

'Millennial Dreaming'

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In July 1893 Australia's first great socialist evangelist William Lane, accompanied by a band of loyal disciples, departed Australia to found a socialist utopia in Paraguay. The story of New Australia – the name given to the communal colony that the settlers established in Paraguay – has long exercised a fascination over Australian historians.¹ The reason for that enduring resonance is, perhaps, at least in part, because the New Australia saga, both in its genesis and outcome, powerfully evokes the unfulfilled dream of Australian socialism. If it is the figure of Lane who personifies that lack of fulfillment in the late 1890s, then it is Jim Cairns who best does so at the end of this century. While these two socialist visionaries inhabited vastly different worlds, their final paths are in some regards depressingly similar. More than eighty years after Lane embarked for Paraguay, Cairns, too, set out to build an alternative community in the hope of providing an inspirational model for the rest of society. The social experiment conceived by Cairns was on a far less grand scale than Lane's, and the site for the alternative community was not half way across the globe but southern New South Wales. Yet, like Lane, Cairns' resort to utopianism came within the immediate context of profound political disappointment. Also like Lane, there had been pre-existing signposts to a developing millennial style utopianism in Cairns' thinking.² Similarly, Cairns' retreat to utopianism was ultimately rooted in a highly idealised view of human potential, as well as a grandiose self-conception of his own destiny as an agent of the liberation of that potential. Inevitably, though, the most compelling parallel is that, just as with New Australia, the community initiated by Cairns was to be beset by conflict and controversy. This paper explores this previously neglected chapter in Cairns' life.

By July 1975 Jim Cairns' parliamentary career was in tatters. In quick succession he had been sacked, first as Treasurer, and then as Deputy Prime Minister of the Whitlam Government. The contentious circumstances of Cairns' downfall lie outside the scope of this paper, however, his political demise, together with the premature destruction of the Whitlam Government in November 1975, only confirmed what he had suspected even before Labor had come to office three years earlier. That is, the pursuit of radical social change through parliamentary reformism was doomed to failure. Since at least the mid 1960s Cairns had been moving along an ideological trajectory which was gradually transporting him beyond the boundaries of institutional politics.³ In his 1972 book, *The Quiet Revolution*, written on the verge of the ALP's historic victory, he had forecast that a Labor government would inevitably find its power to implement social change seriously circumscribed by an entrenched capitalist hegemony. Encouraged by the example of the Moratorium movement, he had flagged his belief that the quest for socialism must shift emphasis away from centralised state power and political reformism to grass roots activity directed at nurturing a counter hegemony to capitalism. Cairns emerged from the Whitlam Government even more certain of this view. The difference was he was now confident that he had discovered the key to creating such an alternative consciousness. His relationship with Junie Morosi served as the personal catalyst for this discovery, while the writings of the controversial Austrian psychoanalyst and social theorist, Wilhelm Reich, provided the major theoretical insight. Cairns now believed that individual liberation was fundamental to

ending the hegemony of (patriarchal) capitalism. The essential precondition to creating a new consciousness and a better society was to understand and change human behaviour at its source, specifically by bringing up the young in an unrepressed environment. In the aftermath of 1975, Cairns looked for an appropriate vehicle through which to give practical expression to this latest direction in his thinking. The result was a relatively short and turbulent involvement with the counter culture movement, one by-product of which was the establishment of an alternative lifestyle community called Mount Oak.

Within months of the fall of the Whitlam Government, Cairns had hatched plans for an alternative lifestyle conference/festival (hence the term Confest). Those plans first gathered momentum in April 1976 when he issued a statement suggesting that a national conference be convened on social change and alternative lifestyles. Over the following months Cairns helped organise and spoke at meetings across the country promoting the idea. By August a rudimentary organisational structure was in place with Cairns its official convenor.⁴ Initially called Alternative Australia, by November the name Down to Earth (DTE) had been adopted. Before this name change a circular was sent out from Cairns' parliamentary office headed 'Alternative Australia '76' announcing that the Confest was to be held in Canberra between 10-14 December. Copies were sent to environmental organisations, student, peace and radical political groups and counter culture communities. The largest of the latter communities was centred on the Northern New South Wales coast. Known in counter cultural circles as the Rainbow region, it had sprung up after the 1973 Aquarius alternative lifestyle and arts festival at Nimbin. Determined that the Confest should have a serious intellectual foundation, Cairns included in the circular a thumbnail sketch of themes he had explored in *The Theory of the Alternative*, a pamphlet he had self-published earlier that year. He invoked the vision of a 'new renaissance' of free cooperating individuals that would offer an alternative to the 'self-interest' of contemporary society. It would spring from

individuals and groups; from workers, students, ethnic communities, communes, cooperatives, sex reformers, feminists, peace activists...They become the community for radical change – the PEOPLE'S LIBERATION MOVEMENT.

The Confest was intended to 'see if there is in Australia this community for change'.⁵

Literature distributed in the days before the Confest claimed it was a spontaneous gathering, not organised or controlled by anyone.⁶ The reality behind this rhetoric was that a core group of around 20 volunteers, among them Morosi, had been responsible for the preparations. Cairns did the lion's share, much of it out of his Canberra office. Apart from publicity, the most critical issue he dealt with was the location of an appropriate site on which to hold the Confest. The Canberra showgrounds were initially mooted as a venue but, following discussions with ACT officials, the Cotter Reserve was chosen. Around 20 kilometres south-west of Canberra, this picturesque six hectare site lay at the junction of the Murrumbidgee and Cotter rivers.⁷ Overseas guests were invited with Dr James Prescott of the National Institute of Child Health and Human

Development in Bethesda, Maryland and Wilhelm Reich's daughter, Dr Eva Reich, both agreeing to attend. In addition, Cairns helped to bankroll and oversee the financial arrangements of the Confest. One of the most significant outlays was for three large geodesic domes that were to act as centres for the various activities.⁸

By the first week of December preparations were underway at the Cotter Reserve. The geodesic domes were erected, giving the site what the *Canberra Times* described as 'a futuristic holiday camp' appearance. A make-shift kitchen was constructed and showers put up. Meanwhile, the first visitors had begun to trickle in and set up camp among the towering eucalypt trees.⁹ When the Confest officially opened on a warm, sunny morning on Friday 10 December, over 2000 people were present. The event began with a 'sharing' ritual designed to break down inhibitions which involved participants dancing, hugging and massaging one another. People were summoned to the 'sharing' by Morosi who worked her way among the village of tents ringing a bell. As convenor and undeclared guiding light of the Confest, Cairns delivered an informal speech to the assembled crowd. Stripped to the waist, he told them that they could reform the 'acquisitive, alienated, corrupt, and violent society' in which they lived by liberating the 'life force' which everyone had within them but was usually 'repressed'. If this life force could be freed in them, then one day it could be liberated in whole societies.¹⁰

Over the weekend of 11-12 December the numbers camping on the site swelled to about 5000 and there was a similar number of day visitors. As Cairns later put it, they were 'all sorts of people; in Jaguars and BMWs, on push-bikes and on foot'.¹¹ Some had come from as far afield as Western Australia and Darwin. Activities were diverse and included workshops on personal growth, natural child birth, the free family, organic food, meditation, yoga, auric massage and iridology. Cairns, whose predominant interest was in the 'theoretical side' of the Confest, devoted much of his time to the ideology workshop.¹² In a letter to *Nation Review* one of the organisers, Kerry Bindon, claimed that thousands had contributed to this workshop. He went on ethereally:

Through all the different perspectives...a common position was articulated for the Movement...not to define its futures, which all felt should be open ended and free, but as a statement of the present, trembling on the brink of the new in the light of the experience of the past.

Robert Hefner of the *Canberra Times*, who listened to Prescott and Reich speak, reported that both had conveyed a similar message: 'the more physical touching shared by people for the purpose of pleasure and understanding, the less the tendency toward violence in their society'.¹³

The Confest ended on 14 December with a pageant and the adoption of a manifesto for alternative living which called for a society based on 'Harmonious, loving and caring relationships within and between individuals themselves and between them and their environment'.¹⁴ Media coverage of the event had been sparse with the notable exception of the *Canberra Times*. Its otherwise open-minded account of the Confest was marred by a heavy-handed satirical piece by Ian Warden on the day after it closed. Warden seemed to be preoccupied with the nudity of some of the participants. While a shirtless Cairns had not been a 'pretty sight' he regretted that Morosi had remained 'stoically clothed'. The Confest, Warden sneered, had been an exercise in middle class indulgence: 'a protracted picnic...a chance to be safely, temporarily alternative'. Notwithstanding his cynicism, Warden admitted that it was possible that the gathering might help 'in bevelling some of the hard edges off our brittle society'.¹⁵

Those who participated in the Cotter River Confest had little doubt that it had done this and much more besides. Within

counter culture circles Cotter River holds a hallowed status. It is viewed as having been not only a profoundly moving, bordering on spiritual experience, but as a seminal moment in the development of the alternative lifestyle movement within Australia. In a short history of the DTE organisation he wrote as editor of *Down to Earth News* in 1983, George Schmidt asserted that Cotter River 'created an euphoric state of recognising in each other a "fellow traveller" in the quest for a better society'.¹⁶ Interviewed over a decade later Schmidt had not changed his mind. He compared the experience to a 'religious ecstasy' and insisted that the legacy of Cotter River was still apparent in a number of alternative lifestyle communities that had grown out of the event. Schmidt also acknowledged the importance of Cairns to that inaugural DTE Confest, describing him as its 'focal point'.¹⁷ Kerry Bindon had made a similar point, telling Ian Mackay of the Melbourne *Herald* that the whole event was 'being maintained' through Cairns' efforts. Cairns was 'a visionary...a wise man, an elder who sees the needs of all the Earth, of everyone on it, of us'. Not everyone saw his involvement in such a heady light. Bindon conceded there 'is a lot of talk that he is using us for his own ends'. In his letter to *Nation Review* later that month Bindon noted that 'suspicion and distrust' of Cairns and Morosi had been evident from the movement's earliest days.¹⁸

Cairns shared in the euphoria of Cotter River. A statement he released on the final day of the Confest bears ample testament to this.¹⁹ Any measure of incredulity had been thrown to the wind, replaced by a state of near rapture. It was as if he had been part of a collective quasi-religious revelation and that after years of fruitless search the Holy Grail of social change had been unearthed. 'For the past five days', Cairns proclaimed,

over 9000 people have shared a rare experience - in an explosion of goodwill, marked by gentleness, tolerance and love, we have shared a growing realisation of the possibility of radical change in ourselves and society. In an atmosphere in which differences of age, occupation, race, sex and personal ideology have become meaningless, we have all sensed the actualisation of the 'impossible dream'. We have all undergone a subtle experience of extreme power and beauty which has radically altered our understanding of human and social potential...Where once many of us were afraid to touch each other, afraid to be intimate, afraid of love, we have become free.

Those who had attended the Confest were the 'possessors of a new and greater consciousness of human potential' and would return to society carrying

what was once a dream and continue it as a reality...we are the seeds of change sowed not only here but throughout the world. We are the seeds of change that will ultimately transform humankind.

The success of Cotter River only made more inevitable a breach between the old and new worlds of Cairns. While he delayed until August 1977 his announcement that he would not be recontesting the seat of Lalor at the next election, his final months in parliament were consumed by preparations for a second Confest. The choice of an appropriate location was crucial because he hoped that it would become the site for an ongoing alternative lifestyle community once the Confest was over. At the time of the announcement of his decision to leave parliament he told journalists that it was envisaged that the community would eventually become self-sustaining. It would grow its own food, have its own health facilities and generate its own power, possibly through solar or wind power. As well, it would engage in 'research-learning activity' on models of human growth, both physical and psychological. People would be encouraged to visit 'to see new ways of living' and then 'return to the normal environment and in this way the alternative lifestyle could develop as they passed on their knowledge to other people'.

In other words, the community would act as an incubator for an alternative society. Cairns also indicated that the land on which the proposed community was to be developed would be 'bought through contributions and held by a cooperative'.²⁰

The search for a suitable site proved difficult. Several properties were inspected around Canberra and in the Aruluen Valley between Braidwood and Moruya on the New South Wales south coast.²¹ The need to find a piece of land that could be leased with an option of later being purchased for a modest outlay limited the choices. Eventually an 1100 hectare property called Mount Oak was selected, a short distance from the sleepy hamlet of Bredbo about 80 kilometres south of Canberra. Nestled in the foothills of the Snowy Mountains, the land was bordered by a sluggish and undrinkable section of the Murrumbidgee River and the Monaro Highway which links Canberra and Cooma. A history of pastoral activity had left the property deeply dissected by erosion gullies and the rolling hills and ravines sparsely covered in natural grasses and a thin scattering of shrubs and stunted trees. As Cairns later admitted ruefully, it was a 'very unattractive' piece of land.²² Certainly, it seemed an unlikely place for a future utopia.

The inhospitability of Bredbo as a site for the 1977 Confest was accentuated by the fact that it was held at a time when the region was in drought. Ian Warden was again despatched by the *Canberra Times* to cover the event. He vividly described the conditions confronting the several thousand who took part in the Confest over a 10 day period between late December and the early New Year:

Oh, the dust! Perhaps the whole area would be transformed by a few good showers but in the meantime it looks like an elaborate film set for the production of a film about Hell. Dead trees, dead sheep, tawny turf and the profuse dung of assorted animals.²³

The barren setting was matched by the primitive quality of the facilities. Unlike Cotter River, there were no existing facilities and so everything had to be constructed from scratch. The toilets were pits in the ground and the small number of showers hopelessly overcrowded. Drinking water had to be trucked in from Cooma daily and many participants were laid low by an outbreak of 'Bredbo bug'. Moreover, the danger of fire on the parched landscape was a constant anxiety.²⁴

The harshness of the environment at Bredbo was just one of a host of factors that combined to prevent a re-capturing of the magical spirit that had prevailed at Cotter River. As the secretary of the DTE Rainbow region, David Spain, later wrote in *Nimbin News*, the Bredbo Confest was a 'demoralising' experience for the movement.²⁵ To some extent, this disappointment was unsurprising. The euphoria of the inaugural DTE Confest was unsustainable and, therefore, Bredbo was destined to be a let down in comparison. The problems, however, went still deeper than this. While at Cotter River complaints about the roles of Cairns and Morosi, and to a lesser extent Morosi's husband, David Ditchburn, had been only barely audible, at Bredbo they grew into a rumble. Steve Kelly, in an otherwise positive review of the Confest for *Nation Review*, referred to the

big question mark that hangs over the entire DTE organisation and it has three names: Jim Cairns, Junie Morosi and David Ditchburn... A lot of people at the festival, particularly those who had gotten actively involved, spent quite a bit of time discussing this trio and trying to work them out.²⁶

How much of the criticism of Cairns that surfaced at Bredbo was the inevitable fate of any guru/mentor within the confines of a relatively small community is difficult to say. Admiration and idolisation are often forerunners to envy and resentment. On the other hand, gurus have a long history of succumbing to authoritarian behaviour (William Lane, for example) which

eventually breeds revolt among their followers. In his previous incarnation as a charismatic leader in the Moratorium movement, Cairns had seemed free of any such propensity. Yet at Bredbo, the principal complaint against him, Morosi and Ditchburn related to their perceived dictatorial control of the Confest. According to George Schmidt, 'every decision had to be countersigned...by Jim or Junie or David'. In an uncanny echo of the events of 1974-75, the campfire gossip at Bredbo singled out Morosi as the one who was pulling the strings. Kelly noted that many felt Cairns was 'a mouthpiece for the exotic Ms Morosi'.²⁷

At another level, evidence emerged at Bredbo of a fundamental incompatibility between the expectations that Cairns had of DTE and those which the movement had of him. Schmidt claims that what became noticeable was Cairns' 'non-participation', apart from 'his talks'.²⁸ Adele Horin detected a similar aloofness at the following Confest at Berri in South Australia in April 1979. Writing in the *National Times*, Horin observed that Cairns remained 'demurely on the sidelines', eschewing the 'open expressions of emotion, uninhibited involvement in massages and other sensuous pursuits, midnight gyrations around communal campfires, even the vegetarian food'. To have expected anything else from Cairns was probably unreasonable. A lifetime pattern of puritanism could not be easily reversed. He was uneasy with some of the mores of the counter culture, whether it be the nudity of many participants, the widespread use of drugs or the open displays of physical affection. Of the former, he told Horin somewhat unconvincingly: 'Like everyone else will sooner or later, I had to get used to it'.²⁹ He struggled even more to come to terms with the practice whereby Confest participants freely hugged one another. Schmidt recalls that, when embraced, Cairns 'gently froze...the way a shy kid does'. Finally, in deference to his obvious discomfort, the others stopped trying to hug him.³⁰

The tendency of Cairns to shrink away from involvement in many Confest activities also reflected that, for him, the counter culture was primarily of interest from a theoretical perspective. In turn, he was frustrated by the social myopia of many within the counter culture. There was 'no concern', Cairns recalls, 'with the things I was interested in: social change... the explanation of economic and social power'. Cairns found it impossible to attract more than a small proportion of those at the Bredbo Confest to his talks. The majority, he observes disdainfully, were only 'interested in massage'.³¹ A more 'extreme example' of self-absorption was the popularity of drug-taking. The lack of social conscience or responsibility manifested itself in other ways, too. Cairns was dismayed that an estimated half of those who attended Bredbo did not pay their \$10 registration fee - a major factor in the Confest's failure to meet its costs. Even worse, a significant amount of equipment was pilfered.³²

But perhaps the darkest shadow hanging over the Bredbo Confest was the contentious issue of whether the DTE movement should support Cairns' scheme to establish a permanent community by purchasing the Mount Oak property. According to Steve Kelly, debate on this question 'flared into open dissent'. The most common objection claimed the land was unsuitable for such a project. Assisted by Bill Mollison of the University of Tasmania, Cairns countered this argument with a plan for regenerating the land and reversing the effects of over-grazing by the introduction of permaculture, essentially a process of mixed cropping. A system of key-line damming was also proposed to overcome the problem of aridity through the storage of rain water in the soil. The resistance to buying Mount Oak was not exclusively driven by practical concerns. Among those from the Rainbow region, there was unease that Mount Oak could become a competitor to northern New South Wales as a mecca for counter culture activity. Furthermore, those already unhappy at the influence of the Cairns-Morosi-

Ditchburn axis harboured a suspicion that Mount Oak might provide a means for consolidating their control. One cynic remarked that 'Bredbo was about to become Jim Cairns [sic] Retirement Farm'.³³

Eventually, a decision was reached to purchase Mount Oak. As originally envisaged by Cairns, the estimated \$60,000 purchase price was to be financed through donations invested in a foundation. Ultimately, the property title was to be held by a collective trust, effectively free land for communal development and an alternative to the normal system of capitalist ownership. Announcing the foundation's creation at the Bredbo Confest, Cairns outlined its aims:

trustees of the foundation will be expected to make a commitment...to bring about or encourage human growth in themselves and in others in a spiritual awakening and to assist the development of communities for this purpose...And, for almost the first time in Australia since white people came here, to establish communities not based upon personal gain.

He defined the guidelines by which the foundation would operate. It was to

receive funds for specific community projects such as the purchase of Mt Oak, Bredbo. The foundation or members of it shall not by money or property acquire any basis for influence, control or power...Each and every person who has attended any Down to Earth Confest shall have the right to participate in the growth of a community project such as Mt Oak.

Finally, Cairns emphasised that, once the 'legal formalities' were complete, 'those who hold that legal skin would not have...any control or interest over what happens...no rights would derive from ownership'.³⁴ They were words that were to come back to haunt him.

Initially, at the conclusion of the Bredbo Confest around 100 people stayed on with the intention of being part of an ongoing community. By the following April, however, a report in *Down to Earth News* indicated that the numbers living there had declined to under 20. Isolation and the vagaries of the climate were just two of the problems for the fledgling community. Rabbit infestation was another headache. Nevertheless, some progress had been made. A communal house was being constructed and a herb garden had been started. Brian Lavery, one of the community members, still spoke of Mount Oak in evangelical terms. 'We are not founding', he insisted, 'just another hippie commune. We are attempting something much more special, much more unique'.³⁵ One year on another of the residents, Ross Morton, provided *Down to Earth News* with a further update on its fortunes. By now the population had dwindled to a 'hard core' of half a dozen and Morton seemed less inclined to indulge in starry-eyed forecasts about the community's future. He was conscious of the many hurdles that had to be overcome before Mount Oak became fully viable. Water supply remained a 'critical factor', as was the infertility of the soil. He also conceded that the uncertainty surrounding the tenure of the land had inhibited 'the establishment of permanent schemes and structures.' In fact, the contract for the purchase of the land had been signed by Cairns in December 1978 but was conditional on the transfer of the land from crown lease to freehold. This had required protracted negotiations with various New South Wales government departments - negotiations that were still proceeding. More enigmatically, Morton referred to 'a series of personal conflicts and crises' which had dogged the community. On a more positive note, Morton reported that completion of the communal house around which were clustered several permanent stone-wood housing structures and herb and vegetable gardens. The re-vegetation of the land had also commenced with the planting of various species of trees. Morton concluded with cautious optimism:

We are slowing but surely moving towards a self-sufficient local trading situation... life is settling down to a measure of serenity and regularity. The alternative is becoming the alternative establishment.³⁶

Only a short time after Morton's report representatives from various DTE groups across Australia gathered in Victoria to plan the organisation's future. Mount Oak was one of the issues discussed. While some funds were allocated to assist Mount Oak, it was decided that the community should be treated as a separate entity rather than as a national DTE project. In short, Mount Oak was being placed at arms length from DTE. Peter Van der Wyk of the Rainbow region reported in *Nimbin News* that the decision arose out of 'a continuing lack of consensus, and unwillingness by many to give financial and energy support to Bredbo'.³⁷ A meeting of DTE Victoria in August 1979 reaffirmed that Mount Oak would have to stand alone. Several considerations influenced that decision. One was financial with DTE Victoria having 'barely enough money to keep its own head above water'. A second was that, as suggested by Van der Wyk, Mount Oak still did not enjoy unanimous support within DTE. There was some attempt to soften the disappointment for Cairns. Indeed, DTE Victoria sounded a bit like a mixed up adolescent, apologetic and yet defiant, in asserting its independence from Cairns. 'We sympathised', *Down to Earth News* declared,

with the dream and the future expectations our founding father - Jim Cairns - has about the Mt Oak community. We will assist and support any individual from our family or elsewhere who wishes to support or work at Mt Oak... but... we cannot and will not accept responsibility for Mt Oak on behalf of all members of the family.³⁸

For Cairns who remained passionately committed to Mount Oak, the decision by DTE to effectively cut it adrift in mid 1979 was a cruel blow. Unquestionably, it was a major underlying factor in his final break with the organisation later that year. In the absence of the support of DTE the Mount Oak community limped on during the first half of the 1980s. The purchase of the property was finalised in late 1980 after nearly three years of delay in getting the title transferred from crown lease to freehold. At the time Cairns heralded the purchase, describing Mount Oak as

the only free land in Australia... [it] is to be the site of a multi-cultural, cooperative demonstration project in participatory democracy - a future oriented development of alternative, post-industrial lifestyles... in search of working models for a new society where appropriate and advanced technology is used with ecological and social conscience.³⁹

These grand words belied the reality that his vision for Mount Oak was dying. Despite some painstaking progress towards regeneration of the land through tree planting and the installation of an irrigation system, the property continued to support less than a dozen permanent settlers who eked out a living by relying on unemployment benefits and the proceeds from sales of vegetables and eggs at nearby markets.⁴⁰ Cairns' original pledge that the property title would be held by a collective trust had been shelved. Instead on purchase the title was vested in Research for Survival Pty Ltd, a company set up by Cairns in April 1976. Apart from a Canberra solicitor, Kevin Rogers, Cairns was the sole director and shareholder of Research for Survival.⁴¹ Hence, he effectively owned Mount Oak.

The legal difficulties involved in placing the title in a trust was one reason for this change in plan, but more important was the record of conflict which had plagued Mount Oak since its earliest days. In November 1985, Cairns claimed to have spent numerous hours 'trying to resolve differences' at the property but 'from the beginning some people have tried to gain control'. He had maintained 'ownership of the land to ensure it remains free and open to people of all kinds'.⁴² Predictably, not everyone was convinced

by this explanation. Among some of the Mount Oak settlers and within the broader counter culture, widespread cynicism was voiced at Cairns' decision to renege on his promise to have the ownership of the property vested in a trust. In the counter culture press there were sporadic attacks on Cairns over the issue in the first half of the 1980s but attempts at a resolution got nowhere. Cairns' most vocal critic among the Mount Oak residents, Barrie Griffiths, subsequently alleged those attempts shrivelled 'in the face of intimidation and other methods by Cairns and the Morosis'.⁴³

In the first half of 1985 the intrigue and animosity surrounding Mount Oak deepened. Ross Morton, one of the original settlers on the property, left to join the Wyuna community. Wyuna was a Canberra-based co-operative which had gradually evolved in the early 1980s. Junie Morosi's sister, Bernadette, was the registered office-holder of Wyuna, and several other Morosi family members were among the approximately 30 adults and children who made up the co-operative. Morosi, Ditchburn and Cairns did not formally belong to the community though Cairns was cited in Wyuna literature as the co-operative's 'inspiration and catalyst'. Morton had kept a diary which, as Wendy Bacon later reported in an article on the Mount Oak dispute in the *National Times*, documented 'an unrelenting and intimidating campaign' by four of the residents 'to drive others off the property'. The four residents were Griffiths, Michael Conway, Margaret McLean and another woman named Uta. The plot thickened still further on 28 May when the Wyuna Cooperative and Junie Morosi were allotted shares in Research for Survival.⁴⁴ Putting the best possible construction on this decision, Cairns may have hoped that allocating Wyuna an interest in Mount Oak would help breathe new life into the moribund settlement. As well, he may have seen it as a way of breaking the control of the aforementioned group who were purportedly intent on excluding others from the property. Even so, it hardened the perception that, contrary to the original ideals of Mount Oak in which ownership was to accord no right of power or control over the property, Cairns was doing with the land as he pleased.

In early October 1985 violence erupted at Mount Oak between some of the settlers and members of the Wyuna community. This development appeared to have been precipitated by Wyuna's occupation of one of the houses on the property though, like so much else to do with Mount Oak, its exact trigger was clouded by a welter of accusations and counter accusations between the opposing groups.⁴⁵ Police called to investigate the violence elected not to press charges, but a total of 18 private prosecutions were subsequently launched as a result of the incidents.⁴⁶ News of the deteriorating situation at Mount Oak quickly circulated within the counter culture. *Nimbin News* published a letter from a member of Wyuna, James Conlon, who asked why those living at Mount Oak were 'resisting the attempts of other people to move on to and share (not control) the land with them'. For the most part, however, coverage of the dispute in the counter culture press was hostile to Wyuna and to Cairns. An article by 'Ian' in *Down to Earth News* in December 1985 was typical, concluding that the episode was a 'warning to those of us who would succumb to the doublespeak of "alternative" gurus like Cairns'.⁴⁷

The outbreak of violence at Mount Oak also attracted the attention of the *Canberra Times*. On 2 November it ran a front page story on the issue based on interviews with Griffiths and Conway which depicted the residents as the hapless victims of bullying tactics by Cairns and Wyuna. Cairns responded with a written statement published two days later. He vehemently denied that pressure had been exerted on anyone to leave Mount Oak. It was Griffiths, Conway and McLean, he insisted, who were trying to control the property and who had 'declared war' on him. During the

following weeks Cairns and Griffiths slugged it out in the pages of the *Canberra Times*. The principal issue of contention concerned the financial contributions to Mount Oak. According to Cairns, apart from one large contribution of around \$32,000 from a young man named Alex Eunson (he had later left Mount Oak disillusioned to join a spiritual sect), donations towards the purchase of the property had been less than \$1000. Cairns had taken out and serviced a \$30,000 loan, as well as having invested \$6000 to put down a bore on the land. Furthermore, he asserted that Griffiths, Conway et al had contributed nothing to the purchase of the property 'nor have they paid one cent to live there'. Griffiths labelled Cairns' statements as 'outrageous' and claimed to be in possession of a tape recording of a 1979 meeting at which Cairns had read out a long list of donations. Although conceding he did not know the precise total of those donations because Cairns had kept the information 'secret', Griffiths was certain that (including Eunson's contribution) the sum exceeded \$40,000. In addition, he argued that the improvements to the land made by those living and working on it amounted to over \$35,000 and the value of their labour was considerably more.⁴⁸

Perhaps the safest conclusion to be drawn from these conflicting claims is that neither Cairns nor Griffiths could boast a monopoly of truth. The fact that Eunson had invested over \$30,000 and Cairns had obtained a loan for \$30,000 to purchase a \$60,000 property suggests that the total of the other donations was negligible. But this is not to deny that Griffiths and the others may have made a substantial input to improving the value of Mount Oak. In normal legal terms those improvements probably afforded them no claim to the land. Yet Mount Oak was not supposed to be bound by standard capitalist legal conventions. It had been conceived as free land in which ownership was to carry no rights, decision-making the preserve of the community on a basis of self-regulation and self-determination. If, however, as Cairns and Wyuna alleged, Griffiths et al were intent on holding the land for themselves to the exclusion of others, then this was behaviour hardly consistent with the principles of Mount Oak.

Putting aside the questions of right and wrong in the dispute, the tragic irony is that the dream of free land and of building a model of cooperation for the rest of society had been reduced to an ugly squabble over ownership and control. In January 1986 the battle over Mount Oak moved to the courts. Research for Survival launched legal proceedings in the New South Wales Supreme Court to evict Griffiths and the other three from the property. They retaliated with a counter claim against the company.⁴⁹ In 1991, with the litigation still unresolved, Cairns decided to wind up Research for Survival and a liquidator was appointed. In effect, Cairns had elected to wash his hands of the whole sorry affair and cut his losses. Morosi observes that he could no longer 'take it'. By 1996 the process of liquidation was in its final stages.⁵⁰ The title of Mount Oak remained formally vested in Research for Survival but Cairns, who had not set foot on the property for over a decade, professed to have no idea what was 'happening there and I'm not interested'.⁵¹

Thus Cairns' communal experiment had ended in conflict and disillusion. The forces that had undermined Mount Oak, not least the unrealistic expectations which had been attached to it, its sheer impracticality and lack of external support, had been complicit in the failure of many earlier utopian schemes. Cairns' involvement with the counter culture had also thrown up a more specific problem, that is, the incompatibility between the movement's libertarian impulse and the sense of common purpose necessary to make such an experiment work. That libertarianism and corresponding self-absorption is perhaps a clue, in addition, to the failure of the 1970s counter culture movement to have a more significant and lasting social impact. The vagaries of human nature had,

of course, played their part in the unfortunate turn of events at Mount Oak. In 1899 when William Lane abandoned Paraguay after several years of fruitless struggle to build a socialist settlement his faith in humanity was broken. He had come to the painful conclusion that 'there was no more truth in the theory of man's innate goodness, than there was in theories of original sin'. The dream of a new social order for a new century dashed, Lane renounced his socialist convictions. Indeed, his final working years until his death in 1917 were spent in New Zealand propagating pro-imperialist ideas.⁵² By contrast, Cairns' faith in the perfectibility of individuals and society has proved more durable. For him, the break with the counter culture and the disappointment of Mount Oak were merely confirmation of the need to address human behaviour at its source. The unrewarding detour into utopianism therefore was not to provide a route back to the mainstream but rather the impetus for continued research in the field of what he describes as human relations. In his most recent, and perhaps last, book, *Reshaping the Future* (1997), Cairns confidently predicts that the 21st century is to witness 'the most significant and liberating change in human history'. This transformation will usher in an epoch of 'limitless potential' for humanity.⁵³ Utopia, it would seem, has not been lost, just postponed to the new millennium.

Endnotes

- 1 For a brief summary of the historiography which has been generated by Lane and the New Australia settlement see Frank Bongiorno's entry on Lane in Graeme Davison, John Hirst and Stuart Macintyre (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Australian History*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1998, p.376. One surprising omission from Bongiorno's survey is Grant Hannan, 'William Lane and the New Australia Movement, MA thesis, University of Queensland, 1966.
- 2 In the case of Lane, it has been conventionally argued that the final disillusionment with Labor politics was the 1892 passage of legislation in Queensland to extend the term of Melanesian labour trade in that colony. See, for example, Hannan, pp.84-6 and Verity Burgmann, *In Our Time: Socialism and the Rise of Labor, 1885-1905*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1985, pp.24-5. However, more recently John Kellest has asserted that Lane's exodus was less a response to disillusionment suffered in Australia than a natural culmination of his 'place in a long and consistent utopian socialist tradition'. John Kellest, 'William Lane and "New Australia": a Reassessment', *Labour History*, no.72, May 1997, pp.1-18.
- 3 This analysis draws on the author's doctoral thesis, Paul Strangio, 'Keeper of the Faith': Jim Cairns and the Search for a Good Society', PhD thesis, Deakin University, 1997.
- 4 Cairns interviewed by Paul Ormonde, 15 August 1976 and December 1976.
- 5 A copy of the undated circular is contained in the National Library of Australia (NLA), Tom Uren Papers, MS6055/24/25. Also see J.F. Cairns, *The Theory of the Alternative*, self-published, Canberra, 1976.
- 6 *Canberra Times*, 6 December 1976.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 16 September 1976; Cairns interviewed by Ormonde, December 1976, and by the author, 18 November 1996. Cairns told the *Australian*, 3 November 1976, that the venue's beauty would be enhanced by a full moon concurrent with the Confest.
- 8 Cairns interviewed by the author, 18 November 1996.
- 9 *Ibid.*; *Canberra Times*, 9 December 1976.
- 10 *Canberra Times*, 11 December 1976.
- 11 Cairns interviewed by the author, 29 November 1994.
- 12 Cairns interviewed by Ormonde, December 1976. Also refer to J.F. Cairns, *Growth to Freedom*, Down to Earth Foundation, Canberra, 1979, p.82.
- 13 *Nation Review*, 30 December 1976-5 January 1977; *Canberra Times*, 11 December 1976.
- 14 *Canberra Times*, 15 December 1976.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 *Down to Earth News*, no.37, September 1987, p.2.
- 17 George Schmidt interviewed by the author, 12 November 1996.
- 18 *Melbourne Herald*, 11 December 1976; *Nation Review*, 30 December 1976-5 January 1977.
- 19 A copy of the statement is located in the NLA, Uren Papers, MS6055/19/1.
- 20 *Melbourne Herald*, 11 August 1977; *Canberra Times*, 12 August 1977.
- 21 *Canberra Times*, 12 August 1977.
- 22 Cairns interviewed by the author, 18 November 1996. This description of Mount Oak is largely drawn from that provided by one of the original alternative lifestyle settlers on the property, Ross Morton, in *Down to Earth News*, no.8, 31 May 1979, pp.31-2.
- 23 Warden thought that the harsh conditions at Bredbo had encouraged a greater authenticity than at Cotter River. There 'are few total pseudos involved', he wrote. *Canberra Times*, 27 December 1977.
- 24 This is based on Steve Kelly's account of the Bredbo Confest, 'I don't want to work on Junie's farm no more', *Nation Review*, 12-18 January 1978.
- 25 *Nimbin News*, no.64, 23 April 1979, p.8.
- 26 *Nation Review*, 12-18 January 1978.
- 27 *Ibid.*; Schmidt interviewed by the author, 12 November 1996.
- 28 Schmidt interviewed by the author, 12 November 1996.
- 29 *National Times*, 12 May 1979.
- 30 Schmidt interviewed by the author, 12 November 1996.
- 31 Cairns interviewed by the author, 29 November 1994. It was not completely true that there was no interest at Bredbo in wider social issues. On 30 December Cairns and several hundred Confest participants travelled to Canberra where they staged a colourful anti-uranium demonstration. See the *Age*, 31 December 1977.
- 32 Cairns interviewed by the author, 29 November 1994. *Down to Earth News* later reported that over half of the participants at Bredbo failed to pay the registration fee. *Down to Earth News*, no.8, 31 May 1979, p.4.
- 33 *Nation Review*, 12-18 January 1978. This is also based on Schmidt interviewed by the author, 12 November 1996.
- 34 From a recording of Cairns' speech as quoted in Wendy Bacon, As the dreams fade, the battle for Bredbo begins', *National Times*, 31 January-6 February 1986.
- 35 *Down to Earth News*, no.2, April 1978, pp.5-6.
- 36 *Ibid.*, no.8, 31 May 1979, pp.31-2. Details of Mount Oak's purchase are based on *ibid.*, no.10, 31 July 1979, pp.11-2 and *Nimbin News*, no.31, 4 September 1978, pp.11-2.
- 37 *Nimbin News*, no.73, 25 June 1979, p.1. Also see *Down to Earth News*, no.8, 31 May 1979, pp.3-6.
- 38 *Down to Earth News*, no.10, 31 July 1979, p.11.
- 39 *Nimbin News*, no.139, 1 December 1980, p.4.
- 40 *Canberra Times*, 2 November 1985.
- 41 A company search conducted through the Australian Securities Commission (ASC) in December 1996 showed that Research for Survival Pty Ltd was registered on 21 April 1976. Its principal activity was listed as agistment. Also refer to the *Canberra Times*, 5 November 1985.
- 42 *Canberra Times*, 4 November 1985. This is also based on Cairns interviewed by the author, 18 November 1996.
- 43 *Nimbin News*, November 1985. For an example of the attacks on Cairns in the counter culture press over Mount Oak see Lisa Samuels, 'Cairns' "free land" vision dies in the Bredbo dust', *Down to Earth News*, July-August 1982, p.4.

- 44 *National Times*, 31 January-6 February 1986; *Canberra Times*, 2 November and 5 November 1985. Cairns became embroiled in another controversy in 1985 when the Hawke Government conducted an inquiry into a housing grant to the Wyuna community. For these and other details concerning Wyuna refer to Strangio, pp.491-2 and 503-7.
- 45 See, for instance, Barrie Griffith's press release, 9 October 1985, in *Nimbin News*, November 1985, and a letter by a member of Wyuna, James Conlon, replying to Griffith's allegations in *ibid*, December 1985.
- 46 Among those charged with assault were Junie Morosi's brother, Mark Morosi, and two other members of Wyuna, together with three members of the Mount Oak community. When the charges came before a magistrate in Cooma the following July the bulk were either dropped or dismissed. However, Mark Morosi was convicted of four counts of assault and sentenced to three months gaol. *Canberra Times*, 16 July 1986.
- 47 *Nimbin News*, December 1985 (emphasis in the original); *Down to Earth News*, no.48, December 1985, p.5.
- 48 *Canberra Times*, 2 November, 4-5 November, 9 November and 25 November 1985. Also see the *National Times*, 31 January-6 February 1986.
- 49 *National Times*, 31 January-6 February 1986. Also refer to *Nimbin News*, vol.9, no.1, March 1986, p.17.
- 50 According to the ASC's records a liquidator was appointed to Research for Survival in July 1991. This is also based on Cairns interviewed by the author, 18 November 1996; Junie Morosi interviewed by the author, 15 June 1996; and the author's notes of a telephone conversation with Morosi, 25 November 1996.
- 51 Cairns interviewed by the author, 18 November 1996. A titles search conducted through the New South Wales Land Titles Office in November 1996 showed that Research for Survival was still the registered proprietor of Mount Oak. However, in an interview with the author, 12 November 1996, George Schmidt asserted that the legal proceedings had been finalised in favour of the Mount Oak settlers. On the other hand, in a telephone conversation with the author, 25 November 1996, Junie Morosi maintained that the legal status of Mount Oak remained unresolved. Attempts to clarify this situation have been unsuccessful. The author's written enquiries to the Mount Oak community have remained unanswered, apart from a brief phone call from an unidentified community member on 27 May 1997. An attempt to gain access to records of the relevant court proceedings in the New South Wales Supreme Court was also unfruitful.
- 52 Hannan, p.190; Gavin Souter, 'William Lane' in Bede Nairn and Geoffrey Serle (eds), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol.9, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1983, pp.658-9.
- 53 J.F. Cairns, *Reshaping the Future*, self-published, Narre Warren East, 1997, p.198.