fairly miserable lives. Angela and Willy and their friends do recordings of their rock songs and this is seen in the film to be hard work but nevertheless exciting and glamorous. Javo acts in melodramatic, amateur plays and disgraces himself in the middle of a performance by having to leave the stage and vomit owing to his heroin addiction.

Nora writes short stories about her friends and their publication makes her friends into enemies. They are all as addicted to art as they are to drugs. They are all confident that they have found a life style that is superior to Australia's socially conservative majority. Perhaps the impetus for a fresh beginning in Australian culture will come, in part, from their revolutionary alternative. This is an opinion, however, which I personally do not hold.

Nora (Noni Hazlehurst) being alternative but wholesome in Monkey Grip, directed by Ken Cameron



Footnote

1. Apart from this one comic incident, film director Ken Cameron has chosen to ignore Helen Garner's explicit references to Marxist ideology in the novel. In the novel Nora prints "HO CITY" on her shirt in honour of "the Vietnamese and the liberation of Saigon" (*Monkey Grip*, Penguin, p. 56). In general the character of Nora is sanitized for the film. In the novel she is considerably less attractive. In fact in the novel she often seems crude, sex-crazed, self-pitying and hiding her envy of the rich behind trite pseudo-ideology. In the film, however, she is made to appear hard-working, a devoted mother and a wholesome hippy who is pure at heart but has the misfortune to fall in love with a self-destructive, narcissistic drug-addict.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Apartheid and Genocide: Australia's Shame

The Novel: *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, by Thomas Keneally

The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith is about a half-caste Aborigine's brutal axe-murder of four women in outback New South Wales at the turn of the century. Keneally sets himself the task of making a white audience some eighty years after the event feel sympathy for the Aboriginal murderer. That is, Keneally aims to exploit the guilty conscience of contemporary liberal Australia about early colonists' genocide of over a quarter of a million Aborigines in the first century of European occupation of Australia.

In order to arouse sympathy for the axe-murderer Jimmie Blacksmith, Thomas Keneally creates a series of pictures of social injustice and racist insults hurled at Jimmie and out of these pictures he evokes the inevitability and the spirituality of Greek tragedy.

The inevitability arises from the cumulative effect of the contempt and the injustice dealt out to Jimmie by a series of mean, cheating white farmers and a corrupt policeman. It is simply a question of how long it will take to break Jimmie's passive endurance of these insults and to snap the delicate thread of his sanity. When he does lose his sanity, he bursts out in a frenzy of Dionysian blood-lust and twisted erotic revenge. The white European public of Australia in 1900 reacted with a manhunt to punish what they saw as a black revolution against white supremacy in matters social, economic and sexual. That is, the white population of 1900 was morally certain in its bigotry that the place of the Aborigine was drinking cooking sherry and varnish in the paddocks outside country pubs and handing over their wives to white drunkards in return for a swig of brandy. Half deliberately and half unconsciously white European settlers over the preceding 120 years had set out to commit genocide on the Aborigines by a combination of alcoholic poisoning, stealing their land, casually shooting them and poisoning their waterholes. They had also destroyed the Aborigines' religious culture and their self-respect through Christian mission stations and had forced them into menial servitude. Finally they ravaged the Aboriginal population with booze and diseases such as syphilis, pneumonia and TB.

Keneally creates a brilliant opening chapter, revealing to his readers the poetry, the joy and the spiritual vitality still present in Aboriginal tribal myths. He also achieves religious satire in his contrast between the Methodist missionary, Mr. Neville, and Jimmie's tribal elders. Mr. Neville is characterised by his tight-lipped sourness, his discontent with himself, the hollowness of his faith, and his ignorant condescension to the Aborigines. Jimmie Blacksmith's tribal family is shown to have an easy-going tolerance and an almost mystic hilarity.

Keneally seems to speak sometimes within the Rev. Mr. Neville and sometimes within Jimmie or one of his family. Neither is of course the case, but the technique serves both to bring the characters to life, and also to create a wryly

ironic distancing effect as we, the readers, contemplate the ethical and spiritual issues of the clash between two civilisations. For example, Mr. Neville's complaint "*If a person could be certain ... that he had imbued one of them (the Aborigines) with decent ambitions*"¹ is heartfelt and he is quite ignorant of his bigotry and arrogance. A clever visual image of Mr. Neville's discontent is evoked when we see him littering his house with "*notifications of vacant ministries out of the Methodist Church Times*" (p.4). By ironic contrast Jimmie is said to have "*all the comforts ... A blanket. His mission clothes. Fresh-water crayfish and slightly muddy perch. Possums came out at night. He flung his club at their phosphorescent eyes*" (p.5). Keneally must have chuckled gleefully at the thought of his middle-class readers, moaning how urgently they need a second family car, an air-conditioner or a freezer, reacting to Jimmie's more modest notion of comfort.

There is an additional irony in the narrative perspective. It is in the implied contrast between our contemporary acceptance of anthropology with its relativity of values and respect for so-called primitive societies and the smug evangelical condescension of Mr. Neville to the Aborigines whom he treats and chastises as little children. Mr. Neville is so convinced that only his church can represent the order of "*higher things*" that he is oblivious of the unintentional irony in his comment on Jimmie's return after his unexplained absence: "*God must love those who greet mere absentees with so much ardour. It was as if the boy had come back from the dead*" (p.6). The irony is twofold: the boy has indeed just returned from the dead, that is from his mythical encounter with the lizard monster who has devoured him and has now let him be born again "*as a completed Mungindi man*" (p.2). The second part of the irony is that a rough parallel has thus been unintentionally established by Mr. Neville between the Christian myth and the Aboriginal myth. The Christian myth is based on a vicarious faith in Christ's return from the dead but the Aboriginal myth allows every initiate to experience for himself the blessing of being born again.

In order to achieve this aim of persuading his audience to feel sympathy for an Aboriginal axe-murderer, Thomas Keneally creates two contexts. The first context is an ironic view of Australian politics at the turn of the century on the threshold of Federation. The second context is a spiritual one featuring the clash of two incompatible cultures. On the one hand there is the stone-age totem and taboo religiosity of the Aborigines which permeates every feature of their social life through appropriate rituals. On the other hand there is the alleged Christianity of white settlers noted, in this novel anyway, for their arrogance, their hypocrisy and their lack of Christian *caritas*. The white farmers smugly assume that Christianity is superior to all other religions. They are as contemptuous of pagan Aborigines as are the Christian missionaries. The Reverend Mr. Neville meddles irresponsibly and arrogantly in Jimmie's tribal integrity. He sets out to destroy Jimmie's sense of belonging religiously and socially to an Aboriginal community that should have equal rights of worship. The Aboriginal community is

ruthlessly destroyed by the white intruders and it is a sickness of the soul as much as a sickness of the body that kills Aborigines like Jimmie.

Jimmie's life is determined by a rhythm of death and rebirth. Keneally makes this particularly clear at the conclusion of the novel when he shows Jimmy suffering feverish nightmares after he is badly wounded in the mouth and jaw by gunfire. As Keneally puts it: "*The pain of his mouth became the pain of tooth-excision at his initiation. He dreamt continually of a beautiful mother, a primal Dulcie, greasing her gums and thighs religiously, to aid his cure and birth from the great Lizard*" (p.164, cf. p.173).

Most important, however, in Keneally's depiction of Aboriginal religion is that stylistically he creates hymns to it which are remarkably similar in tone to the exalted verse of the chorus in classical Greek tragedy. When Mort enters the womb of another tribe's sacred rocks, he sings this hymn:

*Strangers yet well-intended we have come,
Wary of strangers' totems,
Fugitives who have seen all the bad omens of blood
And need the mercy of foreign people,
Warmth, song and food.
Moving forms of men wanting their souls returned to them.
There is nothing we wish to destroy,
Being already under threat from wronged spirits.* (p.148)

Jimmie and Mort are "*desirers of exorcism*" (p.147). They may or may not be authentic, religious Aborigines. But what they certainly are is a recreation of the Greek tragic playwright Aeschylus' *Eumenides*. Jimmie and Mort are doomed heroes who have woman's blood on their guilty hands. As Mort chants in Mungindi dialect:

*Woman's blood cleaves to a man.
If he wash his eyes over and over in Marooka,
His outer eye does not see it again,
But the stain is on the inner eye.* (p.129)

Fleeing from their knowledge of sin, Jimmie and Mort are pursued by the Eumenides, the Furies, the "flies" of Jean Paul Sartre's recreation of this myth in his play *The Flies*. Jimmie and Mort look for exorcism from the Furies of conscience by withdrawing from the white man's world, back into the religious wholeness of Aboriginal tradition. How the exalted language of their hymn contrasts with the demeaning pidgin English that the white man has forced them to speak, liberally interspersed with blasphemies. But the attempt to go back in time to religious traditions before the white man's invasion is doomed to failure.

The womb of sacred rocks has been profaned by white vandals and Jimmie's half-caste soul has been perverted by the Reverend Mr. Neville. Jimmie has become a schizoid creature. He is neither Aborigine nor white. He neither belongs to the great Lizard nor to Christ. He will not accept the chaotic socialism

and drunken licentiousness of his mother's tribe and yet his attempt to become a white man is rejected contemptuously by colonists who are absorbed in the selfish accumulation of property and capital.

The novel is able to make far more of the historical context of Jimmie's revolution in 1900 than the film. The conversations between the Irish rebel Toban and the Rule Britannia loyalists tell us a lot about the mood in Australia just prior to Federation. This background is very relevant to Jimmie's fate in several ways. For a start, the whites automatically exclude him from political debate about Federation and find it hilarious that a mere Aborigine should have an opinion on the subject. Jimmie's interest, however, is part of his desire to belong to the white man's community as an equal, politically and economically. Jimmie's interest in Federation should be contrasted with the despairing acknowledgement by the schoolteacher-hostage later in the novel that only forty percent of Australians turned out to vote on the vital referendum about whether Australia should become a unified Federation. The issue of an independent Australian identity, liberated from all ties to England, is also raised historically at this time, partly by the issue of republicanism and partly by England's call to the colonies to support her war against the Boers in South Africa.

It would have needed a miracle, one supposes, for Australia to become a republic, to refuse support for England in a brutal, greedy war of aggression in South Africa, and to admit Aborigines as citizens with equal rights in this new republic. History has no miracles of this kind. Instead Jimmie echoes the English declaration of war on the Boers and makes his own declaration of war against all whites. This may at first seem bombastic and ridiculous. But if we remember the outrages perpetrated against Jimmie and his fellow Aborigines, as evoked by Keneally in this novel, a revolution against outrageous injustice is predictable and understandable. To give Jimmie's revolution increased popular appeal, Keneally compares Jimmie with Ned Kelly (cf. p.135). When policeman Farrell sodomizes and murders the Aborigine Harry in the gaol cell and then orders Jimmie to burn the evidence and prepare the corpse for a coroner's enquiry, this is a horrendous insult not just to Jimmie but to all blacks. The contemptuous refusal of the stingy farmers to admit Jimmie to anything approaching economic and social equality of citizenship is a further insult to all blacks. This outrage, after all, is far worse than the outrages that caused the population of France to rise up against the ancien regime of Louis XVI in 1789.

This is not to deny that there is a personal element in Jimmie's motivation to his war of revenge. Jimmie wants sexual equality. If the white men can have sex whenever they're drunk and in the mood with the Aborigines' wives, why cannot Jimmie have sex with Mrs. Healy or Miss Graf? Just as Jimmie represses his social pride in his vain attempt to assimilate, he also represses his erotic desire for a white woman. When this repression becomes too much, it bursts out in libidinous rage: Jimmie doesn't want to kill Mr. Newby, he wants to axe-murder conceited, unattainable Miss Graf. It is this repressed erotic desire, which mixed with a

burning conviction of having been wronged, that makes Jimmie a murderer of women. To counteract his readers' horror at Jimmie's atrocities, Keneally emphasises the hypocrisy of almost all the white men who lust after the giggling, tubercular lubras, presumably because the lubras do not have the puritanical hang-ups of their respectable white wives. The novel is more successful than the film in making these psychological connections clear. As Keneally puts it:

When he (Jimmie) put his rifle against Newby's gut, he knew that he wished to kill that honey-smooth Miss Graf. His desire for her blood, he understood came as a climax to his earlier indecencies – relinquishing Harry Edwards to Senior Constable Farrell, for example. He wished to scare the schoolmistress apart with his authority, to hear her whimper. In our world, the delusions that killers let into their blood-screams are the stuff of newsprint and video. A reader should be spared. Enough to say: Jimmie admitted to his body a drunken, judgmental majesty, a sense that the sharp-edged stars impelled him. He felt large with a royal fever, with re-birth. He was in the lizard's gut once more. (p.78)

In summary, the novel is more suited than the film to making such psychological motivations explicit, in using a single image such as "*the lizard's gut*" to call forth in the reader a whole system of Aboriginal mythological references and thus form the narrative into an integrated, intellectual whole. The novel is also more suited to weaving into its account the historical background and the social panorama with the class conflicts for example that surrounded Federation. Finally, because the novel does not make such a shocking climax out of the axe-murder scene (cf. pp.79–80) but rather tends to intellectualise its grotesqueness, Keneally does not have the problem of fighting against the lengthy anticlimax that troubles the structure of the film. Keneally's novel continues after the axe-murders to explore the cruel ironies of perverted passion, false pride and hypocritical self-righteousness. The only human being to live beyond the novel and to learn to accept a terrible responsibility for his arrogant interference in Aboriginal religion, is the Reverend H.J. Neville. But his letter to the editor of the Methodist Church Times is not published.

Footnote

¹ Thomas Keneally, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, Penguin, pp.3–4, All future page references are to this edition of the text.

The Film: *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, directed by Fred Schepisi

The central myth expressed in the film *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* is a new myth about Aboriginal culture that would not have been accepted by most Australians at the time of Federation in 1900–1901, in which years this film is historically set.¹ It is a myth that has possible artistic origins in such works as Jeannie Gunn's *We of The Never Never* and Charles Chauvel's depiction of the Arunta tribe in *Jedda*. It is the myth that the Aboriginal life style before the invasion of the white Europeans in 1788 was socially and spiritually superior to the life style of a typical pseudo-Christian community. The Aboriginal tribe was morally superior because its life style was based on co-operation and sharing as opposed to the white community that was based on capitalist competition, greedy hoarding and stinginess. Aboriginal religion was superior because it permeated everyday tribal life with tradition, legend, ritual, art and the practical social structures of totem and taboo. Christian religion, on the other hand, set up an idealistic goal for individual human behaviour that was so unattainable that it encouraged guilt, misery and hypocrisy.

This myth that is evoked by Keneally and Schepisi in *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* could be seen as "affirmative action" for oppressed Aborigines, inspired, ironically enough, by a Christian desire to make atonement for the racist atrocities committed by our forefathers. This affirmative action pre-determines the bias in the film's characterisation of all whites. Affirmative action also inspires the film's tragic celebration of the Aboriginal ethos, insofar as this ethos had survived in recognisable form after one hundred years of the white man perverting it. Ironically enough, the old Australian myth of mateship unto death is represented in this film not by whites but by Jimmie and his half-brother Mort.

To understand this film properly, one must realise that there are two kinds of violence, psychological violence and physical violence. Jimmie's physical violence in his brutal axe-murders of the white women is horrifying and unforgettable. But the psychological violence that has perverted his soul for the previous twenty years is just as sickening and just as deadly. Mr. and Mrs. Neville both commit acts of psychological violence on Jimmie. When Jimmie returns triumphant from his secret initiation into aboriginal manhood, he is whipped by Mr. Neville for having absented himself from the Easter choir. It is not the physical whipping that matters, it is the humiliation of Jimmie's tribal religiosity. Jimmie's tribal black religiosity is taken from him by psychological violence and he is not even given a white birthright to replace it.

Mrs. Neville has a master-plan to give a white birthright to Jimmie's great grandchildren. Jimmie must marry a white girl and produce a quarter-caste child who must also marry a white and produce an eighth-caste child and so on until the "sinfulness" of being black is finally eradicated. It is this bigoted racism that

perverts Jimmie's soul. It is more sickening than his axe-murders because it is pre-meditated and coldly self-righteous.

The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith is a cinematic masterpiece because Schepisi is able to translate the controlled rage of Thomas Keneally's verbal imagery into brilliant acting performances and camera work that is as imaginative as it is unobtrusive. It was extraordinary to see Jack Thompson discarding his usual macho-role image to play the part of the Rev. Neville. Thompson sensitively evokes the Rev. Neville's spiritual development from well-meaning bigotry towards tolerance and an awareness of guilt at the end of the film. Ray Barrett never overplays the sardonic cynicism and sinister sleaze of Constable Farrell. Angela Punch McGregor achieves a perfect balance between the sluttish giggliness of white trash, a cringing indignation at the arrogant Newbys who will not accept the sacredness of her marriage to Jimmie and a scared affection for Jimmie, the man she has so grievously wronged. But the film undoubtedly belongs to Steve Dodds as Uncle Tabidgi, Freddy Reynolds as Mort and Tommy Lewis as Jimmie. It is a scene of great pathos when Uncle Tabidgi stands before a hostile court and confesses with simple words how very quickly the moment passes that turns a man into a murderer. Mort's almost manic energy, his crazy giggles and his wild loyalty to his half-brother Jimmie, even after Jimmie has sickened him by murdering women, provide a tragic counterpoint to his death-scene.² He paints his face ghost-white for his coming death. Then he sits on a hillside of brown grass, uncharacteristically motionless, solemn and alone, while he waits, patiently chanting, for his executioners. The white hunters are mercilessly satirised as they pose with Mort's corpse for the newspaper photographs as though they had just bagged a ferocious tiger.

Tommy Lewis's depiction of Jimmy's transformation from broadly grinning tolerance of his persecutors to enraged devil man and brooding fugitive is always emotionally riveting and psychologically convincing. The open fields and the rain forests with their gigantic ferns which form the varying scenic background to this tragedy are beautifully filmed. These scenes of almost pristine innocence contrast savagely with the pictures of debilitating alcoholism and disease in the blacks' camp and the evil of Constable Farrell's prison.

In translating the intellectual drama of Keneally's novel into an epic film, Schepisi is in some danger of anti-climax after the stylised brutality and shocking horror of the axe-murders. He solves this by varying his perspective with ironic satire on the affected poses of some of the white pursuers and ghoulish newspaper readers and a tragic focus on Jimmie in his increasing isolation. Jimmie struggles to maintain the savage splendour of his declaration of war on all whites; but his soul is eaten away by his increasing self-doubt and his increasing certainty about the evil of his murder of women and the cultural perversity of his life style. He had lived his life in self-imposed exile from the blacks and as an untouchable, scorned and ostracised by the whites. His declaration of war and his brilliant evasion of capture gradually degenerate into the sullen and merely instinctive

running of a fatally wounded animal. He is defeated not by his pursuers but by himself because he has lost the will to live.

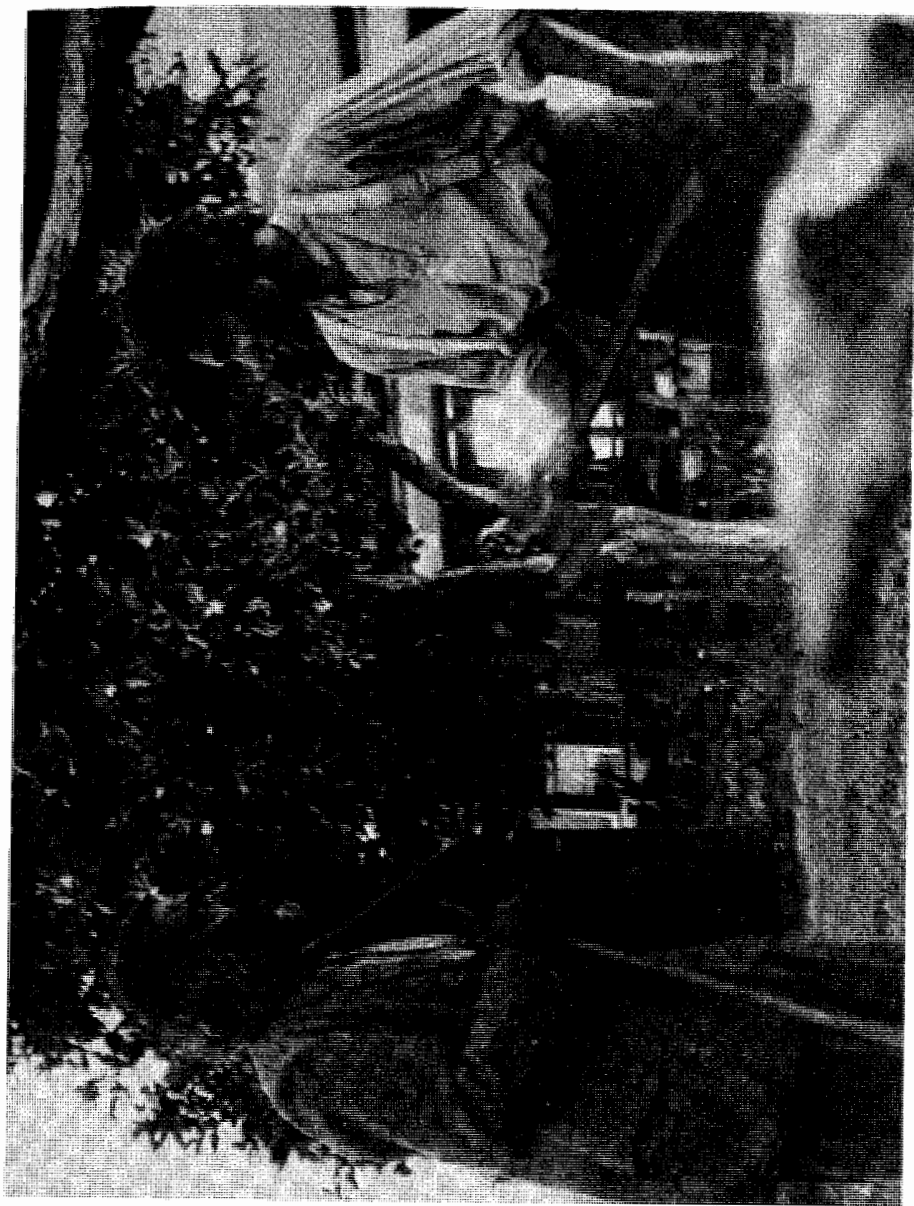
Jimmie is finally wounded by rifle fire while he is swimming across a river. It is ironically appropriate that he stumbles into a Christian mission while he is wounded and that it is a Christian mission that betrays him to the police-authorities. It was after all a Christian mission that had poisoned his mind in the first place by alienating him from his tribal ways and beliefs.

There are two leave-takings from Jimmie in the end, a white man's Christian leave-taking and an Aboriginal, pantheistic leave-taking. Jimmie's original preacher-teacher apologises to him and tries to give him a Christian blessing, reading a sermon that promises eternal life with Jesus even for whoremongers and adulterers. The hanging is heard only as an abrupt sound off-stage as the trap-door falls. And at the moment that this happens there is a magnificent final scene. A flash of white cockatoos is startled up into the air by the surreal sound of the trapdoor falling in a city prison hundreds of miles away. The cockatoos rise high into the air and fly as glorious flutters of pure white above the deep green of the eternal bush that had been Jimmie's spiritual home and his refuge from white man's hypocrisy and cruelty. This is the Aboriginal leave-taking. The white cockatoos are Jimmie's Aboriginal soul flying to another world, even if this other world is not reincarnation, but only the world of history pronouncing a revised verdict on the injustice done to him and his people.

*Jimmie Blacksmith (Tommy Lewis) and his half-brother Mort (Freddy Reynolds) declare war in 1900 on all Australian whites in *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, directed by Fred Schepisi.*



Jimmie Blacksmith (Tommy Lewis) and his spiritual mentor, Uncle Tadidgi (Steve Dodds), arrive at the desperate moment of murderous truth in The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith, directed by Fred Schepisi.



Footnotes

¹ Pauline Kael notes the connection of the film to the Federation of Australia as a “*proud young nation*” in 1901 and remarks “*The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith is a dreamlike Requiem Mass for a nation’s lost honour; that Schepisi should have financed it partly by his work in TV commercials is a joke that all movie-makers can appreciate*”. (Pauline Kael, pp.204–210, in Albert Moran and Tom O'Regan, *An Australian Film Reader*).

² Pauline Kael sees Mort as the film’s real hero. She says: “*If the film has a hero, it’s Mort, who loses his happy laugh when he is drawn into Jimmie’s war, and never fully regains it. We feel for Jimmie, but we don’t love him as we love Mort, who is instinctively kind and selfless. Mort is something like the noble Indians and Negroes of American literature, but he’s not a warrior or a mighty hunter. There’s nothing overtly heroic about him; he’s essentially passive and relaxed – a loyal, easy-going bum in ragged tweeds. This bum makes us see what the Europeans have destroyed; he’s the simplest yet the most civilised person in the movie. The tribalism he accepts means that he doesn’t have to prove himself, like the tormented Jimmie; he is part of everything. Jimmie suffers from the perils of Christian individualism; he wants respect, property, whiteness, and his failure rots him and twists him. Mort has nothing yet feels rich. We understand Jimmie and his divided soul only too well, but we don’t understand Mort – he’s both transparent to us and totally mysterious.*” (Pauline Kael, *ibid*, p. 208).

CHAPTER TWELVE

Born Again in the Garden of Eden

The Novel: *Bliss*, by Peter Carey

Bliss is a moral parable of good and evil. There are no grey areas of compromise. There is good and there is evil and the characters in *Bliss* have a choice. They can choose to live in hell or they can choose to live in heaven. Hell and heaven are present in this life right now. Peter Carey has revived the old puritanical doctrine that this life is a moral testing ground to decide whether we go to hell or to heaven. But he has placed hell and heaven not in some nebulous after-life, but right in the here and now.

It is from novelists like Peter Carey, Patrick White and Thomas Keneally that Australia can expect a new mythology appropriate to our times. This new mythology will have to create an inspiring national image from an uninspiring life style. How do you create a positive national image from the pampered comfort of our living conditions, our conformist imitativeness of the USA, our armchair sports-mania and our infuriating apathy about world affairs and the possibility of a nuclear Armageddon? Phillip Adams is openly satirical about a contemporary Australia that is bereft of proud myths. With sarcastic tongue in cheek Adams writes

Let me introduce you to Jim Banjo Paterson. Son of the sainted balladeer, Jim tried very hard to emulate his father's success. But he wanted to celebrate the life of city folk, to find new heroes for an urban and suburban society who were driving Morris 8s instead of cattle. Thus he penned the epic poem "The Man From Yarra River", a vivid description of the travails of a Rawleigh man selling groceries door to door ... following it with Clancy of the Overpass, a Homeric ode about Arthur Clancy's daily struggle with traffic jams on his way to work at Repco.

For some reason, these poems did not enjoy the widespread success of his father's and young Jim became morose and dissatisfied. And like a lot of morose and dissatisfied people, he joined his ALP branch and became a party activist.

At night young Jim spent hours poring over the writings of Fabians and Maxists and began to get a feeling of the future direction of Australian society. Looking ahead, he could predict times of rising affluence, offset by sudden plummeting recessions. He could envisage an era when people would lose their sense of mateship and become increasingly greedy and unfeeling about the plight of others.¹

This attempt to find new ideals among literary Fabians and democratic socialists probably died with the dismissal of the Whitlam government and the

current Hawke government's preference for pragmatism. Media journalists see more possibilities for a new mythology from the actions of Australia's glamorous generation of international tycoons. Tycoon entrepreneurs like Bond, Murdoch, Packer and Holmes à Court have been made into contemporary heroes by the media because of their ability to amass fabulous wealth. They amass this wealth in abrupt strokes of derring-do and they compensate for some of Australia's inferiority complex by competing successfully in the international market. As our national treasurer tells us that our nation is about to become a Banana Republic and we are lectured almost daily on our dispiriting caution economically, this handful of tycoons represents a secret dream that we have of ourselves. We look to them to uphold our national honour as achievers and to lead us out of the slough of financial despond. The popularity of media articles on these robber barons of high finance proves that we secretly believe in our irrational subconscious that they can somehow bring us home a secular holy grail. They can somehow make us feel that we are not the least innovatory nation in the western world.

This enthusiasm for the robber barons of international capitalism is most emphatically not shared by our leading lights of literature. All of our contemporary novelists reject the values of the entrepreneur. They also reject the materialism and suburban conventionality of Australia's majority today. Patrick White suggests that we look for spiritual inspiration among life's discarded failures. Thomas Keneally suggests in *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* that we review our sordid racist history and work towards a multi-cultural and multi-racial society based on tolerance, respect and equal rights. Helen Garner seeks the sisterhood of feminists on the bohemian fringes of Melbourne's drug-dealing demi-monde.

Peter Carey urges us in *Bliss* to reject our neurotic urban rat-race as carcinogenic and evil. Carey argues in *Bliss* that our contemporary life style is physically and morally cancerous. What we eat, what we drink and what we breathe is riddled with carcinogenic properties. Chemical science has brought us unbelievable luxury and comfort and even the promise of longevity. But chemical science has also brought us cancers caused by chemical additives and sprays, PVC, saccharin and the benzine in petrol. If our urban life style is cancerous, what alternative can Peter Carey offer us? He resurrects the Hippy cult of California in the 1960s and gives it an Australian setting in a coastal rain forest north of Brisbane. Carey suggests a drop-out, tune-in reversion to primitivity and self-sufficiency. This may be a tired old dream by now and it may be unrealisable and impractical, but it can perhaps serve as a modifying corrective to some of our urban excesses.

To understand how Peter Carey constructs his new myth and his new image for an ideal Australian, we need to understand a few basics about the characters and the spiritual plot structure of *Bliss*. Seen as plot, *Bliss* is a hackneyed parable of good and evil. Evil is represented by an advertising agency that dreams up seductive commercials for carcinogenic substances. Good is represented by a

self-sufficient, hippy commune in the rain forest. But Carey creates stylistic magic out of this familiar dichotomy. His style is richly imaginative, witty, blackly satirical and very hard-hitting. He shows in the details with which he presents the advertising agency or family life or the hippy commune that he is not a utopian dreamer: his words and evocations ring with the authenticity of precise and often harsh detail. Take this description of Honey Barbara returning to the slums of her friends after months of whoring. Carey seems to have taken the dramatic-cinematic mood of this description from films of the slums of Rio de Janeiro. But he convinces us with detail that it is really a tropical city on the Australian coast:

She carried her bundle slung across her back. Her bundle contained a blanket, an alarm clock, a pair of baggies, two T-shirts, an old sweater and a separate brown paper parcel full of her whoring clothes.

... She did not need to think where she would go, where she would sleep. She rose up above the coastal plain perhaps six inches every step, a little higher, above the mangroves, the big brown ill-used river, the sapphire bay, and walked the unnamed streets on Sugar Loaf where the unemployed, hippies, junkies and even the respectable poor lived amongst the smell of unsewered drains, half-buried shit, uncollected garbage, jasmine, honeysuckle and frangipani. Bananas grew untended and made their own jungles. Green plastic garbage bags lay in the grass with their guts spilling out. Morning glory tangled itself over rusting cars. (p.193)

Passages like this set the urgent, apocalyptic tone of the moral parable in *Bliss*. Summarised quickly, the moral parable of *Bliss* runs like this. Harry Joy, the successful owner of an advertising agency and an easy-going, good bloke, has a heart attack. During his nine-minute death he experiences the bliss of heaven and the horror of hell. When he is returned to his mortal frame by a commonplace miracle of medical science, he is convinced that he has been re-born into hell. He opens his once trusting, innocent eyes and sees nothing but evil around him. He discovers that his wife is an adulterous slut who will walk over corpses to become rich and famous and make it to the Mecca of materialism, New York. He discovers that his son is a drug-runner and his daughter prostitutes herself to her brother. He discovers that the products he has been advertising are all carcinogenic. With uncompromising logic he fires his evil clients and bankrupts his agency. His family have him locked away in a convenient insane asylum. He can buy his way out only by prostituting himself commercially and reviving the advertising agency now run by his ruthless wife. In the meantime Harry Joy has become paranoid and terrified that the evil forces of hell will torture and kill him if he doesn't become a submissive cog in this machinery of evil and disease.

For a brief while he tries to escape this mess with Honey Barbara, a pure-hearted whore from the hippy commune. Barbara sells the annual marijuana crop and prostitutes herself for a few months each year to help her friends in the hippy community make ends meet in Bog Onion Road by the rain forest. She is a most unusual Australian heroine and demolishes the mythical sanctity of the chaste female as much as Helen Garner's Nora in *Monkey Grip* or Patrick White's Felicity in *The Night the Prowler*. Barbara tries to teach Harry health foods, peace, non-aggression, withdrawal from the materialistic cities, and the art of love. He is too fearful and too corrupt to follow her doctrines. Finally his hand is forced. His wife discovers that she has cancer from one of the products for which she has written brilliant advertisements, namely petrol. She makes petrol bombs and blows herself up together with the representatives of the petrol company. Harry Joy's family are suspected of being communist terrorists. The daughter was in fact once an active communist but has now settled back to enjoy, as she puts it, the inevitable end of this ruined world. Harry steals her rusty old Buick and steams up the Queensland highway north to Honey Barbara's hippy commune.

Honey Barbara regards him as corrupt and will have nothing to do with him. He courts her patiently for seven Biblical years by planting special trees with blossoms for her honey bees. Finally she relents and they live in happiness and hard work for twenty years until one of his own trees falls on him at the age of seventy-five. But he has discovered spiritual serenity as a recluse and in death he experiences the immortality of flowing into the essence of his beloved trees. He has devoted the only productive years of his existence to the planting and nurturing of trees.

The vision splendid of this novel is, in the final analysis, not at all ironic but beautifully lyric. The solution may sound unoriginal, but stylistically Carey makes it uplifting and convincing. Carey is successful in accomplishing this aim because he is never sententious, he never preaches, he is toughly humorous and he calls a spade a spade. Even his new mythological creation of an Australian Garden of Eden in the coastal rain forest is not without ticks, snakes, leaches, tropical ulcers and bush fires. What the novel *Bliss* forces us to do is to view our casual, meandering lives sharply in a focus of good and evil. The goodness of the hippy commune is not a life of ease and comfort. The work is very hard and demanding and the physical comforts are none. But there is the spiritual comfort of art, art as story-telling. The reborn Harry Joy discovers joy in the comforting stories he tells to his fellow-primitives on occasions of birth and death, and even just for entertainment in the evenings after work. It is the story-telling that also solaces us in the novel *Bliss*. A novel that could be depressing is instead enthralling, all due to the brilliance with which Peter Carey tells stories. The story-teller himself, as Carey sees it, fulfils a spiritual need in the community, the need to enrich life with communal myth and traditional ceremony. Here is the way Carey puts it:

He was merely sewing together the bright patchwork of lives, legends, myths, beliefs, hearsay into a splendid cloak that gave a

richer glow to all their lives. He knew when it was right to tell one story and not another. He knew how a story could give strength or hope. He knew stories, important stories, so sad he could hardly tell them for weeping.

And also he gave value to a story so that it was something of worth, as important, in its way, as a strong house or a good dam. He insisted that the story was not his, and not theirs either. You must give something, he told the children, a sapphire of blue bread made from cedar ash. And what began as a game ended in a ritual.

They were the refugees of a broken culture who had only the flotsom of belief and ceremony to cling to or, sometimes, the looted relics from other people's temples. Harry cut new wood grown on their soil and built something solid they all felt comfortable with. They were hungry for ceremony and story. There was no embarrassment in these new constructions.
(p. 277)

What lingers in our memory after we have finished reading Peter Carey's *Bliss* is this imaginative story-telling power which takes us into parables well beyond probability and sanity. And yet we believe in this novel because we are persuaded both by Carey's extraordinary fluency and by his ability to anchor his zaniest fantasies in mundane, minutely described, repulsive reality. His description of the filthy police station where Harry Joy gets beaten up by corrupt detectives, his evocation of the insane asylum where sane men are tortured and detained so that the business-woman director can keep her government subsidies for each body, the descriptions of Harry Joy's home, of the advertising racket, of Honey Barbara's Garden of Eden in the rain forest – all of this is meticulously observed and expressed with convincing detail.

It is this anchor of observed reality that allows Carey to take off on flights of allegorical phantasy and a wildly improbable plot without losing his readers' willing suspension of disbelief. In fact the spoofy plot of *Bliss* is a curious combination of different sub-genres in popular fiction. There is the violence, quick action and treacheries of detective fiction. There are grotesque updates of Jesus-type parables about good and evil in an average, modern metropolis. And there is a half-ironicised hippy revolt against the bad karma, the neuroses, the shithouse-rat-race and the carcinogenic crap of our cities.

Peter Carey pushes all the tendencies of our big-city rat-race to extremes of improbability where they become insane, mysterious, farcical and blackly satiric. There is an air of Monty Python apocalypse to the novel's surreal parables of insanity, suffering and treachery. There is an air of urgency: the end of the world seems nigh, or at least the end of our aggressive, money-grubbing, hate-and-spite-filled cities that know only one commandment and one national image:

Thou Shalt Imitate American Materialism and Thou Shalt Have No Other God Than Mammon.

This apocalyptic plot reminds me of Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locusts* in which Los Angeles, the city of myths and dreams, is destroyed just as Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed in the Old Testament. Balanced against the exaggerations of the plot is a moral testing of Harry Joy, a man who is cheerful, warm-hearted, woefully ignorant, foolishly optimistic and totally blind to the evil around him. Harry's quest for absolute Goodness causes him to become depressed and paranoid: his eyes are opened to the omnipresent evil around him.

Harry senses that all these evil people cannot tolerate his new-found saintliness because his determination to be good exposes them too easily and makes them too uncomfortable with themselves. Harry becomes furtive, angry and cunning. He tries to escape from the power of conventional evil and his attempts are doomed to failure. His former identity of a cheerful, successful executive who turns a blind eye is taken on by subordinate Alex Duval. The two men reverse their identities in an insane asylum. They fight like the principles of Jesus and Satan, of light and darkness. They fight about whether the meaning of life consists only of making an easy passage for yourself or whether life is a punishment inflicted by Gnostic devils in which you have to prove your moral goodness in order to get reborn in the next reincarnation as a higher creature.

The spiritual mood of *Bliss* is a happy jumble of world religions arranged in a new jigsaw-puzzle format. Before Harry will cut down a noble tree to build his humble hut, he invokes a ceremonial ritual of the Hopi Indians by addressing the trees with these words:

You have grown large and powerful. I have cut you. I know you have knowledge in you from what happens around you. I am sorry, but I need your strength and power. I will give you these stones, but I must cut you down. These stones and my thoughts will make sure another tree will take your place. (p.273)

Christianity is the main religion invoked in *Bliss*, not in the form of the organised church but in terms of Jesus' uncompromising division of the world into good and evil. The Christian influence on *Bliss* could be best summarised by the parable: "*It is harder for the rich to enter into the Kingdom of God than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle.*"

The Hare Krishna and Ananda Marga sects are mentioned negatively as are the rituals of black magic that Honey Barbara has seen practised among the crazier sects of the rain forest. Nevertheless, when it becomes necessary in the insane asylum, Honey Barbara does use the rituals of exorcism to drive the devils out of poor shit-filled Harry and help him to find the good karma of serenity and peace.

Pantheistic nature-religion is practised by all members of the non-sectarian hippy community and whole earth foods are cultivated and eaten as a conscious revolt against the carcinogenic shit in the air, the processed food and the drinks

of our cities. Finally, Buddhism is evoked for its doctrine of abstention, withdrawal, the quest for the serenity of nirvana and the notion of reincarnation.

The attempts of Harry Joy to introduce the spiritual humility and caritative love preached by Jesus into our un-Christian, power-conscious society is a catastrophe. Normal, irreligious people don't want their deficiencies to be shown up by Harry Joy being saintly. He is as unwelcome as was Jesus himself when he appeared before the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoiewski's *The Brothers Karamasov*. With farcical and blackly satiric humour Peter Carey demonstrates how incompatible Christian ideals are with average human behaviour. As Harry, a reborn angry Jesus, whips today's money-lenders in today's steel and glass temples of commerce, we the readers are forced to have a searching look at the ethics of our way of life. Not that this novel is the work of a humourless preaching zealot. On the contrary. Peter Carey is uproariously funny and brilliantly witty as he unmaskes the mundane evil around us. The mythical Australian hero and heroine he creates in *Bliss* are sensitive, uncompromising questers for spiritual serenity, physical health and moral integrity of a very unconventional nature. Australian hero and heroine find all this in a romantic retreat to a pre-industrial, whole-earth community. I shall leave it to the reader to decide whether this utopian ideal is really only imitatively hippy-American or whether Peter Carey has given it sufficient variations to make it recognisably Australian.

Footnote

1. Phillip Adams, "The dastardly plot that saved the nation", *The Weekend Australian*, Feb. 28-Mar. 1, 1987, *The Weekend Magazine*.

The Film: *Bliss*, directed by Ray Lawrence

In 1985 *Bliss* won three awards from the Australian Film Industry: Best Direction, Best Screenplay and Best Film of 1985. Director Ray Lawrence's previous hit-film had been *Caddie*. *The Weekend Australian* reviewed the film with these words: "*the most original and eccentrically brilliant Australian film for a long time ... appallingly funny, bitter and deeply frightening*".

The film *Bliss* opens with the narrator telling a story about a drought and a prayer for rain. This prayer is answered with a typical flood on the east coast of New South Wales. There is a splendidly mad opening image of a saintly woman with an outsize Christian cross standing in a rowboat in the flood. The image is as mysterious as Tennyson's Lady of the Lake in the legends of King Arthur, but is at the same time very funny. The film satirically undercuts this religious image by revealing that the whole sequence is merely a story invented by a loquacious advertising executive at a drunken party in the affluent suburbs of Sydney. The "Vision Splendid" (like a vision of the Holy Grail) is lost, seemingly for ever, in the gross materialism of life in Australia today.

The narrator and main character is called, symbolically enough, Harry Joy. Harry is presented as "a good bloke" with a good family life; he is apparently loved by both his family and his employees at the advertising bureau which he owns and directs. The purpose of the first part of the film is to explode this conventional notion of happiness, to reveal that it is a lie. Beneath the surface, it will be revealed, Harry is deeply unhappy; he is being betrayed by everyone around him, by wife, by children, by employees.

What techniques do director Ray Lawrence and author Peter Carey use to probe below this lying surface? They arrange a heart attack for Harry at this same party. In the heart attack he is technically dead for four minutes: he is able to look down from tall trees at his lifeless body. He experiences an unexpected ecstasy of liberation from his unconscious unhappiness but at the same time he experiences a religious terror of the afterlife. He is confronted with the perpetual religious question in Christian terms: Will eternal life after death bring him the bliss of heaven or the damnation of hell? Harry's brief experience of viewing life from the outside point of view of death provides the spiritual basis for a critical examination of his life and our own lives.

First we are shown the truth about Harry's wife Bettina. Bettina is shown at her husband's favourite restaurant and in one of the film's many shocking scenes she is shown having public sex and orgasm with her husband's business associate. It is daring scenes like this which make the film *Bliss* so innovative and startling. The public sex scene is really a fantasy by the owner of the restaurant who is Harry's best friend and who hates Harry's wife. It is nevertheless a true fantasy

and the nature of sexual betrayal is made much more vivid for us as viewers because it takes place in a crowded restaurant where rich people continue eating and totally ignore the couple who are entwined in athletic copulation.

The next scene is just as satirical and is both funny and repulsive. It shows the wife playing the role of loyal companion to her husband at his hospital bedside. But miniature dead fish keep on dropping from inside her dress onto the floor. The dead fish symbolise the odour and impurity of her sexual sin. This is another startling innovation in film symbolism.

Harry is next seen sitting with his saintly female of the Vision Splendid. He has begun his long, exhausting search for truth and goodness rather in the manner of a medieval Everyman looking for God. Opposed to this vision of the Saint of the Flood is the grossly materialistic yearning of Harry's wife and children for the towers of glass of New York, centre of the Western world's advertising industry.

We are now shown the evil below the surface in a shocking scene between Harry's son and daughter. The son is pursuing wealth by drug-dealing and he forces his sister to perform fellatio on him before he will give her cocaine. In his perverted fantasy he imagines himself to have the arrogance and power of a Nazi officer in S.A. uniform. This repulsive scene is a deliberately grotesque attack on our belief in family togetherness and happiness. We next cut to medical scenes of Harry's heart by-pass operation. This operation is frightening medically but horrifying religiously. Harry sees his post-operative heart-wound springing open and letting hundreds of cockroaches out of his body. That is, his body stinks with evil and the creatures of Satan.

Harry now begins to suspect the truth about his life, namely that everyone has deceived him. He becomes paranoid in his suspicions and keeps notebooks to confirm his conviction that he is now already dead in hell. According to the film's depiction of human evil, Harry is right. His wife and daughter are bitches and harlots and his junior partner is planning to steal his business and his wife.

What convinces Harry he is in hell is the scene in which an elephant sits on his little Fiat car and squashes the roof flat. This is of course a ridiculous way to present hell, but the silly farce of this scene is juxtaposed with the restaurant owner revealing that he is dying of cancer. Death by cancer now becomes the film's main theme. Our urban way of life is alleged to be cancerous in every sense, medically and religiously. Another depiction of hell and evil occurs in the scene in which two policemen methodically bash Harry because they think that he is trying to make fun of them with his story about the elephant squashing his car.

Harry now confers with his advertising copy writer Alex about hell and evil. Alex already knows that they are in hell just as he knows that the products that they advertise cause cancer. Harry prepares to fire all his clients and their evil products. This action will send his own firm bankrupt. Everyone in the film despises Harry for his conscientious soft-heartedness and begins to exploit him.

Their only wisdom for life is: At the end of the day how much money have you **earned**? Harry finally catches his wife in flagranti with the junior partner on a car **bonnet**. Harry is so startled that he falls out of a tree where he has been hiding and lands on his head. He picks himself up and proclaims: "*I curse you for all time!*"

We now come to the second point of the film in which Harry advances from his knowledge that urban life is cancerous and begins a pilgrimage towards salvation. He finds a whore with a heart of gold. This kind of whore has been popular in world-literature since Dostoevsky set the romantic fashion for whores as an antidote to middle-class respectability. Harry's whore is Honey-Barbara. She feels no pleasure during sex. The goal of her life is a good Karma through health-giving honey and a good reincarnation in the next life.

Honey-Barbara now replaces the Vision Splendid of the saintly woman in the rowboat as Harry's moral mentor. Harry is forcibly interned in the insane asylum at the orders of his wife and son. They are after his money and want him out of the way. In the insane asylum, which is our society's "*human garbage disposal*" according to the woman who runs it, Harry has surreal visions of hell. For example, he sees children being burnt in the ginger-bread-making furnaces of hell with black smoke pouring out of the sinister chimneys. The evil, corruption, greed, treachery and hatred of this world are summed up in the Matron. She hides her evil behind a facade of the smug manners of an arrogant upper-class mother. Carey and Lawrence are making the point that evil rarely appears in our world as monstrous and obvious. Evil appears as conventional, correct and even self-righteous about its own cruelty. None of these scenes is meant realistically: all scenes present surreal images of evil and hell. They reveal what lies hidden beneath the surface of our society.

There is now an unexpected twist to this crazy plot. Bettina discovers that she needs Harry's genius to sell her advertisements. Her lover, the junior partner, is not adept at this and so she simply discards him and buys Harry's release from the insane asylum. Bettina's idea is to allow her husband to have Honey-Barbara in the family house if in return Harry will sell her advertisements. That is, in order to escape from the hell of the insane asylum, Harry is tempted to sell his soul to his diabolic wife by helping her to win advertising contracts for carcinogenic products. Harry's conscience torments him with symbolic nightmares in which he sees poor Honey Barbara martyred by angry bees, his evil wife consumed in her sinful bed with hellfire, and a vision of himself slitting his throat in desperation.

The junior partner becomes jealous and wounds himself. The family simply laughs at the bloody wound in his side because they say he is only trying to get their attention like a spoilt child. They relegate him to oblivion because he is no good at making money. This evil all reaches a climax when Bettina is found to be suffering from cancer caused by petrol-fumes. She makes petrol bombs and blows herself up together with the executives of the petroleum firm.

Harry sets fire to 500 acres of bush and flees in pursuit of vanished Honey Barbara to the Garden of Eden. He hopes to be born again in purity in the rain forests north of Cairns. The green trees, the lush ferns, the water holes, the peaceful hermits, the planting of trees all symbolise the contrast with the burning fires of hell back in Sydney. There are admittedly leeches, snakes, mosquitoes and spiders, but the new Garden of Eden cannot be entirely perfect. Harry's new goodness and simplicity are symbolised by his planting of trees. Through this activity and work he learns patience, nurturing love and the need for discipline and hard work, even in the Garden of Eden. This is the vision splendid, the higher ideal to which we can aspire according to Peter Carey and Ray Lawrence: That is, drop out, tune in, be a hippy, but at the same time plant trees.

The final symbol of the film is Harry's love-letter to Honey Barbara who won't have anything to do with him until he proves he has become good and therefore worthy of her. He plants special trees which will flower in the difficult month of April and provide nectar for Honey Barbara's bees. It takes eight years of caring love for these trees to mature and flower. Honey Barbara gives herself to him. Harry relates the rest of his story as an old, old man to his beautiful daughter in their house in the rain forest. Finally, Harry is killed by a falling tree. This time he dies in serenity, and, shall we say it, in fulfilled bliss. His spirit merges with the sweet, earthy smell of the forest. He has no wish to return to life. He becomes a sigh among the high branches of these beautiful trees. This then is the story of Harry: He told stories and he planted trees. The film does not necessarily mean that we should all leave our jobs and families and run away with whores to the rain forest to become self-supporting hermits. Nevertheless there is a disturbing moral message that challenges us to change our materialistic way of life. We are invited to reconsider our priorities in the religious context of the fiery pits of hell and the cool fragrance of heaven.

"You won't believe this, officer, but an elephant sat on my car." Harry Joy (Barry Otto) in Bliss, directed by Ray Lawrence.



The Vision Splendid (Helen Jones) triumphs over the flood waters in Bliss, Directed by Ray Lawrence.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Football Fever: Booting to the Big Time

The Novel: *A Salute to the Great McCarthy*, by Barry Oakley

A Salute to the Great McCarthy can be interpreted as a re-creation of Herman Melville's myth of *Billy Budd*. An innocent youth with divine grace is sacrificed to the venality and the corruption of metropolitan Melbourne's nouveaux riches. The novel can also be interpreted as a celebration of the lonely genius of the football player as an artist of pure form. McCarthy, like Franz Kafka's *Hunger-Artist*, is both revered and reviled for the wrong reasons by the sensation-hungry masses. Finally, the novel can be interpreted as a morality myth which ironically examines an Australian class-climber who uses the false glamour of professional sport as an entry ticket to the fabulous riches and exotic sex of the upper-classes. When he discovers that life at the top is filled with emotional ugliness, spite and alcoholic insanity, McCarthy makes a moral stand against our society's power-brokers. He is defeated and is eventually forced to return to the anonymity and poverty of his small country town. The novel is written in the form of tragi-comic memoirs.

These interpretations may give a false impression that *A Salute to the Great McCarthy* is a serious novel. It isn't. It is desperate but not serious. Even the saddest discoveries of life's disillusionment are presented with imaginative wit and hilarious farce. Not foolish farce, but intelligent, sad farce. Barry Oakley wears his culture lightly, but it provides a constant frame of reference for both his wit and his farce. Take, for example, the following quotation in which lower-class footballer McCarthy drives his old bomb of a car to a rendezvous in a Toorak mansion with his licentious seductress:

Tomorrow is Saturday. A day of humidity and the imminence of rain. Overhead a Scapa Flow of warship clouds, magnificent, Admiral McCarthy taking the salute. Driving along Lansell Road on legitimate business past the great houses. Here comes Jack the climber, trembling at the beanstalk. Will her dad be in, that giant? I stand at the iron gate recalling Great Expectations, my favourite schoolboy novel. Locked. I press the bell ... the Pip of the twentieth century, scrubbed and scared and here to see Estella.¹

This is a typical example of Barry Oakley's irresistible style. The whimsical switch from third person to first person occurs throughout the novel and ensures an ironical parody of the hackneyed pathos that often flows from a first person confession. Nevertheless the mythical themes underlying the jesting in *A Salute to the Great McCarthy* are meant seriously and they are themes that are well realised. Oakley himself twice makes specific reference to Melville's tragedy of *Billy Budd*, the tale of the innocent sailor who is condemned by an evil world to a Christ-like death (cf. p.195). In fact Oakley's parodistic self-awareness makes this novel a kind of metafictional spoof.

McCarthy, footballer extraordinaire, who can fly with the grace of an angel to take a high mark, plummets to obscurity and poverty when he refuses to compromise his conscience. His father-in-law offers him ten thousand dollars if he will agree to divorce proceedings and play the guilty party. This novel was obviously written before the changes to the Australian divorce laws in 1975. McCarthy refuses this temptation from the devil and thereby condemns himself to be pilloried by the scandal newspapers that obey the whims of the rich and shape the opinions of the fickle masses. Without parody and wit, this plot line could easily have resulted in melodrama. In fact, there are so many ludicrous things happening that we rarely have time to ponder on the intensity of our identification with McCarthy.

In interpretation number two I suggested that we view McCarthy as an artist whose medium is football. Once again this interpretation is suggested by Barry Oakley himself. The mad homosexual sports teacher MacGuinness is the first to express this theme: *"You dig me? I'll explain it all to you. Sport is violence made rational. Sport is what man makes out of his life, his art-work. If he were God, man would arrange life decent, like a football match"* (p.26). It is because life is not played according to the rules like a football match that first MacGuinness and at the end McCarthy are sacrificed to the evil forces of gossip, scandal and intolerance. Oakley suggests that football is the religion, the opiate of the lower classes; their club's players are angels and winning is equatable with entering the kingdom of God. From the player's point of view, football is both an art form and a religious ritual, just as starving himself in front of an audience is both an art form and a religious ritual for Kafka's Hunger-Artist. McCarthy tries to explain to the homosexual art producer, Mr Tranter, that football is his *"self-expression"* and that *"the game was a form, a set of rules, a mixture of chess and mayhem which gave one identity"* (p.131). McCarthy goes on to explain that a coach who loses a final match is considered *"a worm and no man, taking all the blame. The loser lays down his reputation for the flock"* (p.132). This religious metaphor is clearly meant to evoke Jesus laying down his life for his sinful flock. Oakley's characterisation of football crowds as hate-filled sensationalists and vicarious sadists fits this notion of a sinful flock that must somehow be redeemed.

The third interpretation of *A Salute to the Great McCarthy* sees the novel as a morality myth expressing the evanescence of fame and the futility of this world's temptations to wealth and power. The structure of the novel reinforces this interpretation. There is a series of martyred revolutionaries in this novel. One by one each revolutionary tries to fly in the face of conformism and established power. One by one each revolutionary is crucified or ostracised. In the small Victorian country town of Warwick the power of petit bourgeois conformism and right-wing hypocrisy is represented by the mayor and the police sergeant whose son has apparently been seduced by MacGuinness. MacGuinness is brought to a fall because his homoeroticism is too unconventional for the worthy citizens of Warwick. They resent having admired him for his athletic self-discipline and his leadership of the school football team and they sadistically enjoy cutting him

down as a tall poppy. The mob needs to revere a leader but also needs to sacrifice this leader in order to re-assert its mob supremacy. Similarly, McCarthy's father falls a victim to the gossip-mongers because he regularly has sex in the back of his ute with a promiscuous girl from a neighbouring town. Both men flee small-town conformism and disappear for ever.

In Melbourne the irrepressible Warburton revolts against the boot-licking subservience of clerks to the bosses. He is fired. Miss Russell revolts against Australia's right-wing military interference in Vietnam. She also revolts against the philistinism of the urban masses, though with somewhat less success as she is subject to Oakley's satire on modern art. She is eventually condemned to the bitter loneliness of becoming an old maid. The film adaptation of *The Great McCarthy* changes the script to give poor Miss Russell a much warmer, more sincere character and a happy ending. At the end of the film a penitent McCarthy returns to her embrace. McCarthy revolts against the tyrannical and mindless conventions of Aussie Rules football and instead devotes himself to erotic bedroom football with her in her flat. This film ending has a certain, light-hearted charm, but lacks the power of the novel's disillusionment.

Eccentric old Ackermann revolts against the anonymity and the dry boredom of office-work and office hierarchies. He escapes into fantasy by making bird-sounds in the filing room down below the firm's public offices. More importantly, he escapes into the air, peddling a bicycle-powered contraption that brings him temporary flight and great ecstasy. McCarthy captures his moment of glory on film. Ackermann is very much a parallel figure to McCarthy himself. They are both fliers. McCarthy is captured on film by the newspaper photographers as he flies to a high mark. Flying has become a symbol for the individual ecstasy of self-expression.

Finally McCarthy himself becomes a revolutionary. He revolts against the power of the rich and the power of the right-wing, authoritarian conformists who manage professional football clubs. McCarthy's first revolutionary move is to refuse a bribe from his father-in-law. It is difficult to take McCarthy's moral stand in this matter very seriously, particularly after his farcical marital scenes with Andrea. And yet, beneath the farce of Andrea's crazy self-indulgence and hysteria there are hints of McCarthy's real misery as his last romantic illusion is destroyed. I cannot help wondering, however, if it might not have made a better ending if McCarthy had taken the ten thousand dollar bribe, accepted the gentleman's lie of divorce-guilt, and become a picaro, a rascal whose amorous exploits would be more appropriate to Barry Oakley's witty and light-hearted style.

A Salute to the Great McCarthy is a novel with a pronounced ambiguity towards football. The grace of a high mark in Aussie Rules Football and a great victory can give both players and spectators an ecstatic experience. As McCarthy says of the celebrating crowd after a victory, "*we are their dreams*" (p.181). On

the other hand football is "*mad! All this is mad! This arbitrary thing we call a game. Mayhem with groundrules to placate the god Mob*" (p.187). McCarthy is brought to this disillusioned insight only because scandal and the cowardly conformism of the football directors have robbed him of football immortality.

It provides an amusing ending, when McCarthy grabs the ball in his last game and runs out of the stadium with it. The anger of players and spectators emphasises the childishness to which sport can reduce us. There is also a certain fairy-tale appropriateness that McCarthy runs away with that eccentric revolutionary, his fellow flier, the genial Ackermann. As they set off together for the never-never territory of Queensland, we can't help feeling that they are both destined for a much happier future than re-interment in the thoroughly discredited country town of Warwick. Perhaps when they get to Queensland, McCarthy and Ackermann will meet up with Harry Joy, the hero of Peter Carey's *Bliss* and live happily every after in the rain forest commune.

The most successful thing about *A Salute to the Great McCarthy*, however, is not what Barry Oakley says, but how he says it. It is not the morality myth of the plot, but the imaginativeness and the irreverence of Oakley's wit that keeps us reading with delight. For example, when young McCarthy is obliged to spend a weekend with the mad MacGuinness, he says: "*A whole weekend! With MacGuinness! Like being trapped in the toilet with a tarantula!*" (p.16). When McCarthy's father wants to insist that Warwick get sewerage disposal before a pretentious library, he invents a motto: "*Sewerage before Shakespeare! Turds before words!*" (p.42). When McCarthy is obliged to attend night-school and to take lessons in Business English in order to keep his job, he is understandably depressed. Oakley evokes remedial English in a night-school with brilliant imagery:

Peeling blue walls, rain at the windows, winter-red faces, the heater-pipes going ping pong, the writing of compositions. I was a schoolboy again in a topsy-turvy dreamworld where classes were at night and many of the students older than the teachers. In the dark of night she escorts us deep into a clear thinking passage, leaves us for a while lost, then takes us out again, identifying the flora: that thicket over there a non-sequitur, that line of trees an unwarranted generalisation, that jungle growth emotive language. (p.108)

It is seemingly effortless metaphors like these combined with Oakley's ability to evoke persuasively so many different scenes and so many different kinds of people, even if as caricatures, that makes *A Salute to the Great McCarthy* a wonderful novel. I believe in his characters, from the small town bigots to the whimsical eccentrics, from the football fanatics to the homosexual TV art producers, from the poor aunt's boarders to the alcoholics and drug users of the Toorak mansions, I believe in all of these characters because of Oakley's eye and ear for detail. I enjoy it all because Oakley never lets the fast pace drop. Even the

crazy Batman-farce and the hospital fornication scene (pp.141-152) are evoked with confidence and supreme ease by Oakley the word-magician.

A Salute to the Great McCarthy expresses the flight of the talented youngster from an inhibiting and bigoted small town to the challenge of a big city with all the delights of Sodom and Gomorrah. Barry Oakley's moral rejection of the right-wing power-mongers in this city parallels Peter Carey's satirical exposure of big city capitalism and advertising in *Bliss*. McCarthy, Ackermann and Harry Joy all take flight to the remote, isolated areas of Northern Queensland. Both writers agree in insisting that the way of life practised by the vast majority of Australia's urban population is self-defeating and spiritually deadening. It is evidently from writers like these that Australia can expect an impulse to a new mythical identity, even if only an identity for a small minority in opposition.

Footnote

¹ Barry Oakley, *A Salute To The Great McCarthy*, Penguin, 1971, p.162. All future page references are to this edition of the text.

The Film: *The Great McCarthy*, directed by David Baker

This film is a light-hearted romp through Melbourne football grounds and Toorak bedrooms. It tells the dream story of a red-blooded Australian boy from a country town who is catapulted to fame and fortune because of his talent at Aussie Rules football. This is the myth of success, glory and higher existential satisfaction firmly believed in by the Australian people. The myth is reinforced every day by the Australian mass media.

Not that fame and fortune are everything to McCarthy. He discovers towards the end of the film that he also has a conscience. He defies the collective, hierarchical might of the South Melbourne football club and goes on strike. At the moment when he has only to kick an easy goal in overtime to win the match for his side, he abruptly puts down the football and walks off the field. For everyone in Australia who hates football passionately and resents its grotesque domination of the entertainment mass media every weekend, this strike of McCarthy's is a wonderful moment. The film realises the visual impact of this eccentric scene very well by contrasting it with earlier football scenes which are thoroughly orthodox re-plays of actual matches.

The film celebrates the earthy vulgarity and sexual humour of Australia's working-classes. McCarthy is never allowed to forget his humble origins as an apprentice car mechanic in a small country town. Admittedly a fabulously rich and beautiful heiress does throw herself at him sexually and insists on marrying him. But when she demands a divorce a short time later, McCarthy is finally brought to his senses. He digs his heels in against the corruption he has found in Melbourne's upper-classes. He refuses to be bribed into accepting guilt for the divorce. Instead he proves the power of the working-classes by going on strike as a football player. And seen socially, what else is a professional football player other than a highly paid member of the working classes?

At the end of the film, as opposed to the novel, McCarthy returns as a penitent to the sporty charms and the good-humoured loyalty of his earlier mistress, the English teacher. He has apparently decided that he can find emotional fulfilment with an educated, intellectual woman. Many Australians' suspicion of education and their fears of intellectuality are expressed in these scenes. But the sexual happiness of the cultured English teacher is finally ensured because she has a good sense of humour, because she is not pretentious and because she wears his football shirt in bed to prove her loyalty.

Futhermore, the English teacher also gives out free legal aid to Melbourne's poor folk and to the drunken derelicts on the beach. What greater proof could we ask of her ideological purity than these acts of solidarity with the working classes? She has earned a re-match in bed with the great McCarthy and because this film is

a moral fairy tale, she is given it. The final scenes of the film are a happy mixture of bedroom strip tease and legal defiance of the South Melbourne football club's board of management. Then the two of them, McCarthy and his English mistress, skylark alone on the vast green field of the sacred turf. Their playing football together is also, by humorously transposed metaphor, their making love together. "*I want players to back each other up,*" she yells in exultant parody of the football coach and she waits to be well and truly backed up in bed. "*I want a big drive from the backline,*" she screams happily. And to the delight of footballers and non-footballers in Australia, she gets it. The transposing of the football metaphors to love-making is very reminiscent of an indecent Calypso song in which the West Indian passion for cricket is also transferred metaphorically to sex. Much is made of the digging-in of the bat, the soggianness of the balls and the fact that "*rain come and end the match.*"

David Baker makes much use of two techniques from Charlie Chaplin silent films in order to highlight the happy humour of this movie. Firstly, he uses printed signs that are reminiscent of the silent movies in order to help the narrative along. Baker doesn't need these signs of course but they do add to the fun. Satirical signs like "*The Shootout at the O.K. Corral*" are used to feature a showdown between smalltown football supporters and the poaching talent scouts who have come to take McCarthy to bigtime football in Melbourne. Much of the action is carried out as stylised and choreographed farce. Even a sign saying "*Bullshit!*" is inserted at appropriate moments in the film. Similarly, the burlesque sex scenes in the hospital with the heiress-nymphomaniac are labelled with signs such as "*Hard at work,*" "*Overworked*" and "*Exhausted*" in order to trace the familiar farcical pattern of the sexual love-war between men and women. As a second technique from the silent movies, Baker has the action accompanied by jaunty, honky-tonk piano music. These ragtime melodies reinforce the careless fun of the film's action.

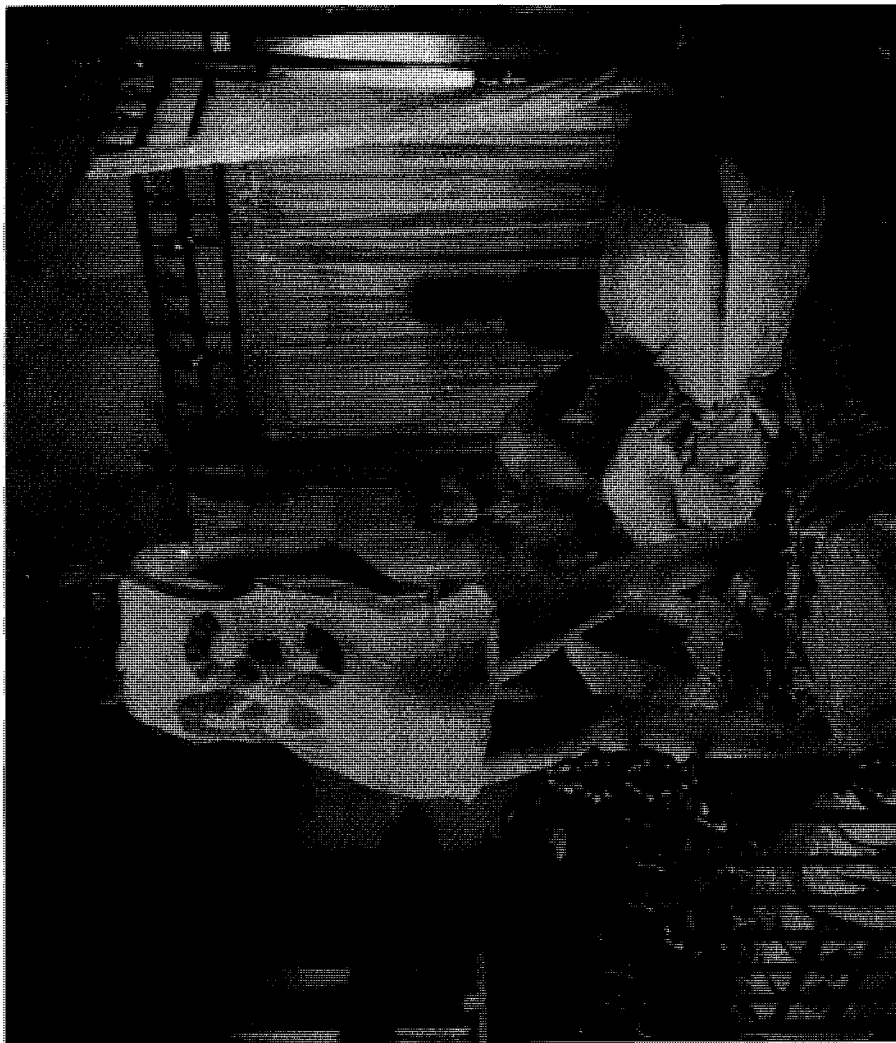
The themes of *The Great McCarthy* are similar to the themes of Bruce Beresford's and David Williamson's *The Club*. But Beresford's film accentuates the realism of the moral struggle between football mania and a balanced, meaningful life style. Baker's film is deliberately unrealistic and as fanciful as a fairy tale. The talent scouts who arrive to kidnap the great McCarthy come by night in a helicopter lit up with a neon-sign flashing SWANS. This eccentric atmosphere is accentuated by the minor actors who include a manically cheerful and irreverent cockney clerk, an even madder secretary who wants to do a strip-tease for everybody at the drive-in, and a lovable old filing clerk who specialises in bird-calls and acrobatic flying in his rainbow glider.

The Great McCarthy is good, clean fun but its satire on Australia's worship of football stars is not particularly deep. The only true satirical moment in the film is a political one. The football coach makes quite clear to the players that if they get photographed by the media while participating in political acts such as protests against the Vietnam war, they will be sacked for giving the South Melbourne club a bad reputation. Players are not permitted to air their political views as they may

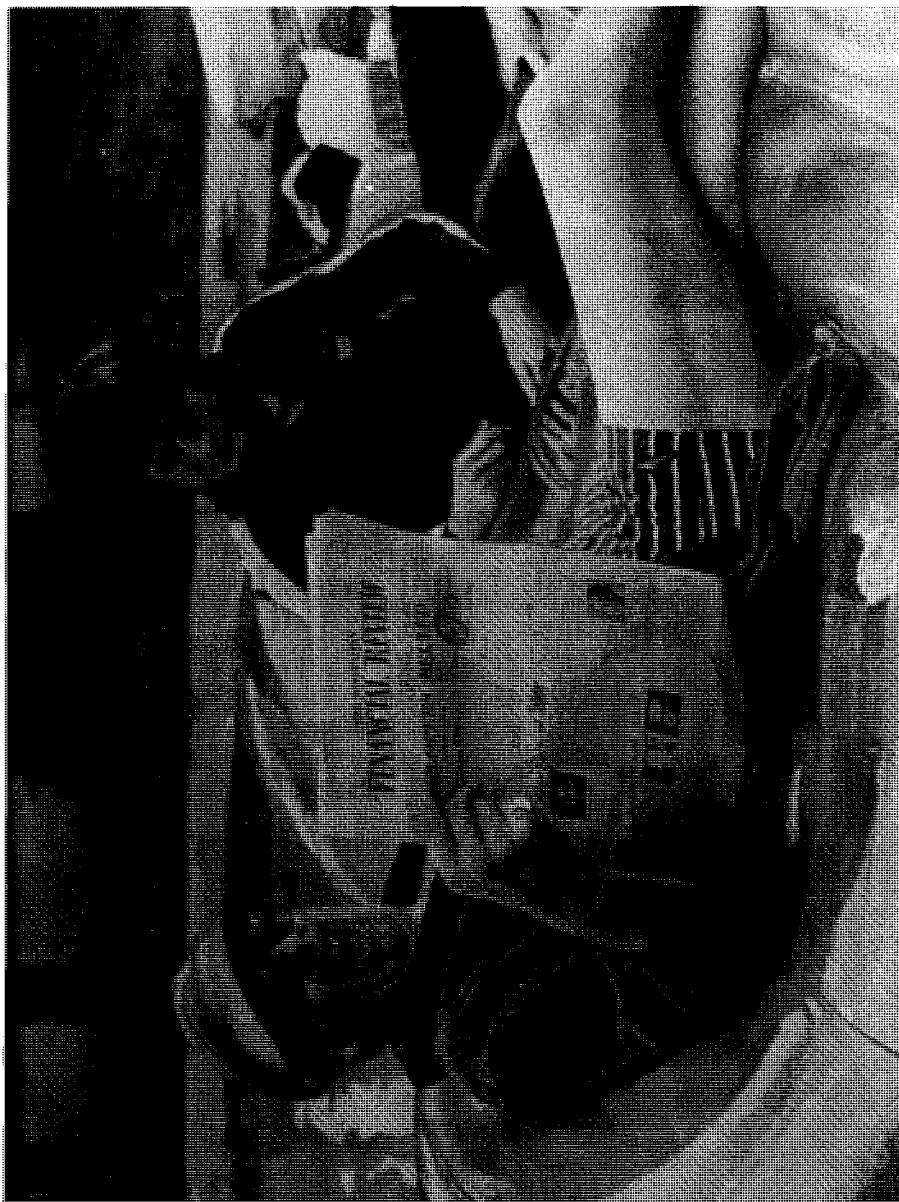
alienate the club's supporters, most of whom are apparently, by implication, sympathetic with right-wing parties.

But this political satire is an unusual moment in an otherwise frolicsome film. Much more typical is the capricious send-up of the party held by the homosexual advertising executives. McCarthy attends this party in order to be primed for his new advertising role as Batman. The next day McCarthy as Batman flies through the air while attached to a flying fox, but has forgotten to hand over his cup of tea before he does his stunt. This is the kind of buffoonery at which Baker excels in this film. *The Great McCarthy* is not a particularly profound or meaningful film but there are enough madcap scenes and sweetly amusing bedroom romps to make it a happy experience for viewers. The myth of attaining immortal glory as a football player is effectively debunked.

McCarthy (John Jarratt) and his English mistress (Judy Morris) take their football to bed in The Great McCarthy, directed by David Baker.



The rich father-in-law makes McCarthy (John Jarratt) an offer he can't refuse. But he does!
(*The Great McCarthy*, directed by David Baker).



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

**“Water from the Moon”:
Horror and Utopian Hopes for Indonesia**

The Novel: *The Year of Living Dangerously*, by Christopher Koch

From its very beginnings in the 1870s Australian fiction seems to have been obsessively inward-looking, opening out only fractionally in its backward-looking concern with the Anglo-Celtic rivalry among the ancestry of our population. There have, of course, been contemporary Australian novels with European settings, like Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's Ark* and *Gossip from the Forest*. But Christopher Koch's *The Year of Living Dangerously* is both rare and timely in its evocation of an Australian-Indonesian culture-clash. Its only important contemporary rivals in opening up South East Asia to Australian fiction readers would seem to be Blanche D'Alpuget's *Turtle Beach* and Robert Drewe's *A Cry in the Jungle Bar*.

We Australians will need a new ethos and a new national mythology to cope with this radical turnabout from being an English colony until 1901 and a European nation up until the 1950s. In today's world our trade, our immigration and our participation in Asian/Pacific politics and wars are making us more and more a part of South East Asia.

In studying *The Year of Living Dangerously* we are comparing a contemporary novel with a contemporary film. The modern narrative techniques of Christopher Koch - point of view, delayed revelation, political and religious mystery - could be said to be even more subtle than the film techniques of Peter Weir - play of light and shade, violent mass scenes contrasted with quiet, intimate scenes, mystery of the Wayang shadow plays, and the musical score.

The Year of Living Dangerously is a philosophical and a religious novel. Each of the main characters is living in a personal hell of anxiety and fear of failure; each is driven on by a different dream of self-fulfilment. The main character, Guy Hamilton, is an emotionally impoverished and narrowly ambitious journalist. He is running away from commitment and love and seeking to fulfil himself solely through his ambition to be a great foreign correspondent. His erotic counterpart, Jill Bryant, a secret service officer with the British Embassy, is said to be on the verge of unhappy promiscuity. After a failed marriage and equally failed affairs, she is driven on by a desperate but barely conscious dream to have a baby. Guy seeks freedom; Jill seeks commitment. This is hardly unique in the plots of novels. But presented against the backdrop of steamy Jakarta and a sexual environment which stresses perversion, frustration and shameful secrecy, there is a gripping tension to their relationship.

But the main thrust of *The Year of Living Dangerously* is not erotic, it is political and religious. The main character is undoubtedly the Chinese-Australian dwarf, Billy Kwan. Billy sees his life as a philosophical crusade of great intensity and urgency. He must find the answer to the questions posed in the Gospels (Luke 3, 10) and echoed by the aged seeker Tolstoy: "*What then must we do?*"

That is, what is morally required of us affluent Westerners when we are confronted with the poverty, disease and misery of the third world in general and Indonesia in particular?

Billy Kwan lives in two kinds of personal hell. His first hell is sexual: he has the sexual needs of a normal man but cannot hope to fulfil these needs because of his dwarfishness. His second hell is that he is a hybrid who cannot find an environment to which he belongs, which he can declare to be his home. He is hybrid because he is half Chinese and half Australian, but is accepted by no racial group. He is also hybrid because he is not a complete dwarf: he is on the frustrating verge of the lowest height considered to be within the bounds of normalcy. But he shares the hybrid existence of famous dwarfs through the ages of history insofar as he plays the clown and the fool in public but carries out secret studies in a private quest for wisdom.

Billy tries to emerge from his hell through intense idealism. He is idealistic in his search for perfect friendship with Guy Hamilton and he is equally uncompromising in his demanding hero-worship of President Sukarno as the saviour of the downtrodden people of Indonesia. The haven that Billy seeks is both personally and politically utopian. No mere mortal, whether a president or a mere journalist, can hope to live up to Billy's idealistic expectations. Billy's resultant disillusion drops him into the bottomless pit of despair. He is in a worse hell than when he began his quest. It is partly from Billy's almost insane desperation that *The Year of Living Dangerously* is driven on to conflict and catastrophe.

On the panoramic political stage President Sukarno is seen to parallel Billy's personal quest. Sukarno suffered through hell in his political imprisonment and exile during Dutch colonial rule. Sukarno was as uncompromising as Billy in his quest for the heaven of national independence. Sukarno is also perceived to be a hybrid and as flawed as Billy. He is partly the God Vishnu swooping down from the clouds in his white helicopter (p 12) but he is also squalidly subject to sexual promiscuity. This promiscuity is not seen as joyful but is interpreted by the Great Wally in *The Year of Living Dangerously* as "Sarinahism" (p 217). Sarinah was the family servant with whom Sukarno shared his bed when he was a little boy. Sukarno named a big new department store after his beloved Sarinah and perhaps his promiscuity in adulthood was only a search to replace her.

President Sukarno is tragically hybrid because he bases his romantic national revolution on Marhaenism but he is really enslaved by Sarinahism. That is, politically he adapts Marxism by glorifying not the urban proletariat of Europe but the marhaens, the barely self-sufficient, small farmers of Java. But erotically he is driven by the less noble desire to go to bed with the marhaens' daughters and wives. As the Great Wally puts it:

... after all, what he most wants to do with the little people is to get into bed with them - the female ones, that is. I think he'd rather plough Sarinah than plough a field with Marha. (p 217)

The minor characters in *The Year of Living Dangerously* are all woven into this complex web of sexual and political chaos. It is not only President Sukarno who is living dangerously in this last year of his real reign, 1965. All of the other characters in the novel are also living dangerously. They are all shown to suffer frustration and failure. In the sexual sphere, for example, there is the Great Wally who is increasingly tormented by his lust for the bantjis, the ululating boy-girl prostitutes of Jakarta. When this secret is betrayed to the Indonesian authorities, they use it as an excuse to deport him and thus get rid of his embarrassingly well-informed political reports to the Western world.

The New Zealand reporter Kevin Condon tries to relieve himself of his sexual frustration by driving his battered little Fiat around taking furtive photographs of poor Indonesian peasant women exposing their breasts while they wash themselves in the sewerage canals. As the narrator puts it: *"he is romantically in love with his own perpetual frustration"*. The Canadian reporter Curtis drives out to the prostitutes at the Jakarta cemetery who expose themselves in his headlights in order to prove that they are not banshee boy-girls but the real thing. Curtis has reduced the mystery of love to the tormented circle of hell: lust and clap, lust and clap.

The minor characters are just as defeated in the political sphere. Colonel Ralph Henderson is a living anachronism of the British empire that no longer exists. His out of place arrogance is both racist and narcissistic. He feels himself superior to both Australians and Americans and he bullies the Indonesian waiter. His diving board exhibitionism is a desperate attempt to stave off old age but it doesn't stop him losing Jill to the much younger Guy Hamilton. Henderson remains pathetically unaware that Jill and Guy both try in different ways to support his hollow dignity. He is helpless when the Indonesian mobs burn down the British Embassy. He doesn't have the sensitivity or the ability to give fatherly love when Guy makes subconscious gestures that he is seeking a paternal substitute to replace the father he lost in the war in Singapore. Henderson remains in his narcissistic hell because he is unable to forget his dignified public image. This image is a prison which conceals his vulnerability and which prevents him from giving or receiving intimate love.

The Indonesian counterpart to Colonel Henderson is the minor Communist Party leader Kumar. Kumar is obliged to conceal his political commitment in order to retain his lucrative and informative job as Guy Hamilton's assistant. His real authority is revealed only when he stops the PKI mob from killing Billy and Guy in the streets of Jakarta and at the end of the novel when he reveals that he speaks fluent Russian (as well as English), having been a student in Leningrad. Kumar is a failure politically because his Communist Party fifth

column is defeated on the brink of the big breakthrough by General Suharto's armed forces. Kumar dreams as fervently as does Billy Kwan for a just society in which wealth is distributed according to need and not corruptly hoarded by the greedy few. In the end he is obliged to admit sadly that this is only an unattainable dream, or as he puts it in the most poignant phrase in the novel: "*it is water from the moon*". Kumar will be hunted to his probable death just as up to half a million communists and Chinese were hunted to their death throughout Indonesia in the bloodbath that followed Sukarno's fall from power.

Kumar is also a failure erotically insofar as he has sacrificed his personal life to the cause of the Communist Party. The closest he comes to an erotic liaison is with the Russian spy Vera who is presumably using him to get to Guy Hamilton. This part of the plot strays anyway into cliché James Bond territory. One senses the lost opportunity for a friendship between Kumar and Guy Hamilton but this is made impossible because of the unbridgeable gulf between their cultures. It can never go beyond a wary sharing of a cigarette or a warning from Kumar that Guy is on the communist hit-list. Kumar is another minor character who is portrayed by the narrator as a man who fails to fulfil himself in love or friendship.

The scriptwriters of the film *The Year of Living Dangerously* sense this and radically alter the novel's plot in order to give mass audiences the sentimental happiness of seeing a life and death bond between Kumar and Guy. Guy sacrifices the possibility of regaining sight in one eye in order to save Kumar from execution by the Indonesian military. That is, in the film Guy discovers commitment to a friend as well as commitment to his future wife, Jill. But in the novel Kumar does not rely on Guy for escape at all. On the contrary, he retains a fiercely independent posture at the end saying:

Mr Billy Kwan was right .. Westerners have not many answers any more. ... We will win because we know what we believe - and you believe in nothing but your pleasures. (pp 289-290)

Major and minor characters in *The Year of Living Dangerously* are therefore integrated in the novel's themes of failure and frustration of the dream of honest friendship in a just society. Billy Kwan explains this failure mythologically when he quotes from the Bhagavad Gita a line spoken by the God Krishna as advice to the prince Arjuna:

Greedy lust and anger: this is the enemy of the soul. All is clouded by desire, Arjuna: as fire by smoke, as a mirror by dust. (p 82)

Billy attempts to overcome these confusing clouds of desire by deliberately refraining from sex and by devoting himself to his vision of the ideal friendship and the ideal society. He gives financial support to the Jakarta slum-family of Ibu and her two children and refuses her puzzled offer of sex in order to repay his generosity. Billy is trying to practice the Christian golden rule of giving love

as a response to the tormenting question of Luke 3, 10: "*What then must we do*"? The implication is that if we all go forth and do likewise, then we do not need to worry about the insoluble political problems of society because they will solve themselves. But Billy is defeated here, too, by ignorance and disease. Ibu and her family bathe in the open sewerage canals of Jakarta and her infant son dies of gastroenteritis. Ibu is taken away presumably to earn her meagre living by prostitution. Billy has lost the family that he could never have by normal means and his Christian experiment has failed.

So, too, does Billy find frustrating failure in his adulation of President Sukarno as the idealistic leader of the Indonesian people. As a tragic hero Billy knows no compromise: he insists on the ideal or nothing. Exiled from the Wayang journalists' club because he is thought (wrongly) to have betrayed the Great Wally to the Indonesian authorities, he hatches in isolation his insane suicidal scheme to confront Sukarno at a public rally with a daubed sheet hanging from a hotel window: "*Sukarno feed your people!*" Billy is murdered by Sukarno's security police and becomes an unknown martyr to the cause of the just society. But it is Billy's death that inspires Guy Hamilton to a change of heart about the meaning of friendship, love and commitment and in this sense Billy's death has not been in vain.

Certainly there is justification for interpreting *The Year of Living Dangerously* as a modern tragedy worthy of comparison with the tragic dramas of classical Greece. Billy has the same nobility of soul and human greatness as Orestes or Iphigenia or Oedipus; he is just as devoted to an agonised dialogue with the vanished gods about justice and love as are the Greek heroes. He refuses to compromise his idealistic vision and he is prepared to give his own life as a sacrifice to his ideal. His death is not just a cause for our mourning, but just as in Greek tragedy it is also cause for us to celebrate the greatness of his soul and the nobility of his vision which compensate us for the sadness of his failure. It is probable that Christopher Koch means us to give this larger context to our interpretation of his novel because he has created a scholarly mythological frame of references from both Arthurian and Hindi legends. Billy sees these myths and legends as "*the ancient dreams which are the spiritual life-blood of the country.*" (p 134)

Just as in the earlier parts of this book about Australian bleeding battlers, there is reverence in *The Year of Living Dangerously* for the hero who has failed nobly. There is also an appeal to ancient myth as a source of national pride, sustaining the people through difficult times. *The Year of Living Dangerously* is not satirical or iconoclastic like Carey's *Bliss* or White's *The Night the Prowler* or Garner's *Monkey Grip*. Rather it is positive in a tragic sense: that is, Koch tries to find greatness in the midst of noble failure.

Reverence for religious myth provides the basis of Billy Kwan's opposition to the new materialistic ideology of Marxism. Under Comrade Aidit's Marxism,

claims Billy in his passionate, unread appeal to President Sukarno:

The myths would be perverted into propaganda, the life of the spirit stilled in the name of the full belly, and love of God made an offence. Islam would be extinguished, and so would joy ...

Unless we love God and reverence life, we are bound for extinction ...

A kilo of rice now costs a worker's daily wage. Your people suffer, Sukarno! Marhaen suffers! How can you bear his suffering? When will you come again to Pasar Baru?" (p 134)

Billy's solution is not to change the economic mode of production or to hold that the meaning of life is to be found in materialism. His solution is that Sukarno should, like the God Vishnu the Preserver, come once again to his people and mingle with them to inspire them with joy and fervour for the national cause of independence in spite of poverty. Billy's final question here has all the tragic pathos of the classical Athenians' appeal to the Gods of Olympus or the Christian search for *deus absconditus*.

In his eclectic mythological framework Christopher Koch refers to Guy Hamilton and Billy Kwan as Sir Guy and the black goblin. In case we should overlook this scholarly evocation of Arthurian and Celtic mythology, Koch thoughtfully provides us with footnote references (p 109-110). This is all made possible within the framework of the novel because the episodic action of the plot is expressed as a reconstruction of events partly by the self-effacing first person narrator and father-confessor Cookie and partly by excerpts from Billy Kwan's learned files on all characters. Billy Kwan is an omnivorous scholar of comparative religion, philosophy, psychology of personality types and even the physiognomy of female anatomical types! This narrative technique deprives *The Year of Living Dangerously* of fast-flowing, continuous action in the development of the plot but does provide a vehicle for mythological interpretation of the action and cross-cultural analysis of the conflict of religious and political values.

Billy sees himself as continuing the Celtic mythological tradition of a kingdom of dwarfs working below the earth mining for hidden riches. That is, Billy (named after the dwarf-king of the Antipodes Bilis) is probing with his strange files under the surface of society for hidden psychological riches which will enable him to understand the hidden secrets of personality, friendship, love and the art of government. In Celtic myth Bilis is the dwarf squire to his giant brother Brian (here Guy Hamilton). This is why Billy tries to inspire Guy to go on a crusade in Jakarta in the name of sacred friendship, commitment to pure love for Jill, and a modern quest for the Holy Grail, that is justice for the starving people of Java.

Koch deliberately confuses the Arthurian myths with those of the Javanese shadow play, the Wayang Kulit. These myths are drawn from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and Koch draws half-joking parallels between Vishnu in his magic car and President Sukarno in his white helicopter and also between King Arjuna and Guy Hamilton as crusaders. Koch also has Billy suggest mythological parallels between Bung Karno as erotic adventurer and the dwarf Semar "*who is the old Javanese god Ismaja, transformed into a dwarf and a clown*" (p 132). Vishnu as the guardian god of Indonesia's many volcanoes is also said sometimes to adopt the form of a dwarf (p 157). But all of this may be seen as wistful self-aggrandizement on Billy's part as he tries to find a significant role for himself as a dwarf and a clownish cousin of Bung Karno (see especially p 133).

Overriding these tragi-comic references to Arthurian romance and Hindi mythology is the ethical primacy of the Christian Gospel with its question: "*What then must we do?*" In this Christian sense Billy can be seen as the disciple of Jesus who does attempt to give food to the poor, while Sukarno can be seen as the Anti-Christ who strays in his later years into the arrogance and corruption of power, forgetting to be shepherd to his people and lusting only after more sex and more monuments to himself. Sukarno may once have been the dalang of the shadow-plays of the Wayang Kulit, that is, the god-controller of the puppets, his people. But now his vision has been "clouded by desire" and he has fallen into venality and narcissism.

But the real tragic heroes of *The Year of Living Dangerously* are undoubtedly the people of the Jakartan slums and the fabulously beautiful Indonesian countryside. It is they who are manipulated by Sukarno's propagandistic "new-speak" (Konfrontasi, Oldefos, Nekolim) in a way that is startlingly reminiscent of George Orwell's Big Brother and Newspeak in his great work, 1984. They hang on his every word at his mass rallies as he cleverly diverts their attention from their economic misery by blaming such convenient scapegoats as the British, the Malaysians and the United Nations. Big Brother also found it convenient to keep small wars on the boil on the distant frontiers in order to manipulate the emotions of the people through daily sessions of hate for the imagined enemy.

The real tragic heroes of *The Year of Living Dangerously* are the marhaen whom Sukarno has betrayed so badly after the initial revolutionary success against the imperialist Dutch. It is the marhaen who are reduced to starvation in Lombok and who are advised by Sukarno to add rats to their diet. It is the marhaen who crowd into the capital city of Jakarta only to find that they are barred from the luxurious riches of the Hotel Indonesia and that they must live by sewerage canals in slum colonies constructed of packing cases and bamboo matting and that they can only survive by begging, prostitution or working themselves to early death as betjak-boys on their tricycle-rickshaws.

It is a central symbol of the novel that at the beginning and at the end of the work (p 17 and p 296) the grim betjak bearing the name Tengah Malam circles like the ominous, coffin-like gondola from Thomas Mann's equally tragic *Death in Venice*. Tengah Malam is the portent of the seemingly never-ending night of chaos and civil war that comes to pass: it means Midnight. The parallel with Salmon Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* suggests itself. The price of independence, dignity and liberation from European colonisation has been high. The utopian yearning for a just society is still "*water from the moon*".

The Film: *The Year of Living Dangerously*, directed by Peter Weir

The reason I thought it important to include the novel and the film *The Year of Living Dangerously* in this book results from my recent visit to the University of Singapore where I delivered lectures on the historical legends of Australia in fiction and film. Audiences there politely pretended to be fascinated by what I was trying to explore about the history of the Australian self-image, but afterwards they revealed that their real interest was in learning how today's Australians relate to South East Asians. The questions that they put to me are questions that are addressed in both the novel and the film *The Year of Living Dangerously*. These questions are:

1. Are we racists in Australia? Do we have racial prejudice against Asian immigrants? Have we finally rid ourselves of all association with the infamous White Australia policy?
2. Are we an underpopulated, overly rich European country that has chosen to ignore the overpopulated, impoverished countries of Asia that are our immediate neighbours?
3. What steps have we taken to educate ourselves about the languages and the cultures of South East Asia?
4. When we visit countries in South East Asia as tourists, what attitudes do we bring with us towards the inhabitants of Bali, Jakarta, Singapore and Bangkok? Do we bring ignorance and indifference? Do we bring only an insensitive, post-imperialist attitude that says "How cheaply can I buy as many prostitutes or duty free goods as possible and get the maximum for my holiday dollar?" Do we automatically expect that everything should be cheaper in South East Asia because after all the people are natives, not white Europeans, so obviously they are prepared to work for a pittance and have a standard of living hopelessly below ours?

These questions are addressed either directly or indirectly by Christopher Koch, David Williamson and Peter Weir in their screenplay for *The Year of Living Dangerously*. The Australian journalists are not present in Jakarta in order to learn with respect and empathy about Indonesia: they are in Jakarta purely so that they can feed like vultures on Indonesia's political turmoil in order to sell newspapers and radio programmes in Australia. The journalists are cut off from the real population of Indonesia because they have no practical command of the Bahasa language and they live in an artificial ghetto reserved for super rich foreigners. In all fairness of course, one must understand that the level of xenophobia among Indonesians in the 1960s was so high that no Westerner could have hoped to have lived outside the ghetto of the Hotel Indonesia.

Kumar and Billy Kwan both make the gap between white European

civilisations and Indonesian culture apparent when they reproach Guy Hamilton separately for his cynicism about third world poverty and his unreasoned opposition to communist revolution. Guy could be seen as a fairly average kind of Australian careerist. Why is it that he was sent to Indonesia with no command of the Bahasa language and no intellectual study of Indonesian culture? Koch and Weir have combined their talents to create a work of art that is compelling entertainment but which also informs us of how miserable daily life is for the teeming masses of Asia. Guy's fellow journalists in this work take it for granted that they should live in a luxury hotel to which ordinary Javanese could never be admitted for a moment; they take it for granted that they should be permitted to buy cheap Asian prostitutes for a price which soaring inflation has reduced to approximately 12 cents. Billy Kwan is the only foreigner to make a genuine attempt to live among the real Indonesians and to feel genuine empathy for their plight. And he is so overcome by the hopelessness of their plight and the callousness of both foreign journalists and Indonesian political leaders that he commits himself to martyrdom.

As might be expected Christopher Koch's erudite novel has been simplified and streamlined for the film. The novel's narrator Cookie has been deleted altogether and the burden of voiceover narration falls to the Chinese-Australian dwarf Billy Kwan. Vera the KGB spy has also been deleted from the plot: Vera's role in Guy's and Kumar's weekend in the mountains above Jakarta has been taken by a severely handsome Javanese woman who is presumably a communist and who carries out the nightmarish scene in which she tries to drown Guy in the old colonial swimming pool. More importantly, Guy does not save Kumar's life at the end of the novel, but only in the somewhat melodramatic film. In the novel Guy and Kumar remain wary almost-friends despite their political hostility; but in the film Guy sacrifices the sight of his eye in order to save Kumar from execution.

In general the novel has much more complex political, historical, religious and mythological information to offer than the film. Koch is a scholarly novelist. His approach is intellectual, not emotional. But it is undoubtedly true that the film offers a quicker-paced, tense drama of action to replace this intellectuality. It is also true that the film has tremendous impact in some of its visual imagery: for example, the scene in which the Javanese priest scoops frangipanis onto the corpse of Ibu's dead child is harrowing. Equally unforgettable is the contrast between the old world colonialism of the British Embassy's party and the grimness of the Jakartan slums.

The film makes only one glaring error and that is in its depiction of the love affair between Guy and Jill. Jill has been romanticised and sexually sanitised for the film. In the novel she is already visibly pregnant and waits for Guy in Singapore for their joint flight to Greece and England. But in the film we are given a fairly clichéd last minute reunion at the Jakarta aerodrome after Guy has

covered himself with heroism in his saving of Kumar. The film pays too much attention to this love affair. In all fairness, however, one could say that the film attempts to show the impact of Billy Kwan's martyrdom on Guy by demonstrating his conversion from cynic to a man who proves his commitment to friendship with Kumar.

When Peter Weir made *Picnic at Hanging Rock* back in 1975, he made a film that was all stylishness and mood. It had no intellectual substance, no genuine spiritual depth, no cogent contemporary theme. But it did have a brilliant combination of slow motion nostalgia, soft focus photography and hauntingly suggestive music.

The Year of Living Dangerously has another brilliant combination of photographic mood and musical score, but in addition it also has spiritual substance and moral challenge for our world today. Artistically the film is successful because it combines its photography, music, mood and mystery with an ideological theme that is the central concern of us all in the 20th century.

This ideological theme is the clash between the "isms", between fascism, capitalism, democratic socialism and revolutionary communism. The theme is also the ideological clash between the superpowers for a world empire. The USA masks its desire for world power behind the fake ideology of Christianity; the USSR masks its desire for world power behind the equally fake rhetoric of communism. The clash between these "isms" has replaced the equally dogmatic and fruitless clash in previous centuries of European civilisation between "correct" Christianity and heretical "incorrect" Christianity.

The screenplay and the photography alternate with great dramatic contrast between sensational public scenes of mass violence and private scenes of intense confrontation and intimacy. The public scenes show the mass demonstrations of the CPI through the streets of Jakarta and their rage as they hurl stones at the windows of old Dutch colonial buildings and thus symbolically destroy the castles of their former colonial masters. The costumes worn by the demonstrators - the girls in pure white, the men (with machete knives) in white with revolutionary red bandanas - are as full of impact as the anti-imperialist slogans and the hammer and sickle pictures.

But then a mass demonstration with the attendant tension of whether Guy will get himself murdered by the people in his insane determination to get a story and photographs suddenly yields to Billy's office or to a love scene between Guy and Jill or to a light-hearted cavorting with the other journalists in their club-pub. It is this alternation between public and private, between ideology and intimacy, between heavy tension and light-hearted relief, that makes this film an artistic success. And yet all the time the tension is building towards the explosive climax of the right-wing military putsch which topples Sukarno and results in the bloodbath of half a million executed communists in Indonesia in the late 1960s.

Many of the intimate scenes are shot in dappled, tropical shade or behind shutters in the humid dark; these shots add to the mystery and contrast with the glare of political events in the tropical sun and heat of smelly Jakarta. But these intimate scenes are made successful by the extraordinary musical score composed by Maurice Jarre. Jarre re-creates the tinkly, jingly music that accompanies a Wayang shadow play in Indonesia and these exotic sounds reinforce the pictorial exoticism that this film has for our mundane Australian vision. But at crucial moments, as tension is building in the plot, Jarre transforms this tinkling of bells and bamboo xylophones into a dramatic and tense theme that becomes increasingly ominous with every repetition. Jarre also highlights the contrast between East and West by showing the dwarf Billy in his grief alone with the haunting soprano of a tragic European opera. Jarre further contrasts this stern beauty of spiritually elevated opera with the banal thumping and pounding of 1960s American rock and roll at the journalists' parties in Jakarta and the trite waltzes of the British diplomatic receptions (not to mention the insanely proud Colonel Henderson on his crazy bagpipes).

There is a great deal of mystery and delayed revelation in this film, just as there was also in the film *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. But the mystery in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* was based on an irritatingly false mysticism of escape into another dimension of time and space through some kind of virginal purity; in fact this fake mysticism will eventually condemn the film to being a museum piece comprised of 100 per cent technique and 0 per cent genuine content. But the mysteries and the tensions in *The Year of Living Dangerously* are real mysteries and tensions; for example, why does Billy keep files? What is the significance of his worship of Sukarno that turns to hatred? Who does Jill work for? Is she capable of real love? Who will win in Indonesia, Sukarno with his arrogant leader-cult? Or the fascist army generals? Or the people's Communist Party? For whom does Guy's chauffeur work and why does Guy have the nightmare about the beautiful woman in the swimming pool who wants to murder him?

The release of these tensions in the banal love reunion on the aerodrome steps leading to the waiting getaway plane is of course inadequate. But then I don't think that we viewers were as interested in the Guy-Jill relationship as we were in the Guy-Billy and the Guy-Kumar friendships. Because it is in these two friendships that the spiritual and ideological centre of the film is to be found.

Similarly the real ending of the film does not occur on the aeroplane. The real ending approaches when Guy is temporarily blinded after he has been bashed by the military: it is ironically symbolic that it is at the moment of his blindness that he sees spiritually with the most clarity. He sees the right of the Indonesian people to reorganise themselves, if necessary through revolution, so that the starving masses are fed and there is a justice for all rather than a cynical dictatorship of the military. When the military forestall the communist revolution with an abrupt putsch, it would seem that Guy's Indonesian assistant Kumar who

is secretly a cadre leader of the Communist Party must certainly be executed. Grimly he quotes the most beautiful line in the film, an ancient Javanese saying about his romantic hopes of justice and peace: *"it is all water from the moon"*. That is, something we can never have in this life on earth. But when Guy succeeds in saving him from execution, we approach the real ending of the film.

This ending occurs with the parting words of Kumar after he and Guy have bluffed their way through the army barricades at the airport. Kumar says: *"We will win because we believe in something."*

And with these words ringing in our ears we watch the Western diplomats, the spies and the Australian journalists fly away to their next trouble-spot in South East Asia: Vietnam. The historical irony of our perspective now in the late 1980s as we look back on this story from the 1960s is that it has been in Vietnam and not in Indonesia that the Communist Party finally won their heroic struggle for independence and unity. But it is from Indonesia that Australia most fears war in the years that lie ahead.

It is possible after all that Indonesian viewers of this film might take serious offence at the unflattering depiction of their folk hero President Sukarno and at the film's accusation of the Indonesian military of brutal mass murder in their execution of the communists. Indonesians might also take offence at the film's parting satire on the bumbling Indonesian airport bureaucrats who attempt to thwart our hero Guy's escape to his lady love and the waiting aeroplane. The film's obvious sympathy with the Communist Party would also presumably score many ideological enemies in Indonesia today.

We Australians see the film as an honest revelation of political turmoil, corruption and cruelty in Indonesia and South East Asia; but perhaps Indonesians would see it as an act of insufferable arrogance and condescension made from the safe bastions of our affluence and Western mass education. But then just how safe are our national bastions?

Conclusion

In exploring the artistic and the socio-historical dimensions of the myths that have shaped the Australian folk-consciousness, I have often been obliged to confess to myself that I am not a detached observer and researcher. I am an Australian with personal commitments and personal enthusiasms. Undoubtedly I have been generous to some myths and prejudiced against others. I will have achieved my purpose, however, if I have provoked you, the reader, to reconsider where you personally stand on such myths as mateship, a classless society, stoic endurance of the outback, the democratic revolution of the Eureka Stockade, the bushrangers' revolt against authoritarianism, the Anzac soldiers, trade unionism, the cultural cringe, Australian republicanism, feminist self-assertion, equal rights for Aborigines and alternative life styles that arise from the moral rejection of capitalism and of materialist ambitions.

It is pointless to acquire a comprehensive knowledge of the novels, the films and myths that I have interpreted in this book unless the points of view of the authors and the film directors have reached you personally, either to enrage you or to inspire you. In the bicentennial year of 1988 there is a national need for soul-searching and for honest discussion about how we contemporary Australians relate to our myths of identity, our literary, cinematic and artistic achievements and our current socio-political challenges.

Select Bibliography

Selected Australian Fiction and Bush Ballads

- Barnes, John (ed.). *An Australian Selection: Short Stories*, Angus and Robertson, 1977.
- Baynton, Barbara. *The Portable Barbara Baynton*, (eds.) S. Krimmer and A. Lawson, University of Queensland Press, 1980.
- Carey, Peter. *Bliss*, Picador, 1981.
- Carey, Peter. *Illywhacker*, University of Queensland Press, 1985.
- Clarke, Marcus. *His Natural Life*, Penguin, ed. Stephen Murray-Smith, 1970.
- Clarke, Marcus. *For the Term of His Natural Life*, Angus and Robertson, 1983.
- Dowse, Sarah. *Silver City*, Penguin, 1984.
- Franklin, Miles. *My Brilliant Career*, Angus and Robertson, 1979.
- Franklin, Miles. *All That Swagger*, 1936.
- Franklin, Miles. *Laughter, Not For a Cage*, Angus and Robertson, 1956.
- Franklin, Miles. *Up The Country*, Angus and Robertson, 1984.
- Garner, Helen. *Monkey Grip*, Penguin.
- Garner, Helen. *Postcards From Surfers*, Penguin, 1985.
- Gunn, Mrs. Aeneas. *We of the Never Never* and *The Little Black Princess*, Angus and Robertson, 1983.
- Hergenhan, L. (ed.). *The Australian Short Story 1890s - 1980s*, University of Queensland Press, 1986.
- Heseltine, H. (ed.). *The Penguin Book of Australian Short Stories*, Penguin, 1976.
- Keneally, Thomas. *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, Penguin, 1970.
- Keneally, Thomas. *Bring Larks and Heroes*, Sun Books, 1974.
- Koch, Christopher. *The Year of Living Dangerously*, Grafton Books, 1978.
- Kramer, Leonie (ed.). *My Country: Australian Poetry and Short Stories. Two Hundred Years*, Lansdowne Press, 1985.
- Lawson, Henry. *Best Stories*, (ed.) Cecil Mann, Angus and Robertson, 1979.
- Lawson, Henry. *Poetical Works*, Pacific Books, 1971.
- Lindsay, Joan. *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, Penguin, 1987.
- Lindsay, Joan. *The Secret of Hanging Rock*, Angus and Robertson, 1987.
- Morant, Harry. *Breaker Morant: A Horseman Who Made History*, (ed.) F. M. Cutlack, Ure Smith, Sydney, 1962.
- Oakley, Barry. *A Salute to the Great McCarthy*, Penguin, 1970.
- O'Grady, J. *They're A Weird Mob*, Ure Smith, 1985.
- Paterson, Banjo. *Images Of Australia*, Gordon and Gotch, 1985.
- Paterson, Banjo. *Banjo Paterson's Short Stories*, Lansdowne, 1981.

- Richardson, Henry Handel. *The Getting of Wisdom*, Heinemann, 1978.
- Richardson, Henry Handel. *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, Discovery Press, Penrith, 1968.
- Rudd, Steele. *On Our Selection*, Angus and Robertson, 1953.
- Stewart, Douglas and Davis, Beatrice (eds.). *Best Australian Short Stories*, Lloyd O'Neil, Victoria, 1971.
- Stewart, Douglas and Keesing, Nancy (eds.). *Old Bush Songs*, Sydney, 1955.
- Tennant, Kylie. *The Battlers*, Pacific Books, 1971.
- White, Patrick. *The Burnt Ones*, Penguin.
- White, Patrick. *The Cockatoos*, Penguin.
- White, Patrick. *The Tree of Man*, Penguin.
- White, Patrick. *Voss*, Penguin.

Interpretation of Literature

Monographs

- Cantrell, Leon (ed.). *The 1890s. Stories, Verse and Essays*, University of Queensland Press, 1977.
- Docker, John. *In a Critical Condition*, Penguin, 1984.
- Docker, John. *Australian Cultural Elites*, Angus and Robertson, 1974.
- Dutton, Geoffrey (ed.). *The Literature of Australia*, Penguin, 1985.
- Dutton, Geoffrey (ed.). *Snow on the Saltbush*, Viking, 1984.
- Gelder, Ken/Salzman, Paul. *The New Diversity: Australian Fiction 1970-1988*, McPhee Gribble, 1990.
- Goodwin, Ken. *A History of Australian Literature*, Macmillan, London, 1986.
- Hergenhan, Laurie (ed.). *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia*, Penguin, 1988.
- Heseltine, Harry. *The Uncertain Self: Essays in Australian Literature and Criticism*, Oxford University Press, 1987.
- Hope, A. D. *Native Companions*, Angus and Robertson, 1974.
- Johnston, Grahame (ed.). *Australian Literary Criticism*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1962, (includes G.A. Wilkes, *The Eighteen Nineties*).
- Moore, T. Inglis. *Social Patterns in Australian Literature*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1971.
- Palmer, Vance. *The Legend of the Nineties*, Melbourne University Press, 1954.
- Phillips, A. A. *The Australian Tradition*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1958.
- Ward, Russell. *The Australian Legend*, Oxford University Press, London, 1986.

Journal Articles

Jarvis, Douglas

"Lawson, The *Bulletin* and the Short Story"

Australian Literary Studies 11, 1, 1983, pp 58-66

Lindsay, Jack

"Barbara Baynton: A Master of Naturalism"

Meanjin Quarterly 3, 1966, pp 345-348

Iseman, Kay

"Barbara Baynton: Woman as *The Chosen Vessel*"

Australian Literary Studies 11, 1, 1984, pp 25-37

Pons, Xavier

"Henry Lawson's Literary Vocation"

Meanjin Quarterly 39, 1980, pp 237-249

Cranny-Francis, A.

"Henry Lawson and the *Labour Leader*"

Australian Literary Studies 11, 2, 1983, p 266

McDonald, Avis G.

"Rufus Dawes and Changing Narrative Perspectives in *His Natural Life*"

Australian Literary Studies 12, 3, 1986, pp 347-358

A Review by Tony Hassall of Laurie Hergenhan,

"Unnatural Lives: Studies in Australian Fiction about the Convicts,
from James Tucker to Patrick White"

Australian Literary Studies 11, 3, 1984, pp 422-425

Pybus, Cassandra

"The Real Miles Franklin"

Meanjin Quarterly 42, 1983, pp 459-468

Bibliography on Miles Franklin

Australian Literary Studies 11, 3, 1984, p 379

McInherny, Frances

"Miles Franklin, *My Brilliant Career* and the Female Tradition"

Australian Literary Studies 9, 1979-1980, pp 275-285

Clancy, Jack

"Bringing Franklin up to Date: The Film of *My Brilliant Career*"

Australian Literary Studies 9, 1979-1980, pp 363-367

Kirkby, Dianne

"Miles Franklin on Dearborn Street, Chicago 1906-15"

Australian Literary Studies 10, 3, 1982, pp 344-357

Bird, Delys

"Towards an Aesthetics of Australian Women's Fiction:

My Brilliant Career and *The Getting of Wisdom*"

Australian Literary Studies 11, 2, 1983, pp 171-181

McFarlane, Brian

"*The Getting of Wisdom*: Not 'Merry' at All"

Australian Literary Studies 8, 1, 1977-1978, pp 51-63

Barrett, Donald

"The Mythology of *Pan* and *Picnic at Hanging Rock*"

Southerly 42, 3, 1982, pp 299-308

Kirkby, Joan

"Old Orders, New Lands: The Earth Spirit in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*"

Australian Literary Studies 8, 3, 1977-1978, pp 255-268

Kiernan, Brian

"Thomas Keneally and the Australian Novel: A Study of *Bring Larks and Heroes*"

Southerly 28, 3, 1968, pp 189-199

Reynolds, Henry

"Jimmy Governor and Jimmie Blacksmith"

Australian Literary Studies 9, 1979-1980, pp 14-25

Sturm, Terry

"Thomas Keneally and Australian Racism: *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*"

Southerly 33, 3 1973, pp 261-274

Frow, John

"The Chant of Thomas Keneally"

Australian Literary Studies 10, 3, 1982, pp 291-299

Clancy, Laurie

"*Poor Fellow My Country*: Herbert's Masterpiece?"

Southerly 37, 2, 1977, pp 163-175

Watson, Betty L.

"Barry Oakley and the Satiric Mode"

Australian Literary Studies 7, 1, 1975-1976, pp 50-63

Worcester, David

"Selections from The Art of Satire"

In Alvin Kernan (ed)

Modern Satire

Harcourt, Brace, New York, 1962

Kernan, Alvin B.

"A Theory of Satire"

In Alvin Kernan (ed)

Modern Satire

Harcourt, Brace, New York, 1962

Sanders, Charles

"Introduction to: The Scope of Satire"

The Scope of Satire

Scott Foresman and Company, University of Illinois, Urbana, (1971)

Interpretation of Film

- Dermody, Susan/Jacka, Elizabeth. *The Screening of Australia Anatomy of a Film Industry*, vol. 1, Currency Press, 1987, and, *Anatomy of a National Cinema*, vol. 2, Currency Press, 1988.
- Dermody, Susan/Jacka, Elizabeth. *The Imaginary Industry: Australian Film in the Late '80s*, A.F.T.R.S. Publications, 1989.
- Eidsvik, Charles. *Cineliteracy*, Random House, New York, 1978.
- Gianetti, Louise. *Understanding Movies*, Prentice Hall, 1972.
- McFarlane, Brian. *Australian Cinema 1970-1985*, Heinemann Australia, 1987.
- McFarlane, Brian. *Words and Images: Australian Novels into Film*, Heinemann, Victoria, 1983.
- Monaco, James. *How to Read a Film*, Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Moran, Albert/O'Regan, Tom (eds.). *An Australian Film Reader*, Currency, Sydney, 1985.
- Moran, Albert/O'Regan, Tom (eds.). *The Australian Screen*, Penguin, 1989.
- Stewart, John. *An Encyclopaedia of Australian Film*, Reed, Frenchs Forest, 1984.
- Tudor, Andrew. *Theories of Film*, Secker and Warburg, 1974.
- Turner, Graeme. *National Fictions. Literature, Film and the Construction of Australian Narrative*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1986.

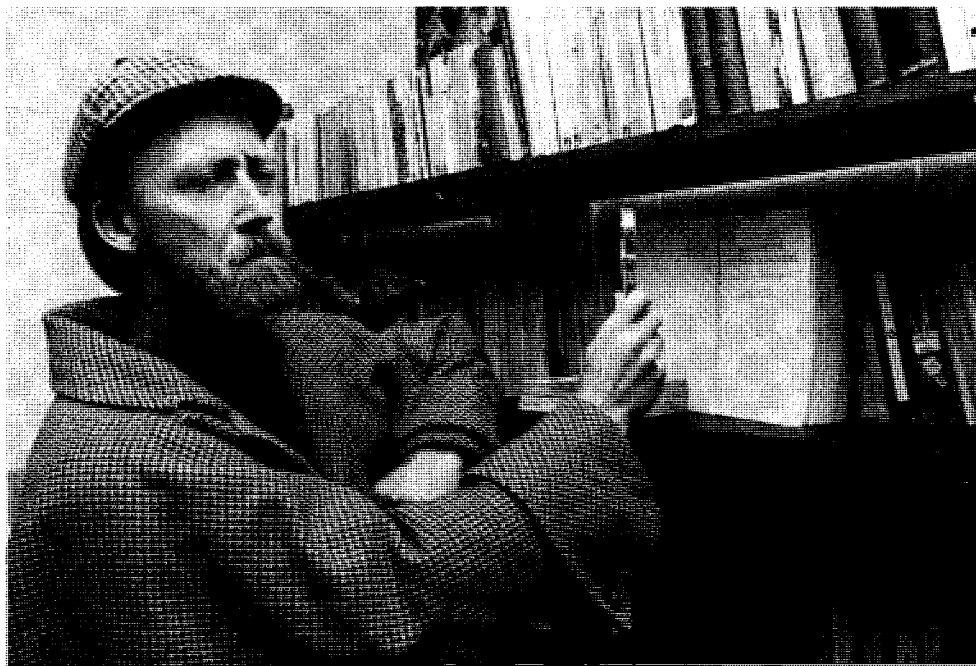
Socio-Historical Background

- Alomes, Stephen/Jones, Catherine (eds.). *Australian Nationalism: A Documentary History*, Angus and Robertson, 1991.
- Alomes, Stephen. *A Nation at Last? The Changing Character of Australian Nationalism 1880-1988*, Angus and Robertson, 1988.
- Blainey, Geoffrey. *The Triumph of the Nomads*, Sun Books, 1983.
- Blainey, Geoffrey. *A Land Half Won*, Macmillan, 1980.
- Boyd, Robin. *The Australian Ugliness*, Penguin.
- Burgmann, Verity/Lee, Jenny (eds.). *Constructing a Culture*, McPhee Gribble/Penguin, 1988.
- Carroll, John (ed.). *Intruders in the Bush: The Australian Quest for Identity*, Oxford University Press, 1982.
- Clark, Manning. *A Short History of Australia*, Mentor Books, 1963.
- Conway, Ronald. *The Great Australian Stupor (An Interpretation of the Australian Way of Life)*, Sun Books, Melbourne, 1985.
- Docker, John. *The Nervous Nineties - Australian Cultural Life in the 1890's*, Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Fiske, John/Hodge, Bob/Turner, Graeme. *Myths of Oz. Reading Australian Popular Culture*, Allen and Unwin, 1988.
- Foss, Paul (ed.). *Island in the Stream: Myths of Place in Australian Culture*, Pluto Press, 1989.
- Goldberg, S. L./Smith, F. B. (eds.). *Australian Cultural History*, Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- Gorman, Clem. *The Larrikin Streak: Australian Writers Look at the Legend*, Sun Books, 1990.
- Horne, Donald. *The Lucky Country*, Penguin, 1964.
- Hughes, Robert. *The Fatal Shore*, Collins Horvill, 1987.
- Lacour-Gayet, Robert. *A Concise History of Australia*, Penguin.
- McQueen, Humphrey. *A New Britannia*, Penguin, 1970.
- Rickard, John. *Australia: A Cultural History*, Longman Cheshire, 1988.
- Serle, Geoffrey. *From Deserts the Prophets Came*, Heinemann, 1973.
- Serle, Geoffrey. *The Creative Spirit in Australia: A Cultural History*, Heinemann Australia, 1987.
- Thomson, Helen. *Women and the Bush: Forces of Desire in the Australian Cultural Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Walker, David. *Dream and Disillusion: A Search for Cultural Identity*, Australian National University Press, 1976.

The Author

Professor David Myers is Dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Central Queensland. Before coming to Rockhampton Professor Myers was at the University of Adelaide and at the University of Toronto, Canada as an Associate Professor of German studies and comparative literature. His publications include articles on North American and German fiction and a book on Patrick White entitled *The Peacocks and the Bourgeoisie: Patrick White's Shorter Fiction*, University of Adelaide Press, 1978. He has reviewed for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age* and national ABC Radio, *Books and Writing*.

His recent publications include, two collections of short stories, *Mudmaps to Paradise*, Capricornia Institute Publications, 1987, and *Cornucopia County*, University of Central Queensland Publications, 1992, and essays on Salman Rushdie, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Thea Astley and Robert Drewe. He is currently writing on revolutionary images of Indonesia in the fiction of Pramoedya Ananata Toer and Mochtar Lubis and is also editing a book anthology of essays entitled *The Great Literacy Debate: The English Language in Australia in the 1990s*.



Author launching Hemlock Sholmes' play-writing competition.