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Abstract
Full text of issue.

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Kunapipi is a tri-annual arts magazine with special but not exclusive emphasis on the new literatures written in English. It aims to fulfil the requirements T.S. Eliot believed a journal should have: to introduce the work of new or little known writers of talent, to provide critical evaluation of the work of living authors, both famous and unknown, and to be truly international. It publishes creative material and criticism. Articles and reviews on related historical and sociological topics plus film will also be included as well as graphics and photographs.

The journal is the bulletin for the European branch of the Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies. As such it offers information about courses, conferences, visiting scholars and writers, scholarships, and literary competitions.

The editor invites creative and scholarly contributions. Manuscripts should be double-spaced with footnotes gathered at the end, should conform to the MHRA (Modern Humanities Research Association) Style Sheet, and should be accompanied by a return envelope.

All correspondence — manuscripts, books for review, inquiries — should be sent to:

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COVER: Passenger ship leaving Sydney. (Courtesy of the Mitchell Library, Sydney.)

Kunapipi refers to the Australian aboriginal myth of the Rainbow Serpent which is the symbol both of creativity and regeneration. The journal's emblem is to be found on an aboriginal shield from the Roper River area of the Northern Territory in Australia.
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Maybe It’s Because I’m a Londoner

The cold became intense. In the main street, at the corner of the court, some labourers were repairing the gas pipes, and had lighted a great fire in a brazier, round which a party of ragged men and boys were gathered: warming their hands and winking their eyes before the blaze in rapture. The water-plug being left in solitude, its overflows sullenly congealed, and turned to misanthropic ice. The brightness of the shops, where holly sprigs and berries crackled in the lamp heat of the windows, made pale faces ruddy as they passed. Poulterers’ and grocers’ trades became a splendid joke...

Charles Dickens, A Christmas Carol

‘So much for the Lascar manager. Now for the sinister cripple who lives upon the second floor of the opium den, and who was certainly the last human being whose eyes rested upon Neville St. Clair.’

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Adventures of Sherlock Holmes

I saw the Chinaman with the branded forehead, and remembering what Fomalhaut had told me, I decided that this man could be no other than the chief of the Gang.

Frank H. Shaw, The Brand of Mystery (Chums, 1920)

London, in my earliest days, came to me always as a set of images by night.

It was a night more thrillingly cold and vast than any in Tasmania, congested with huge, grimy buildings of ineffable importance, and with grimly hurrying people whose concerns were those of a metropolitan Valhalla. It was half fearsome, its alleys the haunt of blackjack-wielding thugs and of various grotesques: hunchbacks, criminal cripples and deformed beggars. The sirens of ships sounded alarmingly from the Pool of London. And yet it had pockets of warmth and enviable snugness, glowing through the fog: gas lamps flaring beside old doorways of worm-eaten wood; candles in attic windows above inn yards, staining the thick northern air with yellow. In rooms where great fires blazed in open fireplaces that were larger and more efficient than ours, men in dinner suits gave low-voiced directions for the running of the world. Mister Pickwick had warmed his coat-tails before such fires; Christopher Robin was made
cosy by them, safe in his nursery; and boys much more worldly-wise than my brother and I toasted sausages and muffins over the coals. Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson, hurrying through pea-soupers to their rooms in Baker Street, could always be confident that a blazing fire awaited them.

This unique British snugness in things — an aspect of the imperial ability to tame a naughty world — was readily and vicariously shared in the freezing Hobart winters of my childhood. And other, more disturbing flames flickered in our imaginations in those days: the bonfires lit by the Blitz. The fires of London, snug or apocalyptic, glowed at the distant centre of our universe, since London was the City: the capital of the world. There was no other city that mattered; Melbourne and Sydney were mere towns, and New York was rumoured to be a brash monstrosity. London was both the city of cities, and the all-wise, half-forbidding Friend.

All this began earlier than I can remember. My Grandfather Hurburgh, in those infant years before I could read, used to take the old Strand Magazine, where Sherlock Holmes had still been making his appearance not so many years before. On its cover was a picture of the famous street, and this is my most ancient and central memory of London. I somehow saw my Tasmanian grandfather — who had never been farther than Sydney, but whose own grandfather had come from Greenwich — as a Londoner; once, I believed, he had walked the Strand itself, in his gleaming black shoes, as all heroes of the city must do. Its deep and splendid channel, crowded with shining cars and god-like city people, was the thoroughfare of destiny we all must some day tread, to pass beneath its porticoes and pinnacles of filigreed stone. And very early too — so early that it has become like a memory of my own past — I followed Ebenezer Scrooge to that ‘gloomy suite of rooms, in a lowering pile of buildings up a yard’ where Marley’s ghost awaited him.

Like many another child of the Empire in the ‘thirties, I had been named after Christopher Robin; When We Were Very Young had been read to me when I was three. My brother and I had Dickens read to us when we were seven and nine years old, and Oliver Twist and Pip and Little Nell and Mr Bumble were famous figures we might some day meet: our parents and relatives spoke of them as though they were real, and I can still see my mother pursing her lips over Uriah Heep. Give us a child until the age of seven. It wasn’t the Jesuits who had us until that age, it was Christopher Robin, Buckingham Palace, Little Pig Robinson, Mr Toad, Sherlock Holmes, and a school called Clemes College. Our teachers
made us keep scrapbooks on the doings of ‘the little princesses’, Elizabeth and Margaret Rose. What chance did we have?

Clemes College was a decaying private school where our father and his brother had gone, housed in a musing nineteenth-century building with French windows leading from the kindergarten room onto an antique sandstone terrace, surrounded by English gardens in which stone urns gathered English moss. It was run by old, vague, white-moustached Mr Clemes, who was English, and by a staff of English maiden ladies who smiled a lot but who displayed sadistic tendencies, setting about us with rulers, and watching with gleaming eyes as big boys tortured smaller ones in the playground. These ladies read us Alice in Wonderland and The Jungle Book and, pointing to a globe of the world in the corner of the classroom, showed us how red was the dominant colour on the map, a pattern ending at the bottom with the little red shield of Tasmania. We were left in no doubt of what we were and where we were; being Australians was secondary, and at the top of the map, in the south of that dragon-shaped island we had never seen, the great web of London waited for us to come to it.

My earliest expeditions through London were made in the pages of Chums: an ancient British boys’ paper which finally expired in the early years of my childhood, before the Second World War. I had inherited the Chums Annual for 1920 from my cheerful Uncle Gordon, who had owned it when he was my age, and who would be off next year to New Guinea in the AIF, to fight the Japanese. ‘Some of those stories’ll give you the ding-bats,’ he warned me, and I thrilled in anticipation of being terrified. I was not to be disappointed: a pirate story called ‘The Night Rovers’ was to petrify me as no literary work has done since:

*It sounded quite loud, for one of the small panes was broken, and I counted thirteen taps. Then they ceased, and a most horrible chuckle ended with a low whistle.*

‘*Thirteen!* breathed a voice that made me shiver. ‘That was your number, Cutías, when we drew lots. And mine was seven. Thirty years agone on the Spanish Main…’*

Boys must have read more in the 1920s, I decided, as I gloated over the sheer size and weight of this big red book — understanding for the first time the full, pregnant meaning of the word ‘volume’. It was actually a bound collection of weekly papers, giving off a delicate scent of age: the antiquity that was twenty-one years ago. Each yellowing newsprint page contained three columns of tiny type, with old-fashioned headings; black and white illustrations occurred, but they did little to interrupt the marvellous, almost limitless fields of print. This book, I saw immedi-
ately, would take years to exhaust, and I was right; when my uncle came back safe from the war, whistling around the house in his jungle greens, there were still stories in Chums I hadn’t read.

At nine and ten years old, one of life’s chief ecstasies was to sit up in bed on a winter’s night with Chums propped on my knees, a cup of cocoa in my hand, the westerly wind rushing in the big pine tree next door, rain drumming on the iron roof of the sunroom my brother and I shared as a bedroom. Of course, as we now know, such papers were tainted with the quaint and objectionable prejudices and myths of their era. Hearty xenophobia, as well as a mystical devotion to the British Empire, were confidently expected of their boy readers; but I knew little then about the ramifications of such things. My friends and I took it for granted that Chinese were sinister, and called ‘Chinamen’; that the only good savages in ‘the heart of Africa’ were those who devotedly served clean-living young English Bwanas; that Dutchmen (the Boer War having left its mark), were treacherous. I tended to skip the self-improvement and athletic articles (‘Boxing for Boys’), and to concentrate on the serials, many of them written by men with military titles (Captain Oswald Dallas; Major Charles Gilson). There were pirate stories, heart-of-Africa stories, Canadian-backwoods stories; but dominating everything, and fascinating me most, were stories whose background was the city of London.

In the year that Chums came into my hands, London was enduring the Blitz, and we thought of the city now with a protective concern. As I sat up in bed reading The Night Rovers, bombs were hitting Westminster Abbey, the houses of Parliament, and the Wren churches we sang about in Oranges and Lemons in the Clemes College playground. Images of all this came to us through photographs and the cinema, the dome of St Paul’s glowing inviolate at the centre of destruction, ringed by defiant searchlights and anti-aircraft guns. We never doubted in Tasmania that London would win; never doubted that the Spitfires would triumph over the Messerschmitts and the Junkers 88s. We listened with a lump in our throats to the unperturbed, paternal voice of the BBC announcer speaking from the heart of fire and terror, on the late-night broadcast carried by the ABC. ‘This is London calling.’ It was a voice made to waver only by the fluctuations of short wave, and by the global distance that separated us from our capital. The droning of the German bombers filled our heads as though they were only miles off; by 1942 our own windows were covered with blackout blinds, and air-raid practice at night made the war come even closer. Sirens brayed and searchlights swept across the sunroom windows as we waited for an invasion by imperial Japan. Our
fate now depended on America, and on a straggling line of Australians in slouch hats (Uncle Gordon among them), on the Kokoda Trail; but it also depended on the war in Europe. Tasmanians flew in the Stirlings and Halifaxes that bombed the Ruhr.

Those who have not been subjects of a global empire, who have not been made aware from infancy of what were then called ‘ties of blood’, will never understand these far-off things. No English man or woman will ever be able to experience what a colonial Australian or New Zealander of British or part-British descent felt about England. We were subjects of no mortal country; hidden in our unconscious was a kingdom of Faery: a Britain that could never exist outside the pages of Hardy, Kenneth Grahame, Dickens and Beatrix Potter; and yet it was a country we confidently set out to discover. We sailed, as soon as we reached our twenties, for isles of the Hesperides we never doubted were real. What no native of the ‘mother country’ could ever understand — what no-one but overseas children of the Empire could ever experience, in fact — was the unique emotion summoned up by the first sight of a country known at one remove from birth, and waited for as an adolescent waits for love. We really did stare at the white cliffs of Dover with beating hearts; we really did survey London (familiar yet unfamiliar, in a dreamlike, paradoxical mix), with a surge of intoxication. This quickly wore off, as the cold realities of bedsitters and jobs descended on us; but nothing could rob us of those first hours and weeks.

These are archaic emotions, now. No doubt citizens of the imperial Roman possessions once experienced them, on coming into Rome for the first time. Possibly they will never be felt again. But those who dismiss them as a sentimental absurdity have no conception of their intensity, and fail to understand the central convictions and fantasies that history can brew up, shaking whole generations with their poignancy; making them willing to die for such fancies. Afterwards, as a joke, they are made to be merely quaint.

For me, the London of fancy became the London of fact at the age of twenty-two; and my entry was made via the Strand. Robert Brain and I, penniless after hitch-hiking about Europe, had landed in England at Harwich, having come across by ferry from the Hook of Holland. We caught the train to London, and entered the tube system, to emerge into the city’s open air at Charing Cross Station.

Here was the Strand, then, on a fine summer’s morning, carrying its human streams towards the Aldwych, St Clement Danes and the Inns of
Court and Chancery where Dickens’s Lord High Chancellor had sat at the heart of the fog, and no doubt sat still. Here were men actually wearing black morning-coats, pin-striped trousers and bowler hats, wielding furled umbrellas, whom we examined with joy, until one of them glared at us. Here was a real copy of The Times bought from an actual, cloth-capped Cockney at the entrance of the station, who called Robert ‘Guv’nor’. A man passed us now clad in a suit of green silk, wearing a green top hat and talking to himself. He was an unusual sight to young Tasmanians in 1955, but no-one else in the crowd even glanced at him: here was the famous British tolerance of eccentricity. We entered Forte’s café across the road, where we drank without complaint a grey liquid called coffee which was certainly not coffee; then, in a daze of delight, we wandered on under the promised porticoes and pinnacles of filigreed stone. There was Villiers Street, running down to the Embankment, where we might well have to sleep out, we knew, if we didn’t find jobs immediately. And here, reassuringly, was Tasmania House, where we went in to the desk and found our mail awaiting us. This was our club, and London was already our home.

But if it was home, it was a stern and tight-fisted one. For the first time, we understood our good fortune simply in being born Australian. Post-war Australia was carefree and prosperous; post-war Britain was grim and poor; these facts were soon borne in on us, as we contemplated weekly wages which at home would barely have satisfied us as pocket money, and nearly half of which would be needed to rent a single bedsitting-room. London was still marked by the Blitz: war-damaged buildings were being repaired, and flowers grew on the gaping bomb-sites. An air of austerity persisted, and people had the manner of cheerfulness in adversity: that style we had become familiar with in wartime British films. Faced with these realities, we soon separated. Robert landed a job in one of the counties, teaching in a summer school; and I found myself alone in London.

At that time, the new Welfare State didn’t pay unemployment benefits which made survival possible; nor did one think of applying for them. I must quickly find work or starve; I had five pounds borrowed from Robert to stave off that eventuality, and my search began. Tramping the streets, gazing up at lighted windows in Charing Cross Road, Piccadilly and the Bayswater Road, peering through the doorways of buildings whose intimidating neo-Greek facades forbade entry to any shabby young colonial, I began to understand what the American writer Thomas Wolfe had discovered here before me: that there were two races in England, the Big People and the Little People.
These were the days before large-scale immigration from India and the West Indies, and the island's two indigenous races were very clearly recognisable; I was seeing, although I didn't know it, the last of the frozen old England which the post-imperial era was dissolving. The Big People, who ate in restaurants in Mayfair and Soho where the prices terrified me, were conveyed past in Jaguars and Rovers and Rolls Royces, and lived in another London than the one I was discovering. My London was the London of the tiny bedsitter in Bayswater or Earl's Court or Notting Hill Gate, with its gas-ring for cooking, gas-box to pay coins into, aged washbasin and shared, freezing bathroom down the passage. 'Your bath will be on Tuesdays and Thursdays,' my first landlady informed me. 'Mr Drummond has his on Mondays and Wednesdays', and Miss Appleby has hers the other days.' My London was the London of the cheap caf., with sausages, eggs and chips for two-and-sixpence, and tea for fourpence. It was a London whose streets were the grey of old overcoats, its buildings of that liver-coloured brick whose hue seems the essence of despair; the districts of Little Dorrit:

Wilderness of corner houses, with barbarous old porticoes and appurtenances, horrors that came into existence under some wrong-headed person in some wrong-headed time. . . . Ricketty dwellings . . . like the last results of the great mansions breeding in — and — in...

This London, into which I was descending like so many other young Australians, was the London of the Little People: Cockneys and working-class Londoners who received us with the friendliness of fellow-spirits. Cockneys in particular assumed that an Australian was a sort of lost tribal brother, and one felt that this was so. The Little People existed with few creature comforts, keeping their clothes neat and maintaining an unaccountable jauntiness. They didn't own the houses they lived in; they had no cars; they could afford no holidays, except for a few days at Brighton; their only pleasures were a few pints of bitter in the evenings and a seat in the cinema or the music hall once a week. And this life was soon to be mine.

The interview for my first job held a promise of glamour. It was conducted by a pretty young employment officer at Lyons' Corner House, where I had applied to wash dishes. She spoke in the accents of the Big People. 'Hev you ever appeared before the public?'

No, I said cautiously, I hadn't.

'Do you maind appearing before the public?'

No, I didn't mind; and I was issued with the grey, vaguely Cossack jacket which was the required uniform of a Lyons' waiter, and sent out
on the floor to what was called a 'station'. This was a block of tables which it was my duty to keep cleared of dirty crockery, and where my other task was to pour tea and coffee for the customers. The kitchen, reached through swinging doors, was a tiled ante-chamber to Hell; here I fought through a line of other snarling waiters to keep my coffee and tea pots filled at the huge, hissing urns. But outside, on the red-carpeted floor, all was grandeur.

Lyons' Corner House at the corner of Tottenham Court Road and Oxford Street, long vanished, was really just a big self-service restaurant. But it provided elegance; it was a place where the Little People could pretend to be Big People, helped by the fact that after they had queued for their meals, their tea and coffee were poured for them by waitresses, or by uniformed men such as myself. A big Hammond organ was played by a man in a dinner jacket in the afternoons, and the whole scene was patrolled by a species of floor-walker: men in frock coats and striped trousers who were our immediate superiors, and who kept us up to the mark. They too, I realised from their accents, were technically Little People, but they were physically large and martial-looking and had an air of haughty menace that was very intimidating, lining us up each morning for a military inspection.

'Koch, your uniform's filthy. Get a fresh one.'
'Sir.'

I earned five pounds a week, and my bedsitter in Notting Hill Gate cost three; it was not really enough to survive, but on Friday, which was pay-day, Lyons' allowed us a free meal. I had worked out that by Thursday I could usually afford either to eat or to smoke; being addicted to cigarettes then, I chose to smoke. Lying in bed on a Thursday night, my stomach rumbling, dragging deeply on a Woodbine (the cheap fag of the Little People), I would think about the free meal in the kitchen next day, which included nauseating cream cakes. Like many of the Little People, I allowed myself a half-pint of bitter in the pub in the evening, a picture show a week, and ten cigarettes a day; these pleasures being digested with miserly care. I should have been miserable, but I wasn't; a vast elation would seize me at unexpected moments. My love affair with the real London had begun.

I had begun to comprehend that this city of cities, despite its grim facades and its penny-pinching and its beggars, was strangely gentle. The gold light of October fell on sooty, golden stone, and on a hundred gently-frowning little church spires, and I began to understand too what every newcomer here learned: that it was really a set of villages, and that one of its great virtues was a fond, village cheerfulness. Cockney bus con-
ductors impersonated comedians on the double-deckers that took me along Oxford Street in the mornings; motherly women in shops called me ‘dear’, and I saw that people smiled at each other far more than they did in any Australian city. One Sunday morning in that autumn, I was woken in my bed in Ladbroke Square by the sound of a tune, floating through the window from the street below: *Maybe it’s because I’m a Londoner.*

*I get that funny feeling inside of me*  
*Just walking up and down.*  
*Maybe it’s because I’m a Londoner*  
*That I love London town.*

I knew who was playing it: a group of street musicians I’d often seen trudging along the kerb in the Bayswater Road: a one-armed, straw-haired trumpeter; an old accordionist with a black Homburg hat; a thin violinist in a long muffler. I had heard this ballad in an earlier life, it seemed to me, and I knew, in my Sunday bed, that in some way I already belonged to the London of my ancestors, and would do so forever.

I had now begun to make friends. My first friends were two show-business men down on their luck: Derek, a Canadian tap-dancer working with me in Lyons, and his friend Buddy, a New Zealand accordionist. They shared a shabby double room in Camden Town, home of Bob Cratchit, where Buddy would cook us elaborate Sunday roasts. Later I would make English friends, but for now, we three outcasts from the old Dominions wandered about London in our time off, sharing our loneliness. Derek and Buddy, I came to realise, had no friends other than me.

‘They’ll never let you into their homes,’ Buddy told me, discussing the English. ‘Never. Just realise that from the start.’ A bald, stout old man of around sixty, always in a brown felt hat, he had a high, chanting voice and a dolefully dogmatic air, and was very bitter against the world. He was now working on a counter in an Oxford Street department store; it had been some years, I gathered, since he had played his accordion around the music halls, and I suspected that he would never be hired again. He put his troubles down to corrupt theatrical agents who refused to book him.

‘Those bloody agents,’ he would say. ‘They take bribes. They work their favourites into the halls, and leave better performers to starve. If I could shoot them all, I would; every one of the greasy bastards. The barrel of my rifle would be running hot, and still I’d be blazing away.’ His mouth worked, as he stared into vistas of carnage.
‘Now Buddy,’ Derek would say soothingly. ‘You’re just workin’ yourself up.’ He was a thin, pale, sweet-natured man in his thirties, with thin blond hair, who always referred to himself as ‘a hoofer’. He too hadn’t been hired for some time, and I wondered if he would ever hoof again.

Buddy and Derek introduced me to the music halls: one of the cheap pleasures that London then offered the Little People. For ninepence, we could go upstairs at Collins’ Music Hall or the old Finsbury Park Empire and watch jugglers, comedians, dancers, and vocalists like Dicky Valentine. Buddy and Derek would whisper professional comments in the dark, staring down at the lemon-lit stage from which they were exiled.

‘His voice is going. Straining it, you can tell.’
‘Without a mike, she’d be nothing. No power at all.’
‘Poor old bastard, his back’s giving him trouble. See that?’
‘Now there’s a lovely hoofer.’
‘Fifty, if he’s a day. Bribed the agent, I’ll bet.’
‘Now Buddy, don’t be bitter. You’ll only give yourself a heart condition.’

‘Agents. My barrel would be running hot.’
‘Buddy, please. We’re trying to hear the vocalist.’

I now found a job at a pound a week more, in the Hearts of Oak Insurance Company at Euston; and the last edges of the world of Dickens closed even more firmly about me.

At the Hearts of Oak, I found myself in a large room surrounded by glass offices, sitting at a long wooden table together with some eight or ten other men. Our job was addressing and sealing envelopes; we did nothing else. This was carried out with steel-nibbed pens, dipped into a set of common ink-wells. I eventually asked one of the supervisors why typewriters weren’t used, and he reacted with distaste. ‘The Hearts of Oak would never treat its customers like that. They expect the personal touch.’ What went into these envelopes, I discovered, were reminders that premiums were due.

We were supervised by a group of men who appeared, like their counterparts in Lyons’ Corner House, to be floor-walkers. They wore the same black morning coats and striped trousers, they were large and intimidating, walked with their hands behind their backs, and spoke in the accents of the Big People. They patrolled past our table at regular intervals, bringing us to order.

‘Mr Brown, that’s enough talking. Resume your work.’
‘Mr Koch, have you no more envelopes? Then why are you speaking to Mr Dempsey?’
What other functions these men had, and the true nature of their work, still remain a mystery to me. They disappeared for long periods, but were always hovering in the background, like suave crows.

On my first day, I made an error I was not to make again. Having collected a set of envelopes and a list of names to be copied from a man who sat at a desk on a sort of podium, I took them away, finished them in an hour, and brought them back to him.

‘What’s this?’ he said.

‘I’ve finished.’

He stared at me in weary disbelief. ‘Try to understand, Koch. That was your morning’s work.’

I understood. Going back to the table, I realised that I would have time here to loaf and invite my soul; even perhaps to tinker with a chapter of the first novel on which I was working at night. We were a happy band of men at that table, all quietly aware of the gift of leisure the Hearts of Oak was giving us — provided, like good children, we were not too noisy, and pretended to write when the supervisors came past. We did crosswords and the football pools; told each other the stories of our lives; discussed films we’d seen; told dirty jokes; debated politics and philosophy; and smoked our Woodbines — always bent over our envelopes, our pens describing writing motions. My chief friends were Bill Brown, an ex-tail-gunner who had flown many raids over Germany, and who now found civilian life boring, and Mr Dempsey, a little old Irish gentleman who had lost all his money.

Handsome, diminutive and gnomish, Mr Dempsey had a sweeping mane of white hair, a trim white moustache, brilliant blue eyes, and a patrician bearing that was probably quite unconscious. He dressed nearly always in a tweed suit of excellent quality which I suspected was the last of a stylish wardrobe. He was, he told me, nearly seventy, well past retiring age, but the Hearts of Oak had taken him on three years ago as a favour, when he lost the last of his assets. He preferred to work rather than draw the pension, on which he and his wife would have found it difficult to survive. Always perky, despite his descent in the world, he was full of extraordinary schemes for escaping the Hearts of Oak and making money. He formed a sort of grandfatherly fondness for me, and seemed to believe that he and I would carry out one of these schemes together. Perhaps it was just a game; but if it was, he never let on. His optimism was supernatural.

‘I’ve had a wonderful notion, my dear,’ he said one morning. ‘We’ll sell bicycles to the Americans. Bill here agrees it would work.’

This scheme, the details of which I’ve forgotten, occupied us for over a
week, with detailed plans and figures on Hearts of Oak stationery. When he got particularly excited, Dempsey would spring to his feet and quote from the poem which he said had provided the firm’s name, declaiming it at the top of his voice. ‘Hearts of oak, the Captain cried!’

A black-coated figure would loom up. ‘Mr Dempsey, what is the trouble?’

‘Sorry, sir — just loyally quoting the firm’s motto.’

When Dempsey discovered me to be an aspiring writer, furtively at work on a novel on the backs of premium forms, he became even more enthusiastic. ‘You must write down your impressions of England now, my dear, while they’re fresh. Young people like yourself from the Dominions see us with new eyes. You ought to get it down before it fades. Get it down.’ His insistence had a personal note; and over the weeks and months, I came to feel that he looked to me to fulfil some lost dream of his own.

His story was at first unbelievable to me. He came from a wealthy Anglo-Irish family, and over a lifetime — perhaps through wild schemes — had run through his entire inheritance. But he had no regrets, he said; he’d enjoyed his adventures, and now and then he gave me glimpses of life on the Riviera in the ‘thirties, where he had met his French wife. ‘The casinos were my downfall,’ he said quietly, dipping into the inkwell. ‘I lost a lot there. Well, well, easy come easy go, my dear, and we must be grateful to the Hearts of Oak for giving us our sustenance.’ He rose to his feet and raised his steel-nibbed pen on high. ‘Hearts of oak, the Captain cried!’

‘Mr Dempsey. These outbursts really must stop.’

‘Aye aye, sir. Just reciting the firm’s motto. We are all grateful to the firm.’

He had written his autobiography, he told me, which had been published some years ago by Hutchinson. He had been friends with Alexander Korda, and had put some money into a film of Korda’s, shot on the Black Sea. Secretly, I decided that these were the fantasies of a poor little old man who was merely a clerk; I even began to wonder if he had ever had any money. But one day he brought me a copy of the book he had written, published by Hutchinson, sure enough: and there, among others, was a photograph of a youthful Dempsey with Alexander Korda, on location on the Black Sea.

‘Yes, it’s all true,’ Bill Brown said to me disgustedly. ‘The mad little bastard ran through all his money. And now he’s ended up here. Serve him right; if I’d had that money I’d have bloody well hung on to it.’

But Mr Dempsey’s cheerfulness began now to seem to me heroic. He
loved poetry, and when I asked him whether he was ever downcast about his fate, he quoted Housman to me.

Be still, my soul, be still; the arms you bear are brittle,
Earth and high heaven are fixt of old and founded strong.
Think rather, — call to thought, if now you grieve a little,
The days when we had rest, O soul, for they were long.

‘That’s what I tell myself when unhappiness or discontent come upon me,’ he said, ‘and you should learn to do the same. Tell your soul to be still, and it will be. All bad things pass, my dear, just like all good things. They pass.’

Eventually Mr Dempsey invited me to visit him at home in the evening: to take tea and cakes and to meet his wife, at their flat in the Gray’s Inn Road. ‘I’ve spoken about you often to my wife,’ he said. ‘She greatly looks forward to meeting you. She doesn’t get about much; she’s not awfully strong. I have to make sure she takes care of herself; she’s all I have, my dear, we never had children — and we’re as much in love as we were when we first married. So you see, I’m very fortunate.’

The Dempseys lived just around the corner from Doughty Street, where Dickens’s house was. I discovered a tall, grey, four-storeyed terrace of intimidating gloom: a house from *Little Dorrit*. The Dempsey flat was reached by climbing three flights of steep, narrow stairs through semi-darkness, and proved to be simply a double room with a tiny kitchen and no bathroom. There were two frayed old armchairs of Genoa velvet; a cheap dining room table; a small, crowded bookshelf; a sagging double bed in a corner half disguised by cushions. The central light was weak and we sat in a brownish gloom, eating our cream cakes and buns and drinking our tea. I guessed that they’d spent more on the cakes than they could afford.

But the Dempseys were vivacious and happy, and plainly pleased to entertain me. Yvette Dempsey was much the same age as her husband, probably in her late sixties: frail and bird-like, with a thin face of faded French prettiness, her pale eyes just discernible behind tinted glasses. Her English was not good; it seemed they spoke French a good deal between themselves.

‘He speaks very much about you,’ she said. ‘He says you will become a real author. That is a brave thing to be. My husband has also written a book, did you know?’

They sat side by side, holding hands in their unperturbed poverty, and I saw that what Mr Dempsey had said was true: they were very much in love with each other. Glancing at a small side table set against the wall,
my eye was caught by a drawing in a frame, and when I peered at it, I became embarrassed: it was a sketch of Mr Dempsey I had done myself, on the back of a piece of Hearts of Oak stationery, whiling away time at the table. Mrs Dempsey smiled. 'It is such a good likeness,' she said. 'I had it framed.' But the crookedness and smeared paste told me that they had framed it themselves.

I visited the Dempseys perhaps twice more. Soon afterwards, I resigned from the Hearts of Oak, having found a more exalted and well-paid clerical job in the London office of BHP, the major Australian iron and steel corporation. The old gentleman in the glass office to whom I tendered my resignation surveyed me reproachfully. 'So it's a higher salary,' he said. 'BHP? Never heard of it. You may get more money from these fly-by-night organisations, but in the Hearts of Oak you'd have been secure for life.'

Mr Dempsey seemed very much affected when I left, and told me many times to keep in touch with him; to call on him and his wife again, in the Gray's Inn Road. 'You'll succeed,' he said. 'Never doubt it, my dear. And if you get discouraged, remember: «Be still, be still, my soul; it is but for a season.» You will call on us? Don't forget. We'll be waiting. You're like a son to us.'

I promised him that I'd come, and I intended to; but I never did. Derek and Buddy drifted out of my life too, because now I'd found a girl, and had escaped from that London which is the capital of loneliness, where the aged and the lost wander in calm despair. Young, poor and happy, my English girl-friend and I held hands along the Embankment and over the Waterloo Bridge; we watched Richard Burton play Iago at the Old Vic; we listened to Hancock's Half Hour on the radio in my bedsitter at night, as the iron, majestic cold of the northern winter closed in, and the pea soupers that Holmes and Watson knew began. We tied handkerchiefs around our noses against the smog; breathing in, we left a yellow stain. But I was not appalled by this winter; it was winter in the city of cities, the grim and gentle old friend I had waited for. I thrilled to its sheer, icy edge, and looked up at the Pole Star, and discovered what I believed no-one had noticed before: that the moon here was upside down. Or rather, I told Patricia, the moon in Australia was upside down; and I now understood why the man in the moon's face, in English nursery books, was shown in pictures to have a mouth like an O. In Australia, the mouth was one of the eyes...

But recollection of London happiness is tainted with the knowledge of how I failed Mr Dempsey. There are omissions that can never be made good, and cheerful little Dempsey and his pretty French wife wait for me
still, after thirty-odd years, holding hands in the brown gloom of that tall old terrace in the Gray’s Inn Road: that house out of *Little Dorrit* that could not crush their spirits. In a hollow of the heart where the Marshalsea Prison stands, in a London that doesn’t exist, old Dempsey waits, and his shade will not release me. Some day, he and I will sell bicycles to the Americans.

This is the first in the series *The Colonial Visits ‘Home’*. ‘Maybe It’s Because I’m a Londoner’ will appear in a collection of essays by Christopher Koch. The collection, *Crossing the Gap*, will be published in Spring 1987 by Chatto & Windus.

Like many other ‘colonials’ visiting ‘home’, Chris Koch taught at one period for the London County Council. The photo on this page and the following one record this experience.
Highbury Quadrant Junior School (L.C.C. school), London; class of ’56: Grade IV. Left: Mr G. Palmer, headmaster. Right: Christopher Koch, class teacher.
Christopher J. Koch

INTERVIEW

Christopher Koch was interviewed by John Thieme in London on 18 April 1985.

C.J. Koch was born in Hobart, Tasmania, in 1932 and now lives in Sydney. He has had many occupations, and worked as a radio producer for the ABC for over ten years before leaving in 1972 to write full-time. His novels are *The Boys in the Island* (1958), *Across the Sea Wall* (1965), *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1978), and *The Doubleman* (1985). *The Year of Living Dangerously* won the *Age* Book of the Year Award and the National Book Council Award for Australian Literature, and was successfully filmed. *The Doubleman* won the 1985 Miles Franklin Literary Award, one of Australia’s most prestigious prizes for literature.

Photo: Bob Finlayson, *The Australian*.

*Chris, your latest novel, published in the U.K. today, is entitled The Doubleman and this title seems to highlight a theme which has been prominent throughout your fiction. You repeatedly seem to use characters who are in some sense ‘doubles’ of one another. For example, in Across the Sea Wall the protagonist Robert O’Brien feels that his friend Jimmy Bader, with whom he leaves Australia, is a kind of double and*
I suppose in The Year of Living Dangerously it's possible to view Hamilton and Kwan as doubles of a kind. What exactly does 'doubleness' mean for you? Is it some alternative notion of identity?

Well, I suppose I'm preoccupied with the idea that character is something that's not always complete. I rather doubt that any human beings have a feeling of completeness; we all perhaps want to be someone other than ourselves. If you're a man of action, if you're a basically extroverted type, you perhaps yearn to be somebody more inturned or inward, and it's notorious, of course, that introverted people and people who live for the imagination have some yearning to be people whose life is outward and positive and more dynamic. So I think that we tend to be incomplete; and I'm perhaps particularly preoccupied with that theme.

Along with characters who are doubles, the novels frequently seem to refer to places which are 'other'. Francis Cullen in The Boys in the Island has the notion of an 'Otherland' which seems to be a creation of the imagination and in addition there's the repeated use of contrasted worlds: Tasmania and the Mainland; Australia and Northern Europe; Australia and Asia; Sydney and Melbourne. Is the 'other' place again intended to suggest other possibilities of the self?

I would call it the search for Paradise: what an Australian poet, James McAuley, once called 'the Edenic urge'. I think implanted within most of us there is the sense of a place beyond the real. In orthodox Christianity that, of course, is Paradise, but it takes many forms. It's perhaps the Blessed Islands of Celtic mythology. It can take on many symbolic forms, but I think that it is also something within us, and The Boys in the Island was where I dealt with it, I suppose, most directly, because I believe we have a sense of this place most intensely in adolescence, or some of us do; and this is because in childhood it is actually real for some people — the Wordsworthian idea that one comes from that other place and one half remembers it.

Talking of Romantic poets, in The Boys in the Island you use an epigraph from Keats, from The Fall of Hyperion, and I took it that this was because of the novel's concern with Romantic enchantment, and disenchantment too perhaps, the illusions of youth that you were just talking about. Is that correct?

The quotation is meant to reinforce the theme that if you live for dreams, you will inevitably find it difficult to cope with reality. The boy in that book is a rather ordinary boy. It's not meant to be a 'portrait of the
In fact, even at that age I was determined not to repeat that theme, and I think I did avoid it. What I was attempting was to create an Everyman, a perfectly ordinary youth who happened to harbour an intense world of dream — the sense of the Otherworld we've been speaking of. I coined the term, 'Otherland'; but in fairy mythology, of course, it's known as the Otherworld. That sense was more important to him than everyday life, and he was young enough and naive enough to actually believe it might be found somewhere, beyond the next hill, on the mainland of Australia — so that the mainland is in some way a symbol as well as a reality. And, to answer your other question, there is a heightened sense of expectancy when you grow up in Tasmania — which is a very beautiful place, but which, in the days when I wrote that book at any rate, seemed to be at the utmost edge of the world. One had the feeling there that everything was somewhere else.

So obviously this would suggest a continuity in your work between The Boys in the Island and The Doubleman, where again you come back to the fairy world and the hold that it can exercise on certain imaginations. Would you agree that there's a movement in the later novel towards a less sympathetic treatment of enchantment, that you're now more concerned with exposing some of the aberrations which this psychology can lead to — perhaps we could see them as aberrations particularly rife in the 'sixties when the novel is set?

Yes, I think that's a fair statement. The sense of the Otherland, which I've said I think is in all of us, can go in different directions. In mystics it becomes an actual vision of a paradisal state, and it's the goal for which they aim. But in the 'sixties, that desire, that unfulfilled expectancy, which I think torments so many people, was looked for through drugs, was catered for with all sorts of quasi-mystical beliefs, not all of which were healthy. The 'sixties was the time when orthodox beliefs finally broke down; and into the vacuum rushed many, many other beliefs, some of them worthwhile, others questionable, particularly those associated with the drug culture. Drugs, after all, are a way of trying to get a visionary experience on the cheap; and I'm dealing with that.

But the thing that came to interest me most — although it may seem rather strange for an Australian novelist — was the European fairy Otherworld; in particular, the Otherworld of the Border ballads and Danish folk-lore. It's still very much part of our culture, throughout the Western world — it doesn't matter which country you're in. And there's really a remarkable wisdom in these legends of Faery. I can best illustrate this by referring to that story which appears in many forms concerning
somebody who goes to Fairyland — who actually goes under the fairy hill and dances with the fairies and is feasted and drinks fairy wine. The man then wakes on a hillside to find that it isn’t just a few nights that have gone by, but twenty years, and that he is now unfit for life. We often find this at the end of stories about people who were supposed to have gone to Fairyland, particularly in the Celtic countries — that they then lost all interest in life. And what such a legend is telling us is this: that if you actually make illusions more important than reality, you will be drained of vitality; you will lose your ability to live. This can include mourning for the dead too long, living for half-imagined love which has no real grounding in reality — many things. And I think this applies to our society now, because it’s very significant that we are becoming more and more obsessed with fairy tales. If you go into a bookshop, you will find masses of stuff on fairies — for adults. A lot of the books that are now written for adults, novels, stemming from Tolkien, are manufactured fairy tales. And I’m very interested in something Goethe said about this. He actually predicted the present phase we’re in, and he said that a culture goes through three stages. There’s an early stage of real mystical belief and powerful symbolism; then you have the analytical stage, which is the stage that we’ve had until now: a sophisticated society that analyses its beliefs. But the next stage, which you sometimes get in a society in decline, is one where the first condition is reached back for rather desperately. People try to recapture their early beliefs in myth and magic because they feel that their central belief-system is collapsing, and there’s a need for a vitality that’s gone. I think there are some signs of that occurring now, and this is what I’m dealing with in *The Doubleman*.

Your novels also give us another version of the journey to the Otherland, when you take characters to Asia. In *Across the Sea Wall* in particular you’re concerned with Hinduism. Were you wishing to explore the illusionism, the mysticism, that was so popular during the ‘sixties?

Well, there are two preoccupations in *Across the Sea Wall*. One is the quite realistic one of portraying someone who goes into a situation which is outside his normal experience. Robert O’Brien is an imaginative but again fairly ordinary young man who is flung into Asia — a region which in those days Australians hardly ever saw — and he’s outside all the terms of reference he’s used to; everything is changed. I was interested to present a character who was literally at sea. The other aspect of his experience I became interested in was the encounter with Hindu mysticism and Hindu religion. And, just as I found Gnosticism inter-
esting while writing The Doubleman, at the time of writing Across the Sea Wall there was something of a revelation for me in discovering the nature of the Indian goddess Durga, or Kali, who is seen in Hinduism to be amoral. Now this is very strange to the Christian way of thinking; and it’s necessary to understand that the dance of life that carries Kali through the world is what causes both creation and destruction. She is the elemental force in things, and they say her sport, or play, which is expressed by the Hindu word līlā, is what causes everything from cyclones to the loss of children and, on the other hand, causes life. It has neither pity nor malice; it just is: it’s the power of action. And that fitted with the sense of chaos that O’Brien was moving into. It was also fascinating to me because it seemed to answer the question that Christians find very difficult to deal with: how do you account for chance, mishap, tragedy and destruction in a world that is supposedly controlled by a beneficent God?

And there’s something similar in The Year of Living Dangerously where you use the Indonesian puppet-play, the wayang puppet-play, and you introduce your readers to the wayang of the left and the wayang of the right.

Yes, well the wayang descends from the Bhagavad Gītā. It is descended directly from the Hindu epics, although, of course, it’s undergone sea changes in its Indonesian form and it has extra characters. But I think it also possibly reflects that duality in the Hindu cosmology, because the Indonesians say that the wayang of the left, although they are the villains, are not entirely bad; while the wayang of the right, although they’re basically the heroes, have their bad qualities. And indeed Arjuna, the hero from the Mahābhārata, who appears in the wayang, is in many ways a selfish, cold man. So there is that Hindu duality.

Are there correspondences between the characters in The Year of Living Dangerously and characters in the wayang puppet-play or the Hindu epics behind it?

Yes. The wayang has a fixed, classical form and I used one of the plays of the Pandava cycle, which has to do with the Pandava brothers: figures from the Hindu epics. I set up a parallel pattern in the novel. Arjuna has his parallel in Hamilton, while his wise attendant Semar, the famous Indonesian dwarf-clown, who is also a god in disguise, has his counterpart in Billy Kwan. There are many court scenes in the wayang series: the courts of the wayang of the right and the wayang of the left, presided over by their kings. In the novel, there is Sukarno’s court at the Merdeka
Palace, and there is also a sort of parody of that court in the Wayang Bar, where Wally O’Sullivan is king of the press corps. The wayang of the left, under Aidit, head of the Indonesian Communist Party, has another court at Party headquarters.

The progress that occurs in the wayang play is that the hero, Arjuna, slowly discovers his own deficiencies through Semar’s help; he goes to a holy man in the hills, and through meditation establishes contact with his inner self, and is therefore able to overcome his enemies. This happens to Hamilton, when he goes up to the hills near Bandung, and encounters the wayang show and the dangers of the Long March. There are a lot of parallels: all good fun.

I see. Did you go to a written source for information on the wayang or are your accounts purely from first-hand observation?

The wayang was an experience that I first had in a very superficial way, as most Westerners do. You pass them at night on the road-side and you see the lit screen in the dark and you go to the edge of the crowd and you watch for a while, but it’s all in Old Javanese and it means nothing to you. But it came back to me in a rather haunting way many years later, and then I read a marvellous book on the wayang, On Thrones of Gold by a scholar called James Brandon. That was a wonderful source, and I became more and more interested in the way that by sheer luck the symbolic patterns and morality play of the wayang paralleled some of the patterns in my novel. That’s the sort of bonus that sometimes happens and which you don’t plan for.

What was your own reaction to Sukarno and the politics he represented?

Like all Australians I was alarmed by Sukarno in the early ‘sixties. One has to remember he had become a classic dictator, like Mussolini or Hitler. He addressed vast rallies in which he dominated and hypnotised the people; he led them into a war-fever; and he was confronting Malaysia because Britain was giving Malaysia territories to which he wanted to lay claim. And so he became an aggressive expansionist, and we had a situation where Australians even imagined that we would possibly be at war. I know that the British thought that they might well have to go to war with Indonesia, and there was limited fighting in Malaysia when Indonesian troops were dropped in there. Now all that was unfortunate, and Sukarno in the ‘sixties was in that final stage where both his egotism and his desperation over the chaos of his country led him
into adventures that were alarming and regrettable. But in his early years, I believe, he was a great leader. He was the father of Indonesia; he led it into independence, and he was an inspiration to his people. He had a great vision, and a great poetic gift: you see it in his speeches. He had a genuinely original concept in what he called Marhaenism, which is different from Western ideas that are imposed on those countries. Marxism, for example, very often tends to be seen as the answer for a developing country; but Sukarno, although he was often close to Marxism, said: 'No. The typical Indonesian, the poor man of Indonesia, is not of the urban proletariat Marx was thinking of, living in Western cities. Here, he’s the peasant who owns perhaps half an acre of ground and nothing else, and it’s that man I’m going to take to freedom.' He called this figure Marhaen, after a peasant he once spoke to, when the concept came to him. And that was a great vision for South East Asia, I think: one that remains truly accurate. Billy Kwan, of course, talks about this in the novel. But Sukarno lost that contact with the rural poor of Indonesia; he was carried away by self-adulation; and that was his tragedy. He forgot Marhaen.

*I believe that currently there are plans to make a film of The Boys in the Island. Could you tell us a little about this?*

Yes. Tony Morphett, who is one of Australia’s top screen-writers, has developed a script in conjunction with me and we’ve been lucky enough to interest Carl Schultz, who is one of Australia’s best directors, and who just did a film called *Careful He Might Hear You*, which is a great success in America. Carl and Tony and I are very hopeful that we’ll get this film off the ground quite soon.

*In the original Tasmanian locations?*

Yes, and that’s something I’m looking forward to, because I think it is a landscape of rare beauty, very different from the rest of Australia. I want to see it presented to the rest of the world.

*Remarks you made earlier suggested that to grow up in Tasmania was to feel particularly remote, perhaps to feel particularly colonial. In retrospect, do you feel growing up in Tasmania was a good experience for a writer in the making?*

Certainly for the sort of writer that I am. There is a feeling of innocence and wonder in a place like that. Island people are a bit special anyway, as
you should know being British. Our relationship to the mainland in Australia is in some ways like a variant of the British-European relation. We belong to the continent and yet we don’t. And there was always the sense in Tasmania when I was young of remarkable things to be discovered on the mainland. So that one was living in a very beautiful place, but a place in which the dominant note was one of expectancy. Perhaps that’s lessened these days, but it was certainly so in my youth.

*And you weren’t too badly marked by going to a Christian Brothers school?*

(Laughing) Most Australian Catholics of my generation were marked, literally and in other ways, by the Christian Brothers, and it’s notable that most of my contemporaries in the literary field are lapsed Catholics — people such as Tom Keneally and Ron Blair and so on. I think the harshness of what was really Irish Jansenism in the Australian Church did a lot of damage in that way. I’ve found my way back to a sort of accommodation with my own Catholicism. Most of my contemporaries haven’t.

*All of your novels are characterised by a highly polished prose style, a poetic prose style really. Do you feel you were particularly influenced by any other writers in developing this style?*

Well, I think all writers in their youth are formed by those writers they admire, but it’s fatal, of course, to imitate the style of another writer and I think one consciously tries to find one’s own tone of voice and if you’re honest in expressing what you feel, since all of us are unique, you’re not going to sound like someone else. In absorbing those influences, you’re like an apprentice, I suppose, and the novelists who probably influenced me most were the American Thomas Wolfe, who’s not read very much now; William Faulkner; Thomas Mann (who I think is the novelist par excellence); Tolstoy; E.M. Forster; Scott Fitzgerald; one could go on.

*Finally, Chris, which contemporary Australian writers do you most admire?*

I’ve always had a particular admiration for Hal Porter, who only recently died. The books that Hal is best known for, I suppose, are *The Watcher on the Cast-Iron Balcony*, his autobiography, and a novel which had a big impact in London in the ‘sixties, called *The Tilted Cross*, which is set in the convict era in Tasmania. But Hal’s best known, I suppose, as a writer of short stories. I think he is the supreme artist in prose in our literature. He
was also a very fine poet; and I happen to be interested in prose which takes the same trouble as poetry, which uses metaphor and uses symbol, and is concerned with sound as well as sense.

Hal is a very idiosyncratic writer. He’s not a typical novelist. His is always a very personal vision of the Australia that he knew, spanning a period from the turn of the century until this decade. You get a wonderful and eccentric mosaic of our society: its nuances, its coloration, its sad and silly and lost souls; and I think that’s what Hal will be remembered for.

HENA MAES-JELINEK

Hiistory and the Mythology of Confrontation in *The Year of Living Dangerously*

The imaginative writer is as much the historian of the dead as of the living.¹

Wilson Harris

When Wilson Harris made this statement he was referring to those whom he calls ‘the nameless forgotten dead’, i.e., the suffering multitudes whose lives usually go unrecorded in history books, yet who carry the burden of history. They are involved in what he has termed ‘the paradox of non-existence’,² the fact that so much experience, both actual and psychological, is passed over in silence in factual history or conventional narrative and *appears* to be non-existent. For Harris these unrecorded, unwritten lives are ‘a catalyst of sensibility’.³ The function of art is to retrieve them from forgetfulness and to give life to these ‘unborn’ existences. It is also to transform imaginatively through a metaphorical discourse the given categories of the conventional narrative. In this way historical catastrophe can become a warning for the future; it also becomes ‘seminal’ in the sense that through art it may lead to a vision of
rebirth and an alteration of stark opposites into a relationship of reciprocity.

Although *The Year of Living Dangerously* is written largely in the realistic mode, it lends itself to an analysis inspired by Harris’s views. Two major elements suggest such an analysis: the mythological framework which structures the narrative and the omnipresence throughout the novel of the long-suffering Indonesian people symbolized at the beginning and the end by a tricycle (*betjak*) rider dressed in black, whose vehicle bears the words *Tengah Malam*: midnight.

The novel is not strictly about war since it stops short of recording the civil war and the holocaust in which over half a million people suspected of pro-communist sympathies served as scapegoats for the new leaders and were massacred. It recreates the year 1965 in Indonesia which President Sukarno himself called ‘the year of living dangerously’. ‘Confrontation’ was his motto in that year and it involved confrontation at all levels: between the new emerging forces of Indonesia, a former Dutch colony, and the British and American neo-colonialists (*Nekolim* = neo-colonial imperialists); confrontation also between Indonesia and the newly formed Federation of Malaysia which included former British territories claimed by Indonesia such as Sarawak on the island of Borneo. To avoid sitting with the representatives of Malaysia, Sukarno left the United Nations and involved his country in a ‘Crush Malaysia’ campaign. While war was not actually declared on Malaysia many acts of violence were carried out, notably in Sarawak and Sabah (Northern Borneo). Another confrontation which pervades the narrative is that between the rich or the aristocrats (the *parayiyi*) and the poor, particularly the *marhaen* or small peasants whom Sukarno had conciliated by devising his own brand of nationalist Marxism or populism but whom, as is shown in the novel, he eventually betrayed. There is also the confrontation between the predominantly Muslim army forces and the P.K.I., the Indonesian communist party. It is this political opposition which culminates in the aborted communist coup of 30 September 1965 which was immediately followed by the take-over of the country by the army. All these confrontations clearly illustrate Wilson Harris’s suggestion that, as a result of the wounds inflicted upon it, a ‘humiliated culture is drawn … into … a polarization from which revenge is perpetrated upon all humanity’.

The Australian-British journalist Guy Hamilton moves through these polarizations, largely unconscious of what they really mean to the Indonesian people. He is drawn into a vortex of violence until on the dawn of 1 October he challenges the soldiers who surround the presidential palace
and is blinded in one eye with the butt of a gun. Through most of the year he has been working in close collaboration with the Australian-Chinese cameraman Billy Kwan who, as he himself says, is Hamilton’s eyes (‘You for the words, me for the pictures’ (p. 23)). Billy is a dwarfish figure who guides him through the Indonesian underworld but whom he tends to take for granted as he does Jill Bryant, a secretary at the British Embassy who falls in love with him. The plot records the mounting tension in Jakarta with the Vietnam War a threatening monster in the background and Hamilton’s attempt to establish his reputation as a first-rate foreign correspondent. Everything is grist to his mill from a famine on the island of Lombok to mass demonstrations in which he twice escapes being lynched, to the information, given by Jill to prove her love, that the Chinese are sending an arms shipment to their communist friends in Indonesia. Hamilton betrays her trust for the sake of a scoop just as for a long time he fails to realize the true nature of Billy’s commitment both to himself and to the Indonesian people.

A turning point in the growth of Hamilton’s consciousness takes place when he witnesses a representation of the *Wayang Kulit* on the outskirts of Bandung. The *Wayang* is the shadow puppet theatre which was already popular in Indonesia in the tenth century of our era. It was strongly influenced by Hinduism and the major war epic it stages, the heroic struggle between the Pandava and the Korava, was adapted from the Hindu epic, *Mahabharata*. The *Wayang* is not a mere game or theatrical representation. It expresses man’s relation with the supernatural world and presents it in a concrete way. Basically, the ‘representation is a mystical action where the invisible becomes visible, where the ineffable makes itself heard’.

Although the shadows of the *Wayang* are mythological figures, one can see a connection between them and the shadowy lives of eclipsed people in whom Wilson Harris sees the source of the divine. The *Dalang*, i.e., the narrator and manipulator of the puppets, is a kind of shaman-priest who establishes a contact between the living and the dead. He is an artist and creator; his task is phenomenal since he improvises on a given theme and keeps the show going for the whole night (from 7.30 in the evening to 6.00 in the morning) without ever leaving the screen. The confrontation he presents is essentially one between the forces of good and evil, so that the conflict, which ends with the triumph of good and the restoration of order, is of a moral and spiritual nature.

The same is true of *The Year of Living Dangerously*. The whole novel unfolds like a *Wayang* play; it opens, and much of it takes place, in the *Wayang* Club of the Western-style Hotel Indonesia. It is appropriately dark, only lit up by red candles on the bar and a few lamps which throw
light on the figures that decorate the walls, the heroes and villains of the *Wayang Kulit*. This is where the giant hero Guy Hamilton meets the dwarf Billy Kwan and they strike up an alliance. Hamilton is associated with Arjuna, the chivalrous Pandava warrior who fights for the triumph of good; Kwan identifies with Semar, the peasant dwarf who serves and advises Arjuna and is wiser than his master in difficult situations. Together they move between two worlds, that of the gods (Sukarno in his helicopter is seen by the people as Vishnu in his magic car) and the dark world in which the people live their buried existence. The other journalists also call their team ‘Sir Guy and his dwarf’: they jokingly associate Hamilton with a hero of medieval romance while Kwan evokes the Arthurian dwarf Pelles who was ‘split into two men — a knight and his dwarf squire’ (p. 117). Thus while drawing attention to the kinship between Hamilton and his shadow or double Kwan (they both have green almond eyes), Koch also emphasizes the parallels between Indonesian and Celtic mythologies and gives them universal meaning. Kwan is often called a goblin and attributes his dwarfishness to his Irish rather than his Chinese ancestry (p. 95).

While Koch himself has suggested close correspondences between the *Wayang* figures and his own characters as well as between their deeds, the mythical framework of the novel suggests a less systematic analysis than the mere recording of parallels, whether in parody or seriousness, between myth and fiction. More significant, I think, is the groping through myth, a groping possibly unconscious on the narrator’s part, towards the alteration of polarized situations in the narrative. It is largely illustrated in Billy Kwan’s attitude towards the underprivileged; it is also linked with Hamilton’s changing conception of his identity and his commitments.

In his numerous comments on myth Wilson Harris always emphasizes its essential life and vitality as opposed to what he calls ‘the mimicry of fact’. Unlike recorded historical facts, which are apparently final but actually partial and often one-sided, myth is essentially dynamic. It breaks through historical fact and brings to light the nameless, unacknowledged faces of the downtrodden. Myth is not a mere story or a formal pattern imposing order; Harris describes it as ‘a capacity for mediation between polarized emotions, polarized cultures’. In the same essay and several other of his essays Harris associates myth with music, which he presents as a metaphor in depth. Like painting and language, music can express the artist’s consciousness of the invisible and of eclipsed humanity. Music is also ‘a vibration of silence’, ‘a kind of echoing darkness’, which alters the humiliation and bitterness of the
experience the artist is describing. What Harris calls the 'creative therapy'\textsuperscript{11} of this alteration is relevant to \textit{The Year of Living Dangerously} and its use of myth, though not in any political sense.

The novel is told by one of the \textit{Wayang} Club journalists, Cookie, who has based his narrative on his own observations, on Hamilton's confidences and on the files Billy Kwan used to keep on all his acquaintances and even on important political figures in Indonesia. As he begins to write, Cookie identifies with the Javanese \textit{dalang}, the master of the shadow show and whispers his invocation: \textit{May silence prevail: may the strength of wind and storm be mine} (p. 89). The whole \textit{Wayang} performance is accompanied by \textit{gamelan} music which, as opposed to Western music, has two tuning systems, each one of which comprises three principal \textit{patet}. The concept of \textit{patet} is a highly complex one.\textsuperscript{12} It is enough for our purpose to say that it is a musical scale or mode with psychological overtones. The particular tuning system (\textit{sléndro}) which accompanies the play on which the novel is modelled includes the \textit{Patet Nem}, \textit{Patet Sanga}, \textit{Patet Manjura}. They correspond to the three nocturnal periods of the performance. The narrator (and at a further remove Koch) has used these terms as titles for the three parts of his narrative. They clearly represent the prelude, intrigue and denouement or finale or, in Hamilton's development, innocence, experience and maturity. I would suggest, however, that the musical mode which enhances the meaning of the shadows' movements and structures the novel is an equivalent of the 'echoing darkness' mentioned by Wilson Harris. It is not a mere accompaniment to the deeds of heroes and villains but the 'silent voice' of the shadowed Indonesian people which underlies the narrative and eventually acts as a catalyst in awakening Hamilton's sensibility.

As I have already suggested, Hamilton fights his way through the polarizations of the Indonesian situation without being overly affected by it. He only wants to avoid \textit{Konfrontasi} in the office between Kwan who supports the Muslims and Kumar, his Indonesian assistant, who speaks in favour of the P.K.I. Hamilton himself is involved in minor conflicts such as rivalry with the other correspondents or with Henderson, the British military attaché, who hopes to marry Jill. But these make Hamilton the parody of a \textit{Wayang} hero rather than a real one like Sukarno. As Cookie indicates, he enjoys his affair with Jill 'under the yelling visage of \textit{Konfrontasi}' (p. 138). He does become strongly attached to her but he pretends not to know that she is pregnant by him and feels relieved when she goes to Singapore possibly to have an abortion. Politically, he is a conservative and although a hybrid, as Kwan insists, he feels nostalgia for the British Empire. He looks askance at Kumar who
indirectly suggests that the liberal humanism he stands for is meaningless in Indonesia (p. 176).

By comparison Billy Kwan is wholly committed and is ridiculed by the other journalists for taking up one cause after another. The most complex figure in the novel, he is also the most successful creation as a character. He is the only foreigner to be genuinely interested both in the Wayang and in the Indonesian poor symbolized by the mother or ‘muse’ figure whom he presents as ‘a nullity — a vacuum’ (p. 131) and his pictures of the people tell a story that Hamilton doesn’t tell in his reports (p. 81). He has, however, a dangerous tendency to turn people into gods as he does with both Sukarno and Hamilton. He sees Sukarno in multiple guises, as a ‘Javanese god-king’ but also as Semar, the dwarf god with whom he himself identifies (pp. 132-3). Sukarno is also (like himself) the ‘great dalang’ who has created (p. 13) Indonesia. At first Billy approves of Sukarno’s policy of defying the world because it restores the self-respect of the Indonesians after years of humiliation. What he does not see is that this leads to Indonesia’s running amok just as he himself runs amok when deeply frustrated.

Billy Kwan is presented by Koch as the ‘wise fool’. With his multi-coloured Hawaiian shirt, he corresponds to the Harlequin or trickster, who for Wilson Harris represents both the sickness of an age, the legacies of hate that must be broken down, and its possible rebirth. Like the Harlequin, Billy is ‘a borderline conception between mischiefmaker and saviour’. It may be as a compensation for his humiliation as a dwarf that he too wants to play god, particularly with Hamilton, whom he launches on his successful career and whom he introduces to Jill in the hope of enjoying Hamilton’s affair with her vicariously so that he can tell Hamilton reproachfully ‘I created you!’ (p. 237).

This assertion becomes truly meaningful only after Billy’s death. He combines the double attribute of the dalang as creator and manipulator. While still alive he is more of a manipulator, like Sukarno, who, hoping to remain in power, plays the Muslims against the P.K.I. In Billy’s bungalow the files he keeps can be seen as a counterpart of the puppets on the wall and illustrate his desire to manipulate people like Wayang puppets. Billy’s duality (see the reference to his ‘two faces’, p. 99), like Sukarno’s and like Indonesia’s (‘its enormous hopelessness, its queer jauntiness’, p. 59), is a major expression of the duality and the oppositions through which the narrative progresses, suggesting an antinomian philosophy of life. In his dossier on dwarfs he writes ‘I can shuffle like cards the lives I deal with. ... I own them in a way! They can lock me out of their hearts ... but not out of their lives’ (pp. 109-10). But he feels genuine concern both for
Jill and the Indonesian people. He favours the Muslims because their faith is still passionate and in Indonesia the spiritual is all important: ‘the unseen is all around us’ (p. 97), he says. Addressing Sukarno in his dossier, he urges him not to forget the marhaen and to beware of Aidit, the communist leader:

\[\text{He and his cadres would stamp out the ancient dreams which are the spiritual life-blood of the country. The myths would be perverted into propaganda, the life of the spirit stilled in the name of the full belly, and love of God made an offence. Islam would be extinguished and so would joy. (p. 134)}\]

When he sees that Sukarno no longer cares for the marhaen and perhaps never did, that he maintains his policy of prestige in the face of mounting violence, the total collapse of the Indonesian economy and the starving people, Billy turns against him just as he turns against Hamilton for failing to come up to his expectations. His ambivalence prevails through his last meeting with Hamilton. He rightly sees that what is at stake all over the world is ‘the death of love’, that ‘when we abuse each other’s bodies … the spirit doesn’t die … it just becomes a monster’ (p. 236). But he refuses to see that Hamilton has begun to change after his experience in central Java; he jeers at his intention to marry Jill and dismisses him contemptuously as a wrathful god might dismiss a man unworthy of his gifts.

On the day of Sukarno’s visit to the Hotel Indonesia Billy Kwan in a particularly loud harlequin shirt runs to the seventh floor and manages to hang out of a window a banner with the legend: ‘SUCHARNO, FEED YOUR PEOPLE’ (p. 249). He is shot by an intelligence agent and falls to his death. Public and private conflict coalesce in this gesture of despair. First because Billy’s disappointment in Hamilton is clearly inextricable from his strong disillusionment with Sukarno and indeed heightens it. Also, like the people of Java shortly afterwards, he illustrates Harris’s view that ‘the difficult transformation of habits of power … is so frustrated … that the psyche of possibility … has no recourse but to run wild, to become an irruption of terror’. \(^{16}\) Nevertheless, Billy’s death completes Hamilton’s conversion. Already his trip to central Java, his fear of losing Jill and the loss of Billy’s co-operation had made him realize to what extent he had become involved, and he had stopped taking people for granted. His grief over Billy and his anger at the horrors that are beginning to take place in Jakarta show that he is no longer a mere spectator and that he now genuinely cares. The loss of one eye seems to be his penalty for losing Billy, the double or part of himself, who was also his ‘eyes’ (p. 72), and it is significant that Hamilton is now ready to
forsake a chance of recovering his eyesight in order to make sure that he gets on the plane with Jill.

The end of the novel recreates, in terms of a Wayang performance, the struggle for power between the army and the P.K.I. which took place in Jakarta in the autumn of 1965. Rather too obviously, perhaps, the communist forces are identified with the Wayang of the Left, which in moral terms also stands for evil, while the Muslim-supported army are the Wayang of the Right (i.e., good) led by the alus prince Suharto who turns the tables on the communists and momentarily restores a semblance of order. Admittedly, both sides contain elements of good and bad but their positions in the struggle are fixed. As a result, the mythological representation of the political confrontation jars with the moral or spiritual meaning of the Wayang. Indeed, no one side is better than the other and, politically at least, there is little to choose between the Right, supported by spiritualist Billy, and the Left, supported by materialist Kumar. Unfortunately, there is no hope of a dialogue.

There is a suggestion in the novel that the whole world is a Wayang theatre (see pp. 104 and 108). But it is only in personal relationships and in Hamilton’s conversion that the Wayang confrontation is given meaning and resolution. Clearly for Koch, evil is indifference, taking people for granted and using them; good, however hackneyed this may seem, is love and caring about what happens to others. Hamilton knows that the dawn towards which he is flying emerges in Europe for Jill and himself only. It cannot be said in Harrisian terms that the child they are expecting is an ‘annunciation of humanity’ and prefigures its rebirth. While they are flying towards privileged Western Europe, South East Asia with the coming holocaust in Indonesia and the Vietnam War is being plunged into darkness.

An unforeseen result of Hamilton’s perception of this and of his greater attention to Billy’s convictions after the latter’s death is that, although he is granted his wish to be posted to London, he now feels more Australian than British and realizes that ‘in the end, the other hemisphere would claim him’ (p. 295). Implicit in this recognition is the feeling that Australia too, as part of the Southern hemisphere, is committed to that part of the world rather than to Europe. The novel ends with the expression of Hamilton’s distress and his vision of the betjak rider. There is no hope that the living Wayang figures will avert the impending catastrophic confrontation, only an individual’s awakening to genuine feeling and to the existence of the ‘nameless dead’.
NOTES

1. 'Re-creative Parallels', talk given at the University of Bayreuth, 18 June 1983. No written text is extant and the quotation is from notes I took.
3. Wilson Harris, The Eye of the Scarecrow (Faber paperback edition, 1974), Author's Note unpaginated.
5. Christopher Koch, The Year of Living Dangerously (first published in 1978; Melbourne: Nelson, 1982), pp. 36 and 72. All further references are to this edition and given in the text.
11. 'Metaphor and Myth', p. 5.
13. Her silent presence recalls Mariella, the Amerindian muse in Harris's Palace of the Peacock.
15. 'Character and Philosophic Myth', p. 128.
16. Explorations, p. 98.
17. On this aspect of the novel see Helen Tiffin, 'Asia, Europe and Australian Identity: the Novels of Christopher Koch', Australian Literary Studies, Vol. 10, No 3 (May 1982), 326-35.
A Love Story

(i) Legend
(ii) Odalisque
(iii) Madonna
(iv) The Slaves
(v) Triptych
(vi) Commedia dell'Arte
(vii) Love Lies Bleeding
       or
       The Muse Nailed

(i) LEGEND

When Philip wakes again it is daylight; as window, wash-basin, chair and then rucksacks swim into focus, this time he knows where he is: in a room in a pensione in Florence, just a stone’s throw from the bridge where Dante saw Beatrice, exams over, his girl beside him. Three months of travelling. Seeing. Voyage to Discovery. New World finds Old. He turns his head; Alvie is still asleep. Sitting up carefully, he watches a pulse ticking in her neck. Her skin is pale, winter-pale, but across the pillow her hair is a copper fire. She has used the rinse she bought to try out her phrase book Italian. Her lips move; she is smiling. At what, he wonders, sliding out of the bed. What?

Shivering in the cool of late autumn, he pulls on jeans and skivvy and, lifting the chair over to the window, opens his notebook. What he reads there doesn’t seem too bad, quite good in fact. Before she wakes up he will have another go at it, see if this morning he can’t pin down in verse all the dazzle of paint, the curve and gleam of marble that has made him feel drunk — stoned — feverish since he stepped off the plane back in Rome.
He glances across at Alvie; her eyelids flutter. Stay asleep darling, he begs. Let me get this right first. Alvie is a bit terse sometimes about his notebook — a habit grown out of all that solitariness, a whole four-fifths of his life actually, so long he used to think being alone was fate’s lot for him. She says it’s an obsession, this need to get it right. Just dash off a few impressions she says, the rest will come later, you know it will. Stop worrying Phil. Relax. Take a deep breath. Take more photos — they’ll bring it all back. Or postcards — buy postcards like me. And she flicks through things that have caught her eye: a fountain in Rome that they came upon unexpectedly at the end of a long day when they were on the edge of quarrelling; and that statue of the naked boy about to kiss his girl; nice that, she says, Love hugging his Psyche...

What she doesn’t understand, broods Philip, hunched up under the window, is that it’s not simply a matter of making notes of everything like some indiscriminate camera. No. That isn’t bothering him. It’s the shape within all the shapes and colours — that’s what keeps eluding him.

He looks down at his notes. It’s no good, the words won’t move, they lie shrivelled and limp. His head begins to thump. He feels chilled right through. Dropping the notebook he goes to his rucksack and drags out a thick winter shirt, then gives the rucksack a great shove across the floor. Alvie mumbles; opens her eyes. ‘Up already?’

‘It isn’t exactly early.’
‘What’s eating you?’
‘I’ve got a headache.’
‘Bad? How bad?’

‘It’s like those snakes wound around old man Laocoon,’ he tells her, rather pleased with that, glancing across at her as he buttons his cuffs.

She laughs. ‘It’s probably all that Chianti you’ve been drinking. You want to watch it, Phil.’ She yawns, stretches, pushes her hair off her face. Pulling a blanket around herself she comes across to the window. ‘Want me to rub your head?’

‘Yes please.’ Head against her breast he tells her, ‘When I woke up in the middle of the night I couldn’t remember where I was. It was horrible.’ It is the ghost of a childhood terror: waking to a darkness that gave him back nothing but his screams until alarmed, impatient, blinking as she switched on his light, his mother would rush in.

Alvie’s fingertips on his temples move in slow firm circles. ‘You soon remembered,’ she says drily.

‘You smell good,’ he murmurs, breathing in a mixture of sleepiness and yesterday’s sweat and the ardour of his pre-dawn clinging.

She laughs again. ‘So do you. Maybe that’s it — compatible what’s-its
names.’ His hands take in the familiar sharpness of her hip bones, the smoothness of skin. Her thighs part slightly. She says ‘Where are we off to today, Phil — the Accademia, is it? What’s so funny?’

‘You. Saying that. Where are we off to today. Remember that first holiday you spent at my father’s when we were kids and I was supposed to be showing you the sights of Melbourne?’ Like wine there courses through him memories of that frantic two weeks; those old things he loved that he wanted to show her, and the first time she touched him (it was outside the Museum), and the kisses and fondling that nearly sent him crazy until on the very last night of her visit she said yes to him, (he cleaned his teeth first, he remembers), a scared kid discovering with her what other kids sniggered about and poets sang about and his parents wrecked up his childhood fighting about. And himself? She had whispered ‘Quick get something, anything, yes your singlet’ll do’ because she was bleeding, loving her he had made her bleed but she hadn’t cared, she’d said ‘Don’t be shocked Philip, I’d rather it was you than anyone’ and he had cried with the joy of her.

‘I remember.’ The blanket slips from her shoulders as she waves her hand at their pile of guide books and mementoes. ‘So here we are. So what’s new.’

He looks at her, sees the delicacy of marble. An idea hits him. ‘That statue of Apollo pursuing Daphne in that gallery in Rome — you know, the one by Bernini —’ They had walked around it for ages, marvelling at the desperation the sculptor had caught, the cry for help, the youthful arms outstretched, the swirling cloak covering the lust doomed to marble imprisonment forever as the nymph’s flesh turns to wood at his touch.

‘The letch with the hots for the leafy lady — that one?’

It’s the poet clutching at his muse, he thinks excitedly. Scooping up his notebook and scrawling ‘Bern’s Ap -> Daph = me -> inspiration’, he tells her ‘I know exactly how frustrated that poor bugger felt!’

For a moment she stares at him, then pulling on her tracksuit and snatching up towel and soap she retorts ‘Oh you do, do you? Just what do you think happened when you woke me up at four o’clock this morning?’

But whether she is offended or pretending he’s not sure because when he starts to explain what he meant she shuts him up with one of her kisses, and when he grabs her towel to pull her onto the bed with him she turns it into a wrestling match which she wins by escaping into the passage.
Breakfast in the pensione is served until nine.

It is now twenty past.

Philip, arranging his damp shirt on a hanger by the window, says ‘It’s hardly worth going down, is it?’ but Alvie, pulling a comb once through her wet hair, jangles the room key at him, saying ‘Come on, we’re paying aren’t we?’

On the stairs maids are bundling heaps of linen. ‘Permesso!’ she calls, bounding past them. ‘Bon jerno! Kommy star? Permesso!’ ‘Bon giorno, bon giorno!’ he echoes, relishing her easy warmth with strangers but wincing at her accent. In the dining room doorway they pause. The room is almost empty, the other guests well on their way to the Uffizi or the Ponte Vecchio by now. A waitress glances at them then goes on shaking cloths and laying clean cutlery.

She nudges him. ‘Me dispee-archie,’ she mews plaintively, then drops her head to her folded hands in a parody of sleeping. ‘Troppo! Troppo!’ She nudges him again triumphantly as the waitress, sighing, waves them to a table by the window. ‘Wow! Just look at that sunshine, will you!’ she exclaims, pulling the lace curtain aside so that he sees a brightening in the grey sky. ‘We’re dead lucky, aren’t we?’ She peers at him around a fold of the curtain, her eyes round. ‘What if someone...?’ They burst out laughing. Under the table her feet find his.

He glances around the room. Is the waitress grinning? Is that disgust crossing the faces of the middle-aged couple whose eye he catches? He looks down at his hands, momentarily convinced that what he still feels in his fingertips, his joints, along all his senses, must be apparent to everyone — his hurrying with her towel to the shower cubicle at the end of the corridor and finding the door ajar because the lock doesn’t catch and her saying ‘Oh it’s you, is it?’ goggling her eyes at him around the plastic curtain then catching his shirt sleeve and trying to pull him into the shower recess with her, laughing at his protests as his clean shirt gets soaked, and then the two of them together in the shower fighting over the miserable trickle of hot water, feet skidding on the mouldy floor, hip bones jostling, her body slippery with soap, tasting of soap, opening to his urgency as though it’s five years not five hours since they last made love, water spraying everywhere and should someone barge in only the greasy plastic shower curtain dividing love from indecency.

The waitress brings two rolls and two pastries to their table. ‘Go on,’ Alvie says, biting into one of them. ‘Eat up, they’ll be giving us the shove in a minute.’
‘Coffee? Tea?’ the waitress asks.

‘Kaffay con lattay,’ she replies, indicating him. It’s something they agreed on before they left home: to use their little bit of Italian wherever they could; they’d feel part of the place then; it would be more fun. ‘Si, un caffè con latte,’ he repeats. ‘Per favore.’ But while he struggles to find the correct word, the correct way to hold his mouth, she slams the phrase book shut and plunges on. She points to herself. ‘Daisy dayro ... daisy dayro tay con lattay freddo. Freddo!’ she emphasizes. ‘I can’t stomach tea with hot milk,’ she tells him, and she pulls another of her faces, looking to him to laugh with her — but at what? at funny foreign customs? at herself for being so pigheaded over cold milk in the cup first? He isn’t sure. But laughs anyway, because looking at her he is reminded of a plant his stepmother grows in a sunny garden bed, a joyous plant all pinks and reds and golds amongst the dark green leaves of its neighbours. It catches him with a shock of gladness each time he passes it. Love-lies-bleeding, his stepmother calls it. Philip prefers amaranth, a name he looked up in the dictionary once because he liked the sound of it: amaranth, an imaginary unfading flower. Watching Alvie now as she drowns a spoonful of brown sugar then chews it, the sort of silly thing you remember years later about people, he thinks excitedly love is like that plant, not imaginary meaning unreal but imagined, of the imagination — five minutes fucking somewhere, bedroom, bathroom, each moment gone as it’s happening but the joy of it lasting, shaped in your mind the way all the canvas and stone we’ve been looking at these last few days has been worked on, shaped: a glimpse of the unimaginable.

‘Maybe we should catch a bus,’ she is saying, leaning over the table to look at his watch. Her own watch is probably on the floor somewhere upstairs, one of her careless, carefree habits. ‘If we don’t sit down for a cappuccino maybe we can afford a bus?’

‘Yes,’ he says, concentrating on the spoon he is turning in his cup. He wants her again. When they go upstairs to clean their teeth he will have her again. And there rises the certainty that from all the notes, bits of verse, impressions filling page after page of his notebook he will shape a poem more erotic than anything he has yet tried, a poem as voluptuous as worked marble, as sensual as Titian’s Venus yesterday, the glowing flesh turned in love to whoever looked at her, as unfading as an imaginary flower.
‘It’ll be good,’ he tells her as they climb onto the crowded bus. ‘It’ll be different.’ Alvie pulls him towards two seats about to be vacated. ‘It’ll combine everything I’ve felt about all this — this —’ And he gestures widely to indicate: everything. Words spin into his mind. He begins to juggle phrases. So absorbed is he, staring into the aisle at nothing, that it is Alvie who sees them first. ‘Look!’ she says, nudging him. ‘That cap on that girl — isn’t it great?’

He looks. Along the narrow medieval footpath, walking in the same direction as the slow-moving bus, come two girls wearing jeans and leather jackets, sisters perhaps, one about twelve who is talking, gesticulating, skipping around people in her way, the other older, taller, her fair hair falling to her shoulders from under her Mao cap, and her hands as calm as her still, grave face. Where have they come from? Perhaps they live in one of these ancient jutting houses. If it were not for their clothes, he thinks, looking from one to the other as they catch up with the bus, they might have stepped out of a fifteenth century painting. The bus crawls past, then stops altogether. Horns toot. Ahead he can see a policeman waving his arms. He looks back at the girls, and sees a youth carrying a satchel and a rolled-up tube of paper approach the older girl and speak. She stops. The Angel Gabriel at the Annunciation, he thinks. The Angel Gabriel unrolls his scroll of paper and displays it. He has long dark hair and a soft cap like an upturned plant pot — ‘like the cap we saw in that painting yesterday!’ Philip exclaims. ‘That Lippi self-portrait, remember?’ Painted by the artist-son of an artist-priest and the nun Lucretia... ‘Fra Filippo Lippi used to hop out of his monastery at night and rage around Florence — along this street maybe, Alvie!’ He cranes across her.

She breathes into his neck ‘Some guy, that Filippo. Looking for inspiration, was he? ... I got a postcard of his Madonna, Phil,’ she adds, sitting up. ‘You know, the one with the little angel peeking over his shoulder?’

‘Did you? It’s lovely, isn’t it?’ Lucretia was probably the model for that painting. Philip likes to think so anyway. He sees the priest at his easel, splotches of paint on his black garb, capturing forever the girl he has smuggled into his cell. Look at the Christ-Child, he tells them. You must all look at the Christ-Child. Lucretia, dazed with his kisses, folds her quivering hands and lowers her eyes, but one of the little Angels won’t keep his head still...

It’s Fra Filippo out there and he wants to paint her. The youth and the girl
confer earnestly. As the youth takes more papers from his satchel the younger girl, the little sister, looks from one to the other with, well not a smirk exactly, smirk's a bit coarse —

At last the girl gives back the sheets of paper, reluctantly Philip thinks, and the youth rolls them up again. Fastening his satchel he goes on his way. Just then the bus lurches forward through a gap in the traffic, and Philip’s last sight of them is of the little sister laughing outright, and the girl glancing over her shoulder at God’s messenger, curious and secretly pleased —

‘Dirty postcards, I bet,’ says his Madonna, shoving him in the ribs with her elbow.

(iv) THE SLAVES

Hunching their shoulders, they cross the piazza. It is weather for moving briskly, but two middle-aged women in black have stopped to chat under the bare trees, their hands in fingerless gloves, bread and vegetables clutched in their arms. Their laughter rings like metal. A few people, off-season tourists like Alvie and Philip perhaps, are gazing up at the facade of the great church, or poring over maps. Pigeons fly down to a child who is scattering a few crumbs. At the rapid approach of a black-robed priest, his heavy cross swinging, the pigeons fly up in a swoop of wings, then settle again hungrily. One white pigeon, however, does not fly down with the others but flaps and whirrs between the trees in a dazzle of white wings. As it turns gracefully above their heads Alvie cries ‘Oh look, Phil!’ then laughs out loud as it comes to land in front of the child, a plastic wind-up toy. ‘I thought it was real!’ And she links her arm in his and squeezes, a gesture that says Aren’t I silly and isn’t that bird silly and isn’t all this fun?

As they get closer to the child scattering crumbs, Philip notices a very tall, very thin black man approaching. With one long arm the man scoops up the bird then stands quite still, not speaking to the child who has begun to stalk a real pigeon — not speaking to Alvie or Philip either, hardly looking at them in fact, but by the way he is standing as aware of them as they are of him. His thin black fingers caress the plastic toy. It is one of those moments, Philip thinks, one of those moments that means more than itself, the women’s conversation that I can almost understand and the child hunting and the black man with the white bird, waiting. I’ll buy it for Alvie as a memento, for fun.
As he hesitates, adding up lire in his head, he hears an Australian voice saying ‘Jesus, this world!’ Turning, he finds a young man with a rucksack standing just behind him. ‘He does that every day,’ says the stranger, giving a nod towards the black man. ‘Him and dozens of others like him all over Europe. Haven’t you seen them? They’re slaves — yes, slaves,’ he repeats at Alvie’s startled look. ‘There’s a boss man somewhere around, he brings these people into the country and provides the bits of plastic and a shed for them to doss down in, and out they go, every day, tourists or no tourists, trying to earn a few cents because they’re all wanting to get back home, especially now that winter’s coming on and winter in Europe’s not much fun if you come from a warm place but they haven’t got a hope, they’ll never earn their fare back again, the best they can hope for is enough to eat and a place to sleep and if they don’t manage to sell any the boss man kicks them out and they starve.’

On hearing this Philip thinks, I couldn’t bear that bird now, I’ll just give him the money. But as he struggles in his mind for the right words in Italian, I want … I do not want, the black man abruptly launches the plastic toy into the air and follows it to the other side of the piazza, and the opportunity is lost.

‘We’re off to see David,’ Alvie is saying to the stranger. ‘The Accademia’s just around the corner.’

The stranger nods. ‘Me too. I’ll tag along with you.’ He shrugs his shoulders to ease the rucksack decorated with a blue and white Eureka flag, that symbol of freedom. He looks as though he’s been travelling a long time. His boots are worn down to the uppers, his jeans in tatters, Philip observes, glancing down at his own neat jeans bought for this trip. His untrimmed beard and his hair tangling onto his shoulders make Philip think of a satyr, one of those hairy half-human creatures of woods and fields that he and Alvie have been looking at in dozens of paintings and sculptures over the last few days. Marsyas, he thinks. The satyr Marsyas — the one that painters loved because he challenged the god Apollo and got skinned alive. He hears Marsyas tell Alvie ‘David was carved out of the one big block of stone. They say that when Michelangelo looked at it he could see David there in it, waiting to get out.’

‘Is that so?’ exclaims Alvie, opening her eyes wide — and Philip raises his eyebrows to himself, since it was only yesterday that Alvie herself read that bit of information out loud from a guide book in a book shop.

Philip stands for a long time in front of Michelangelo’s first Slave, one of four in this gallery, marvelling at the anguished effort in the powerful shoulders and stomach muscles as the imprisoned man struggles against
This bondage of stone. Michelangelo never finished it, Philip thinks, but it looks just right the way it is — the figure trapped, straining, not whole yet, desperate to stand free like the David.

He looks around to tell Alvie ... and sees that she has already finished looking at the four Slaves, and not only the Slaves but the highlight of the gallery, David standing in the floodlit niche. She is slouching with her back to the Pietà of Michelangelo's old age, the one Philip read makes an interesting comparison with the highly polished one in the Vatican. She is talking to the stranger.

Moving closer he hears her saying in the bantering tone that annoys her when other women use it to men: 'Okay, so Jesus's legs are deliberately sculpted all rough, not even the same length, so you tell me why.'

'Because Michelangelo was in a hurry, he was afraid he might die before he finished,' Philip puts in quickly.

The stranger glances at him. 'When people were crucified, hanging there was such agony they used to push up with their feet against the nail to get a few seconds' relief, so the soldiers would come around with clubs and break their legs so that they couldn't.'

'God!' Alvie exclaims. 'Why are people so vile to one another? ... Did you know that?'

Philip shakes his head. 'Have you had a good look at the David?' he asks as she makes to move towards the door.

The stranger, turning with her, says over his shoulder, 'Take a look at David from the side. There's real apprehension on his face. You don't get that on the postcards.'

Philip catches Alvie's eye. 'Come and look?'

'No. You.' She glances back at the half-formed torsos and the beaten corpse. 'I'm going outside for a bit.'

He shrugs, and takes longer than he means to over the rest of the sculpture. When he comes out of the gallery he finds her sitting alone on the steps.

'Let's go.'

'Hang on,' she says. 'I'm minding his rucksack.'

He notices it then, the grimy worn rucksack with the Eureka flag. 'Is he still hanging around?'

'What's eating you?'

He says nothing to that, just sits beside her on the cold step and watches the black man throwing the plastic pigeon.
'This one,' Alvie says, peering in through the window of the locanda. 'All the people in here look like locals.' An elderly waiter escorts them to a table and pulls out their chairs with a flourish. Alvie, laughing up at the man, insists on giving the three orders in her atrocious Italian. Three, because the stranger is still tagging along. Marsyas. The satyr with the Eureka flag. When Philip said to Alvie on the gallery steps 'So let’s get something to drink. Okay?' he said as he hoisted up his rucksack, 'Good idea. What about something a bit more substantial?'

Philip mentally calculates lire again. One good meal a day. And a bottle of wine. He sees Eureka Flag top up his glass — tops up his own.

Eureka Flag is telling Alvie that he’s on his way home. Back to an Australian summer. He’s been wandering around Europe for months.

'I suppose you’ve been in every gallery and cathedral,’ Philip says enviously. It’s the first thing he has said to him.

The guy says no he hasn’t, as a matter of fact this is the first gallery he’s bothered with, but he thought he’d better see something to tell his family. He doesn’t go for this sort of thing as a rule, there are too many terrible things going on in the world to be wasting his time in old tombs and churches, we might all be blown up tomorrow the way things are heading.

'All the more reason,' Philip replies, warming to the debate, ‘For seeing all this before it disappears ... It doesn’t seem logical not to,’ he continues eagerly. ‘I mean, here are all these marvellous things around you that have inspired people for centuries — ordinary people I mean as well as all sorts of artists — and either way you’re going to miss out, aren’t you? Either by being blown up, which might not happen anyway, or by worrying yourself silly beforehand —’ And he gives him a rundown on all the things he’s missing right here in Florence, the Loggia for instance, an open-air museum full of statues of old Greek legends, Hercules breaking a Centaur’s neck, and the Rape of someone, two rapes actually, and Perseus with the head of Medusa. And the Baptistry doors — he mustn’t miss the Baptistry doors, especially Ghiberti’s, Paradise and murder and wrath and punishment in ten bronze panels.

Eureka Flag leans forward. ‘Centuries of it, right? See, I’ve got this theory —’

‘And the Cathedral,’ Philip interrupts, splashing wine into their glasses. (Alvie puts her hand across hers.) ‘The Cathedral — there’s another Pietà there, a polished one like the one in the Vatican.’ He racks his brain for something to cap the other’s comment about the Pieta they saw this morning.
'What have you been doing?' Alvie asks.

He replies that he's just been to Germany for the autumn peace demonstrations. He was with the people blockading one of the American missile bases. When they started the blockade no one knew whether the police would play it low key or get heavy. Boy, water cannons are no joke!

'It doesn't seem like you've been having much of a fun time overseas,' Alvie comments, wrinkling up her nose. And she smiles at him. Chin propped on one hand. Smiling.

'Or achieving anything much,' Philip adds, turning to order more wine.

'Wrong!' says the guy. 'People like you two should go along to a demonstration sometime. See for yourselves. At the missile base for instance. Boy, was that something! All those blockaders working together, caring for each other, it's the only way, getting together, showing other people, it's true what old J.C. said (not that I'm religious or anything like that), Wherever two or three are gathered together — like the three of us, say. That's all it takes because before long two or three more will join in and soon you'll have a crowd, you'll have a whole city, a nation — all because of two or three. Only they've got to care, that first bunch, they've got to get rid of all the fear inside themselves, all the anger, they've got to love one another —' He smiles apologetically.

'Have you noticed how easy it is to say you hate something, I hate the unions, but if you start on about love everyone thinks you're some sort of nutter?'

Alvie says 'I love Ronald Reagan,' and laughs.

Philip tries to catch her eye: We love each other.

At that moment their meal arrives.

'That was quick,' Eureka Flag comments. He grins at Alvie. 'It helps all right if you know the language.'

Alvie gives a little shrug of pleasure, a quick tightening of the shoulders like a hug. 'And if you're a woman,' Philip smirks.

'Oh rubbish!' Alvie says. 'They just like you to try.'

Philip lifts his glass and studies the dark red wine. 'Especially if you're a woman,' he repeats, watching sideways as the colour runs into her face. He says softly, 'It wouldn't matter how badly you said it.'

Get stuffed! Alvie breathes.

Eureka Flag is saying 'Great nosh-up, this. If I hadn't found you guys I'd have just grabbed a pizza somewhere.' He says are they going to Germany, he can give them the name of friends to stay with in Germany, they're great people, they live in a huge old converted barn so there's
heaps of room, they’ll make Alvie and Philip welcome in Germany.

‘Sounds great!’ Alvie says. ‘Phil?’

‘Are we going to Germany?’ Philip responds in what comes back to him as the thin sarcastic tone he hasn’t heard in years, his father’s to his mother, before they split up. So he says hastily, ‘Yes, the Loggia — he must see the Loggia, mustn’t he, Alvie? — and just a few steps away there’s David again.’ ‘A replica,’ Alvie explains. ‘The small force against the evil in the world!’ Philip declaims, flourishing his glass. He adds ‘With bird shit on his head!’ And laughs.

For a moment Alvie stares at him like a mother or something, then turns back to her plate. ‘How’s yours?’ she asks the other guy. ‘Want to try some of mine?’ They exchange spoonfuls. Philip shrieks with silent laughter when a gob of pasta catches in his beard.

‘Philip?’

‘No thanks. I’m happy with what I’ve got.’

‘Well — can I have a taste, then?’ Alvie persists. Philip shrugs, and pushes his plate across the table. She asks, concentrating on her fork, ‘Do you have brothers and sisters back home?’ The guy’s face lights up. Two sisters and a brother, he tells her. ‘Uhuh,’ says Alvie, nodding. She says ‘My Aunt Trudi’s a teacher — you know? And she reckons you can always tell the kids without any brothers and sisters the day they come to school. They never want to lend their coloured pencils.’

‘Is that so?’ says Philip.

(vi) COMMEDIA DELL’ARTE

Then Philip, emptying the bottle into his glass, hears himself saying so heartily that Alvie starts staring again, ‘So what are we all doing the rest of this afternoon? You could go to the Uffizi, mate, but it’ll be closing time soon, and if you want to stick with us why don’t we just walk around in the centre of town?’ and Spaghetti Beard says ‘Great, mate!’ so they’re landed with him for the rest of the day. Philip, hogging the guide book, shouts ‘The Loggia! Let’s start with the Loggia!’ but Marsyas the rebel jumps to his feet shouting ‘No, Paradise — that’s where it all started, mate, all the aggro!’

‘Alvie?’ says Philip.

Alvie sits scraping up the dregs of her cappuccino with her spoon. Suddenly she bursts out ‘So where’s it all getting us? That’s what I’d like to know! All this cruelty, snakes crushing people, men racing off women
or fighting half-horse things, Judith cutting off some guy's head I don't 
know how many times, some poor young guy shot full of arrows and 
looking pleased about it for Chrissake! — It's horrible, horrible, I don't 
care if I never see another bleeding Jesus!'

They are silent for some minutes then. She goes on scraping the 
bottom of her cup until Philip has to stop himself reaching over and 
taking it from her because when he was a child his mother would never let 
him do that.

'Let's go back to the big square,' suggests their companion. 'There's 
usually something happening in the squares, even at this time of year.' 
Street theatre, he tells them — he was into a bit of street theatre himself 
with the peace movement. Sure enough, in the piazza people are 
gathering around a young woman who has lighted some sort of flare in a 
tin and is blowing bubbles. Flickering light catches at the bubbles as they 
float off into the dusk. Two or three children run with upstretched arms. 
Suddenly the woman puts down the bubble pipe and reaching out catches 
one, two, three, four bubbles and begins to juggle them, her eyes dark 
pits in her uplifted face. A murmur runs through the crowd. Somebody 
claps. At the sound her hands falter. One of the bubbles drops and 
bounces once, twice on the pavement.

Leaning forward without looking down the woman catches the bubble 
and tosses it back with the others — gobs of colour pulled together into a 
pattern of light.

'Oh!' Alvie cries, delighted. 'Now how does she do that?'

'It's just what I'm trying to do with words!' Philip thinks, or does he shout it, 
because Alvie and Spaghetti Beard begin to laugh, all around people are 
laughing, staring at him, and he burns with embarrassment, hearing 
himself sound pretentious, ridiculous. He hates her for joining in with 
that fellow in mocking him. He turns away quickly — and sees what they 
have all been guffawing at. It is not him at all, but a young man behind 
him, right at his shoulder, another of these street theatre characters, a 
mimic this time. Philip, turning, catches him leaning forward earnestly, 
just as Philip must have been leaning, a frightful frown on his face. As he 
turns the young man jumps away and begins to mince across the piazza 
behind a woman wearing extraordinarily high heels. Each time the 
woman half-glances over one shoulder, conscious of something out of 
place, the mimic steps to the other shoulder, so artful you can see those 
high heels on his mocking ankles. This time Philip joins in the laughter, 
even throwing a few hundred lire when the man brings around his cap, 
but the noise screams in his ears.
'Let's go!' he says as Marsyas moves off to look at the huge white Neptune dominating the piazza. Not yet, Alvie replies. He can if he wants, but there's plenty happening here, she's going to hang about for a bit.

'With him?'

'He's okay. He's nice. You stay too.'

'What for? I can't see anything happening. Come on. I don't want to hang around any more.'

She shrugs his hand off her arm. 'Well maybe I do.'

Marsyas comes back to them. 'You two coming?'

He hovers indecisively. 'I want to do a bit of writing,' he says, looking at Alvie.

'Letters home,' says Marsyas.

He would let it go at that but Alvie says 'No, poems, he writes poems, he's working on something right now but he won't let anyone see till it's finished. He's good,' she adds. 'He gets things published.'

'Only in things no one's ever heard of,' he says modestly.

'What do you write about?'

'Love poems,' Alvie replies as he hesitates, so that he feels himself going red again.

'You should write about real things,' says Marsyas. 'I mean, like what's going on around us in this stuffed up world. The sort of things those guys —' He gestures towards the marble figures in the Loggia — 'have been rabbiting on about for centuries. Only now it's pollution and Pershing missiles. Same thing, isn't it? You're good, she says — you might change something.'

'I'll keep it in mind,' Philip replies, furious with her, with both of them.

Back in the room at the pensione he sits on the bed under the bare globe and on a fresh page of his notebook writes *Art mocks Life*. Or should it be the other way around? *Life stuffs up Art.* Then he sits for a long time tapping the pencil. How can she just wander off till all hours in a foreign city with some yobbo she knows nothing about? *Satyr holds orgy in bed-and-breakfast. Sabine woman seized, rescuer trampled.* He writes *Life* again then sits turning the pencil point in the dot over the i. The minute she sets foot in this room he will grab her, rip off leaves and bark to the heartwood, screw her till she screams, screw that satyr out of her, flay him alive in front of her, shoot her full of arrows, thorns, nails, break her legs —

He begins to write. The pencil races. When he has finished there
appears a poem that leaves him drained and triumphant but is so ugly, so violent that as he rereads it he feels sick. Throwing pencil and notebook onto the floor he crawls into bed. He is awakened later — minutes? hours? — by muffled laughter, the turning of the door handle, more squawks of laughter. 'Put the light on,' he says coldly. 'I'm not asleep.' The glare almost blinds him but he can make her out, alive with laughter, and behind her, standing in the doorway clutching his rucksack, him.

'He's got nowhere to sleep,' she says. 'He had to vacate his room yesterday morning, so I said he could camp here overnight.'

'Oh sure,' he replies. 'Help yourself. Room in this bed for three. Edge or middle?'

But sarcasm is wasted on him. 'No worries, the floor's fine by me,' says the satyr, and begins to unroll a thin grubby mat and a sleeping bag.

She titters again. 'You should have heard me chatting up the guy on the desk so he wouldn't notice him sneaking upstairs!'

When he wakes again, head aching, groin aching, it is almost daylight. The intruder has gone. Mat, sleeping bag, rucksack — gone. He turns his head; Alvie is still asleep. As he slides his hand between her thighs she murmurs half-waking and puts her arms around him. When they have made love they turn back to back, their bottoms touching. From the edge of the bed he sees his notebook lying open on the floor, and remembers with amazement his poem of last night — too shameful to show anyone, too good to tear up. As light seeps into the room he can make out several pencilled arrows pointing to something scrawled under his own writing. Leaning out to reach it, he reads Thanx! and an address in Germany.
FAMILY HISTORY

Satin in Mother’s room,
mirrors, alabaster boxes,
Black Sea shells, water singing,
I went around the bed chanting:
Do you hear the sea inside me?
Stopped at the new cot
oyster head, crayfish tail,
as in the zoology books,
I picked it up and swallowed it,
horrified,
yet the thing had no taste.

When I found myself I was weeping,
beating the ground with my fists,
the wet nurses were there,
all in grey, and his face
with the dark handsome eyes
slipped away from my reach.

RITES

They moved towards the killing
in an underwater dusk
the sunken garden full of shadows.
I went unwillingly
kept looking at the ground
their sandled feet on the wet stones
the palm leaves they were holding
in their hands to mark the chanting.

The silence struck
as they approached the chamber.
Past the white portals, only
the body petrified in ash
lay in the light,
arrested in the moment of
the fall, beyond release.

On the stone benches I waited
with the others. Were there
palm leaves, or horses’ manes
that glinted in the dark?
The black fox watched me from
her lap, lithe, a sea serpent
with enamelled eyes.

THE BELL

Soundless
you ring
on the great waves
in afternoons
full of cicadas.

Your breath
dusts slightly
the polish of
their wooden vestments
waiting
so small
so self contained
before the altars.
Imagine a woman, placed where she has no sense of her real identity — perhaps orphaned at birth without surviving relatives, or removed from her parents. Place such a woman where the individual is defined, first by her race — 'Bantu' — European — Indian — then, remove from her a sense of racial belonging: i.e. make her the child of one White and one African parent. Then imagine this woman writing creatively, always fearful of the knowledge that the White mother she had never known had died in a mental asylum.

One such woman was Bessie Head, who died in April 1986 in Serowe, a village in Botswana. Her name will be unfamiliar to women who have heard of her White South African counterparts — Olive Schreiner, Sarah Gertrude Millin, Pauline Smith, Nadine Gordimer. For while White South African writing is constantly placed before the British reading public, the work of this writer seems to pose a problem for librarians, booksellers, and teachers of literature. York University, which boasts a Centre for Southern African Studies and a Department of Woman's Studies, has in its library a single copy of A Question of Power flanked by Gordimer and Lessing's entire repertoire. Yet Bessie Head wrote in English: three novels, a collection of short stories, and a social history of the Bamangwato people.

Bessie Head was born in South Africa in 1937. (Her surname is the English translation of an African word meaning 'head'.) Like many Black writers, she served her apprenticeship writing for the magazine Drum although she was a qualified teacher. With the failure of her marriage she went into self-imposed exile with her son, choosing the semi-desert country, Botswana, neighbouring South Africa.

Had she remained in South Africa, she would have had to write within the confines of its censorship and banning laws. Yet having left that country, her writing remains free of political bias. In A Question of Power she makes a brief reference to South Africa:
It was like living with permanent nervous tension because you did not know why White people there had to go out of their way to hate you or loathe you.... There wasn't any kind of social evolution beyond this, there wasn't any lift to the heart, just this vehement, vicious struggle between two sorts of people with different looks.

She then purposely turned her back on the highly urbanized society she had left, to focus on the poverty of the common people and their struggle with the land.

Coming unprepared to Bessie Head's fiction, the western reader may experience uncertainty and dissatisfaction with her female characters and the resolution of her themes. However, if her work is approached through the non-fictional book: *Serowe Village of the Rain Wind*, the reader will proceed to the fiction with an immense respect for this writer. For in this work Bessie Head has done what few writers of fiction have even desired to do. Through interviews, translations and research, she has recorded the unwritten social history of the Bamangwato people from the oral testimony of old women and men. There is both a freshness and simplicity in each short narrative that captures the distinct voice of each narrator. In this book she traces the themes of migration, self-help and traditional crafts, and also the social and educational reforms implemented by Khama the Great. In *For Serowe a Village in Africa* she says: 'Historians do not write about people and how strange and beautiful they are — just living.' She has left us with a woman's perspective of history.

*Serowe Village of the Rain Wind* is witness to South Africa's loss — for much of South Africa's oral history which needed to be recorded from the memories of the old, was out of her reach when she went into exile.

Of Bessie Head's fiction there are many views currently in vogue. Her writing is said to fit into the category of 'Exile'; she is dismissed for having rejected the political aims of other writers from Africa; she is further criticized for being out of touch with South African politics and Pan-Africanism; her work is described as autobiographical; and her women characters are said to be 'struggling to free themselves from male domination'.

But this writer in exile was unique. She refused to live the isolated life of the modern artist labouring instead with ordinary women and men on an experimental farm. Instead of writing as the isolated exile with a longing for home, her subjects have invariably been the Batswana, her scene, a Botswana village. Her political perspective seems more visionary than that of the realists — she abhorred the white racism that contributed so much to her own suffering; but she also had a fear of 'exclusive brotherhoods for Black people only'.
Throughout her fiction Bessie Head deals with the situation of women in traditional African society. She takes for her subjects ritual murder, witchcraft, the clash between Christianity and Setswana custom, and in *The Collector of Treasures* gives an analysis of men in traditional, colonial and post-independent Africa as it affects women and the family. Bessie Head recognized the impermanence of women’s creativity and labour: ‘Women’s hands build and smooth mud huts and porches. Then the fierce November, December thunderstorms sweep away all the beautiful patterns. After some time these same patient hands, hard and rough, will build up these mud necessities again’ (*For Serowe a Village in Africa*).

Her prose is at times daringly explicit, moving through the philosophic to the poetic: ‘...it was a harsh and terrible country to live in. The great stretches of arid land completely stunned the mind, and every little green shoot that you put down into the barren earth just stood there, single, frail, shuddering...’ (*Where Rain Clouds Gather*). Her themes consistently those of exile, sexuality, good, evil, tradition and change. Like D.H. Lawrence, she focussed on the common people, not the rich, the powerful, or the heroic. Like Thomas Hardy, she perceived Nature as evil, and her prose often captures the diminution of Man by Nature: ‘...and people mentally fled before this desert ocean. This fleeing away from the overwhelming expressed itself in all sorts of ways, particularly in the narrow, cramped huts into which people crept at the end of each day, and the two bags of corn which were painstakingly reaped off a small plot’ (*Where Rain Clouds Gather*).

Bessie Head is South Africa’s first Black woman writer. Although she wished especially not to be perceived in terms of colour or sex, these two factors, together with her South Africanness, were elements she had to contend with and which shaped her life. That she emerged from all her experiences to write is testimony to her creative spirit.

**WORKS BY BESSIE HEAD (1937-1986)**

*Where Rain Clouds Gather* (1968). Set in a village community, it explores the conflict between tradition and change when an aspect of tradition becomes the embodiment of evil.

*Maru* (1971). A novel about two men, neither of whom is evil, who love the same woman. It illustrates the powerlessness of women in traditional society.

*A Question of Power* (1974). Presents the clearest opposition between good and evil, the drama for control of the female character taking place in her mind.
Recent discussions of Bessie Head's work have centred on *A Question of Power* and the general tendency has been to view this novel in terms of its reference to Head's experiences as a coloured South African and an exile in Botswana. ¹ While Head's novels do reveal a deep concern with the social realities of Southern Africa, they also show a studied attempt to relate the local experiences of the characters depicted to mankind's social evolution. In linking these experimental and existential concerns, Head exploits the analogies between the conflict of forces within individuals and within a community and between the behaviour of human agencies and the operation of cosmic forces. Through the use of this analogical method she extends the reference of her novels and, at the same time, mirrors the thought-patterns of the society in which the novels are set. Moreover, she employs the conventions of traditional African narrative and praise poetry in which impressions of characters and events are frequently conveyed by indirect allusion rather than by explicit narration or description.²

The paradigm of the conflict between characters in Head's novels is the behaviour of the natural elements in the semi-desert area of Botswana where, in the drought months, the sun is an adversary antagonistic to life and survival and the people often long for 'soft steady rain' ³ without lightning or thunder. Bright cloudless skies hold no promise and dark lowering clouds foster hope which is often disappointed. The expectation of the land and the longing of the people are identical and the one may be spoken of in terms of the other. In Head's novels, sun and rain and solar
and lunar influences provide images of paradoxically opposite but similar powers which both challenge and modify each other. In successive novels, Head explores the symbolic potential of these images. Further discussion will show how Head uses images derived from the physical and social environment in Botswana to reflect broader existential concerns. An examination of Head's use of imagery will also involve reference to her use of local myth and folklore and, in the case of *A Question of Power*, to her attempt to integrate materials from African and Western literary traditions.

In *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Head introduces images which become central to the structure of her later novels. The title of the novel is significant. In Botswana, in September, 'the month when the rain clouds gathered', there is never any certainty of rain and it is a time of both hope and anxiety. Although the villagers still look to the clouds for rain, in the period described in the novel, customs are also changing in the village with the introduction of Western technology and attempts to create alternative sources of water supply. The ability to tap new sources of water successfully, like the coming of the rain, promises relief from an almost constant state of drought. The gathering of the rain clouds alluded to in the title of the novel thus refers to the period of anxious waiting for promised relief and combines references to two different types of expectations — relief from the drought and an improvement in the quality of life.

In *When Rain Clouds Gather*, rain is, moreover, depicted as a benign force. Maria, one of the central characters, observes to Makhaya, for example: '...all good things and all good people are called rain' (p. 168). Water is associated with a past 'golden age' when the land was able to sustain the people. Dinorego, for example, retains 'a wistful memory of when the whole area had been clothed by waist-high grass and clear little streams had flowed all the year round' (p. 37). Drought and its ravages are associated with the present when the traditions, like the land, have been eroded. The underground rivers in the semi-desert environment provide the basis for a further extension of the analogy between the drought which is alleviated only intermittently by rain which, though benign, is capricious, and oppressive social conditions which can be relieved only by the intervention of paternalistic but whimsical leaders. The underground rivers which persist when the land appears arid and desolate are compared with the 'rivers inside' (p. 168), the inner reserves of strength to be found among the ordinary members of the community.

The period described in the novel is typical of the drought months in Botswana when the sun becomes an overwhelming force from which the
people recoil. Looking on at the landscape, Makhaya, the newcomer from South Africa, reflects:

The great stretches of arid land completely stunned the mind, and every little green shoot that you put down into the barren earth just stood there, single, frail, shuddering.... And people, mentally, fled before this desert ocean content to scrape off bits of living from its outskirts.... This fleeing away from the overwhelming expressed itself in all sorts of ways particularly in the narrow, cramped huts into which people crept at the end of each day.... (p. 115)

At its greatest intensity, the sun is depicted as a force which both threatens physical survival and hinders movement beyond certain narrow confines of existence. It thus becomes representative of influences which prove harmful when their force is not modified by the presence of others.

The sun, in its most oppressive aspect, is depicted as a cruel force, but its influence in its more moderate moods is benign; it also brightens and transforms the landscape. Different appearances or moods of the sun which Head emphasizes may be associated with stages which she points out in the life of the community. Three typical appearances of the sun are distinguished. There is the sun at dawn creeping 'along the ground in long shafts of gold light' (p. 16), the fully risen sun 'clear of all entanglements, a single white pulsating ball dashing out with one blow the last traces of the night' (p. 16) and the setting sun retreating 'quietly as though it were folding into itself the long brilliant fingers of light' (p. 77). In When Rain Clouds Gather, as in the later novels, the rising sun is associated with new ideas which can assist in reducing poverty and raising the living standards of the ordinary people in the society. The image of the sun's 'sudden and abrupt' (p. 16) appearance above the horizon suggests a comparison with new ideas which are precipitately introduced. Gilbert reflects, for example:

Three years of uphill battling had already made clear to him his own limitations in putting his ideas across to the people, and he had also learned that change, if it was to take place at all, would in some way have to follow the natural course of people’s lives rather than impose itself in a sudden and dramatic way from on top. (p. 30)

There is clearly a correspondence between the image of the fully risen and overwhelming sun which makes the people retire gratefully to their 'narrow, cramped huts' and new ideas which are advanced in such a way that the people reject them and turn again to traditional practices and beliefs. The sunset to which Makhaya is constantly drawn shows the sun’s intensity modified by the influence of the approaching darkness and
provides an image of the comforting reconciliation of the new with the old.

Darkness in *When Rain Clouds Gather* is associated primarily with tribal institutions and an unscientific approach to social and economic problems. Like sunshine and rain, sunlight and darkness represent antagonistic but complementary forces. Each combines both menacing and comforting aspects, and each by itself is undesirable. The sun blinds by an excess of light and the darkness by a total absence of light. One of the central concerns of the characters depicted in the novel is to reconcile their traditional institutions with modern scientific knowledge. The extremes of traditionalism and modernity are represented in the images of areas dominated either by darkness or sunlight. Makhaya’s Zulu background is identified with the first and Gilbert’s English background with the second.

The society from which Makhaya comes is depicted as an example of diehard traditionalism:

...he had been born into one of the most custom-bound and conservative tribes in the whole African continent, where half the men and the women still walked around in skins and beads, and even those who moved to the cities moved with their traditions too. There seemed to be ancient, ancestral lines drawn around the African man which defined his loyalties, responsibilities, and even the duration of his smile. (p. 124)

Gilbert, on the other hand, comes from a society which displays an enlightened scientific outlook, but which has become too technologically oriented and materialistic. Each finds his society restricting in a different way. When they meet in Golema Mmidi, there is a useful interchange of ideas between them which suggests possibilities for interaction between the two worlds which they represent. Like darkness and sunlight Gilbert and Makhaya are presences which modify each other, and their efforts together help to relieve the distressing conditions of existence in the community.

The tendency to convey the quality of one thing through reference to another may be observed also in the depiction of character in *When Rain Clouds Gather*. Characters are compared with the natural elements and with appearances of the landscape. Many of these comparisons have no significance beyond their vivid descriptive quality, but others are very directly related to the theme of the novel. Both Gilbert and Makhaya, for example, are associated with the sun. Gilbert is directly compared with the sun as a symbol of regularity and predictability. The narrator observes, for example, that ‘everything the unusual Gilbert did seemed
Gilbert prided himself on being an unusually well-informed man. No doubt the sun did too. No doubt the sun knew why the clouds formed and why the wind blew and why the lizards basked in its warmth, and all this immense knowledge made the sun gay and bright, full of trust and affection for mankind. (p. 81)

It is significant that Gilbert’s function in the village approximates to that of a rainmaker, for he has undertaken to provide the villagers with water. Thus he is also associated with rain, which represents a life-renewing force. This association of Gilbert with both sun and rain suggests a balance in his nature comparable to that which characterizes the landscape when the elements work in harmony.

While Gilbert is identified with the sun as a bringer of light, Makhaya is primarily a seeker of light. He is constantly aware of the changing appearance of the sun and wanders off frequently by himself to watch the setting sun. Within Makhaya there is, Head suggests, a corresponding muted glow which indicates a capacity to love. He is drawn to Paulina in her ‘vivid sunset skirt of bright orange and yellow flowers’ (p. 78) and eventually both the images of Paulina and the sun coalesce in his mind: ‘Makhaya stood looking at Paulina for a brief moment, a faint smile on his face. She was entirely unaware that her skirt was the same flaming colour as the sun, which was about to go down on the horizon, and that both were beautiful to him’ (p. 117). Significantly Makhaya accepts Paulina only after she has learnt to control her passionate nature. At the outset her warmth is too intense, like that of the sun at midday. This comparison is suggested by her reflections. Paulina yearns for a man who will arouse in her ‘a blinding sun of devotion and loyalty’, and such a loved one could ‘magically become ten thousand blazing suns’ (p. 77). As she becomes usefully involved in the agricultural project, she achieves the kind of control which the setting sun symbolises for Makhaya.

Characterization through association with aspects of nature is not confined to the major characters. Matenge, the sub-chief who opposes Gilbert’s schemes, is associated with the menacing aspects of nature. His presence is a ‘glowering thunderstorm’ which his sunny-natured brother, the paramount chief, Sekoto, avoids. In Sekoto and Matenge, Head juxtaposes the ‘courtesies’ and the ‘harmful or brutal aspects’ of tribal existence. In associating Sekoto with the sun and Matenge with thunderstorms and darkness, Head is both using a convention of traditional African praise poetry and relating their roles to the overall theme of the
novel. While the characters of Gilbert and Makhaya reveal elements working in harmony with each other, Sekoto and Matenge are powers in conflict with each other and neither shows a proper balance in his nature. In the social environment, the villagers of Golema Mmidi are the victims of the conflict between the brothers just as the land is the victim of a lack of equilibrium in the natural environment.

The symbolic significance of darkness and sunlight in *When Rain Clouds Gather* is enhanced by previous use in the literary tradition. While the imagery in the novel is very specifically related to local conditions in Botswana, the basic associations of many images are universal and, as a result, the reference of the novel is extended. Thus diehard traditionalists like Matenge may be seen as only another example of those who suppress new knowledge in order to dominate others who lack social and political power. Moreover, the changes taking place in the community described in the novel are related to a view of progress in which those imprisoned by old ideas and tyrannical institutions are constantly being liberated by those who introduce new ideas.

The inter-connection between different aspects of existence and the correspondences among personal, social, and wider societal concerns are even more forcefully demonstrated in *Maru*. In this novel the symbolic significance of images drawn from the behaviour of the natural elements is further extended by reference to the system of beliefs governing certain rituals and to local myth and folklore.

Motifs from several types of tales may be identified in *Maru*. At one level, the novel describes the rivalry between two close friends for a woman and the marriage of a man of noble birth to someone without status. At another level it recalls the myths about the separation of the powers of a divinity and the withdrawal of a god from his people. It also recalls nature myths which account for the predominance of sunshine and the scarcity of rain in semi-desert regions like Botswana. These motifs, which may be found in traditional African sources, are integrated with material related to recent history. This includes the decline of the political power of the chief in southern African states, the rivalry for succession in royal households in Botswana and instances of chiefs flouting tribal custom on the matter of inter-racial and inter-ethnic marriage.

There are two central metaphors in *Maru*. The first is related to the rain cloud which fails to produce rain. In *Maru*, a comparison is implied between the cloud which fails to produce rain and the chief who fails to relieve the distress of his people. The name given to the hero, Maru, as Head has mentioned in *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*, occurs in the saying ‘Maru a lwala’, meaning ‘The clouds are sick’, which the old
people in the village say when the rain clouds gather in September.  
Significantly Maru is a paramount chief elect. In traditional Tswana societies, the chief was looked to for relief in times of drought and was appealed to in his capacity as rainmaker. Even when traditional rain-making rites were discontinued, the connection between the chief and rain persisted. The name of the hero of the novel thus supports a comparison between the rain cloud which promises rain but does not produce it and the chief elect who fails to fulfil the expectations of his people. Maru not only refuses to assume the paramountcy, but, like the rain in the drought months, becomes distant and inaccessible. The use of rain imagery to allude to the chief's failure to live up to the expectations of the people is not unusual in southern African literature.

Other parallels may be drawn between the behaviour of Maru, the paramount chief elect, and the rain cloud. Maru's deliberations as he contemplates withdrawal from the community may be compared with the activity of the clouds threatening rain. The villagers' attempts to make Maru assume his hereditary office have a parallel in the attempts in former times to make the clouds produce rain by observing special rites. Maru is, however, inscrutable and his intentions are as unpredictable as the rain. His unfathomable nature suggests a further comparison with the rain which, in traditional Tswana societies, was believed to have a distinct personality. Moreover, in popular belief in those societies, wrongdoing in the community could 'spoil' the clouds and drive away the rain. Correspondingly in the novel, Maru becomes disgusted with the behaviour of his people and withdraws from the community.

Maru's disappearance from the community indicates a change in the nature of the society, which is comparable to the effect which lack of rain has on the land. His disappearance marks a break in the custom, for it is clear that he expects Moleka and Dikeledi, prototypes of 'the future kings and queens of the African continent' to succeed him, and not his half-brother Morafi. It also refers to the change in political orientation which is observable in modern African societies where the chief, no longer the centre of tribal life, has lost his magico-religious function. Reference to this kind of change is suggested by the qualities contrasted in Maru and Moleka. Maru is 'rich in speculation and mystery' (p. 105); Moleka cannot see beyond 'the real, the immediate, the practical' (p. 73). The imagery based on the seasonal cycle suggests, however, only the temporary ascendancy of the secular over the religious principle, for, although Maru has withdrawn his influence, he contemplates intervention if sufficiently provoked.

In the novel, as in the local tradition on which Head draws, it is the
anger and consequent withdrawal of the rain which allows the sun to dominate the land. The failure of the rain cloud to produce rain may thus be seen as a basic metaphor employed in the story and combining references to the fertility of the land, the economic prosperity of the community and the spiritual well-being of the people within it.

The other important metaphor in the novel is based on the alternation of sun and moon in the solar cycle. Sun and moon are associated with two types of personalities and with two ways of exercising power. Comparisons of Moleka with the sun are explicit, as, for example: 'Moleka was a sun around which spun a billion satellites. All the sun had to do was radiate force, energy and light' (p. 58). The sun, which is here characterised by boundless and uncontrolled energy, may be contrasted with the fretful and abortive rain cloud.

Head further conveys the violence and forcefulness of Moleka's nature by associating him with the thundercloud. This association appears, for example, in the first description of him: 'A young man sat alone.... There was a heavy thunder-cloud around his eyes. He looked grim and vehement and gruesomely ugly. When he spoke his voice had such projection and power that the room vibrated' (p. 27). The connection between the sun and thunder is familiar in myth where the synthesis of sun-god and storm-god is not unusual. When the sun and the thunder-cloud are brought together in the image of 'a rainbow of dazzling light' appearing from behind 'a stormy sky' (p. 30), they suggest the two extremes of Moleka's personality and his mercurial temperament.

In contrast with Moleka, Maru is identified with the moon: 'Did the sun have compassion and good sense? It had only the ego of the brightest light in the heavens. Maru preferred to be the moon. Not in any way did he desire Moleka's kingdom or its dizzy, revolving energy' (p. 58). In the novel, as in traditional African oral poetry, the sun represents power which displays itself openly, and the moon power which is held in reserve or exercised in secret. As contrasted with the moon which has been popularly perceived as a subtle and enigmatic force, the sun represents power which is ostentatious and forthright. Moleka and Maru, Head thus suggests by the opposition of sun and moon, display two polarities of leadership. Maru's identification with the moon also links him very directly with the force which, in local myth and folklore, was believed to control the rain and reinforces the symbolism related to rain. As 'kings of opposing kingdoms' (p. 34), neither Maru nor Moleka is wholly good or evil. Maru gives up temporal power to pursue a personal romantic ideal. In doing this he also initiates a desirable social change, for in taking a Masarwa woman as his wife and recognising her as an...
equal he opens a door for other members of her oppressed tribe. Moleka, who is capable of generosity but is uncompromising and violent in his methods, is bound to a worldly ideal. Maru’s enigmatic and brooding personality is attuned to the ‘darker’ side of life which, in this novel, is associated not with the forces of ignorance and reaction but with intuitive wisdom and mystery. The charismatic Moleka belongs to the public sphere in which personal longings are subordinated to considerations of social status. Thus Maru’s withdrawal to his secret garden both symbolises the triumph of individuality over the demands of public office and reflects a more secular orientation in the society from which he has withdrawn.  

In the change from the period of semi-darkness (symbolised in the dominance of the moon) to the period of sunlight (symbolised in the dominance of the sun) Head suggests, by the contrast between Maru and Moleka, life may be denuded of its mystery. The compensations which the new enlightened age brings are more positively presented in When Rain Clouds Gather where she dwells on the technological innovations which can relieve harsh living conditions. In Maru Head is more concerned with the questions which a new and more secular orientation in the society raises about the most useful course of action for the individual.

In Maru, Head has not only broadened the reference of the events described but has also effectively employed conventions of traditional African poetry and narrative to illuminate contemporary problems. As in When Rain Clouds Gather, she relies on imagery derived from the natural setting to convey emotions and moods of characters; concrete images are used to express intensities of feeling which are usually described in abstract terms. In using nature imagery in this way, Head relates the language of the novel to the folk tradition and emphasizes the interaction between her characters and their natural environment.

In A Question of Power, Head reinforces the symbolism derived from the natural setting and local oral tradition with references to Egyptian, Classical and Oriental mythologies. While the emphasis is still on the inner life of her main character, she also directs attention to the material concerns of the society. As in When Rain Clouds Gather, Head gives a detailed picture of agricultural activities in rural Botswana.

A Question of Power describes a woman’s struggle to recover from mental breakdown. Elizabeth, the heroine of the novel, is haunted by two apparitions which she identifies with two men whom she has seen briefly in the village. These figures, Sello and Dan, dominate the fantasy world into which she is increasingly drawn as she loses contact with the society
around her. Eventually she achieves equilibrium and is able to partici-
pate meaningfully in the community, which, in its own way, has helped
her to survive her ordeal. Sello, like Maru, is associated with the creative
principle and the sombre side of life. He is also identified with the
religious principle and with power exercised through love. Sello is
‘opposed by personalities whose powers, when activated, rumbled across
the heavens like thunder’. Among these are Medusa and Dan; the
latter, like Moleka, is associated with the sun and with thunder.

Elizabeth’s story suggests analogies not only with that of a woman who
is pursued by jealous rivals but also with the situation of an individual
claimed by conflicting loyalties. It may be related both to the religious
and to the political context. Sello is modeled on a passive god who allows
evil to coexist with good, and Dan on an autocratic and whimsical god.
Elizabeth may be compared with the medium who is possessed by the
god. Sello and Dan also recall two types of political leaders — one
relying on moral persuasion and personal example, and the other
popular appeal.

In *A Question of Power*, the struggle for physical survival in ‘barren terri-
tory’ is still the paradigm of the conflicts between characters. The village
of Motabeng, ‘perched on the edge of the Kalahari desert’ is very much
like Golema Mmidi, and its name means ‘the place of sand’ (p. 19). Motabeng experiences ‘desert rain which dried up before it reached the
ground’ (p. 20), but, like the villagers in Golema Mmidi, the inhabitants
of Motabeng are aware of hidden reserves of water underground. Like
Golema Mmidi, Motabeng gives the impression of a waste land but
possesses the potential to renew itself. The land itself, in this novel, again
supplies a concrete image of the ‘arid terrain’ in which the ‘hard conflict
of good and evil’ (p. 61) takes place.

The daytime and nighttime appearances of the village provide images
of the opposition of the powers which Sello and Dan represent. As in
*When Rain Clouds Gather*, Head associates darkness with traditions and
beliefs which supply an area of stability for individuals in the society but
which also restrict them. These forces which create areas of security, she
suggests, also create prejudice and irrational behaviour. Sunlight is
associated with the conscious and the known and with the new ideas,
products of the intellect, which give hope for progress. Again, it is the
paradoxical nature of the agents of reaction and progress which
preoccupy Head, for, like darkness, sunlight and what it symbolises are
shown to have terrifying aspects. Through imagery related to the inter-
action of darkness and light, she demonstrates the consequences of the
separation of spiritual and intellectual concerns.
As in the earlier novels, differences in the personalities and behaviour of opposed characters are suggested by their association with the constellations. Sello is associated with the moon. His power, which is spiritual, moves and works like 'a flame in the dark night' (p. 41). His association with the moon implies not only his ability to coexist with an antagonistic element but also the waxing and waning of the principles which he represents, over time. Dan is identified with the sun, which, as its zenith in the Botswana landscape, dissipates all other influences. Dan's association with the sun indicates his denial of the validity of any position but his own.

In responding to the influences exerted by Sello and Dan, Elizabeth is constantly attempting to reconcile the principles represented in the images of darkness and light. As a coloured person, she is a combination of both, for she is both African and European. As a South African she comes from a society in which the two have been separated racially, culturally and socially. Medusa, the embodiment of the reaction and divisiveness which hinder harmony at any level, observes with resentment: 'Too many people the world over were becoming mixed breeds and shading themselves down to browns, yellows and creams' (p. 63). The experiences of Elizabeth, the woman of mixed heritage who is pulled in two different directions by sharply polarised forces (represented in the images of darkness and light) may be related to the experiences of the societies in which Head has lived. Elizabeth's need to balance the two sides of her nature reflects the need in these societies to effect racial harmony and to reconcile radically different value systems.

In associating Sello with the moon, Head also identifies him with Buddha and with Osiris, the god of the Egyptian lunar cult. In Elizabeth's mind Sellos' lunar influence temporarily gives way to Dan's radiating light. The correspondence which may be observed, for example, between the change in Elizabeth's outlook and the situation described in Egyptian mythology when the Osirian lunar cult yielded place to the solar cult of Ra indicates Head's intention to link narrower social concerns with broader existential themes. Dan's ascendancy in Elizabeth's mind is described in imagery which suggests an initially exhilarating event, the advent of a 'transforming new vision ... alive to redress the balance of the old'. While Sello's power waxes and wanes, Dan's rise is meteoric and his decline sudden. Like the sun he moves boldly from one end of the horizon to another. It is interesting to note how the image of the sun dissipating the darkness at the end of Part 1 (p. 100) which marks the point at which Dan's power supersedes Sello's and Medusa's combines references to several mythologies. In the first place,
the image conveys the resurgence of vitality in Elizabeth, associating sunrise with resurrection as in Khoisan myth.\(^{31}\) In the second place, it incorporates a conventional metaphor in traditional praise poetry referring to the coming of the chief.\(^{32}\) Finally, it integrates this metaphor with a reference to Perseus’ slaying of the Gorgon which occurs on the previous page of the novel. In Classical mythology, Perseus’ slaying of Medusa is also interpreted as a reference to light dissipating darkness.\(^{33}\)

The allusion to the wider body of methology suggests a further application for the events described in the novel. Thus the specific change taking place in Elizabeth’s mind reflects not only a situation in her immediate society (the analogy between the human organism and the social organism being implicit throughout the novel) but more generally the change in the outlook of a society when a seemingly sombre and oppressive influence yields to a seemingly more attractive and benign one. In Elizabeth’s situation, Dan’s apparently enlightened outlook, his reassuring boldness and his ideological commitment provide no better hope for the future than Sello’s.

Our examination of Head’s novels thus reveals a continuity in thematic preoccupations already remarked on by Arthur Ravenscroft who observed in the novels ‘a quite remarkable cohesion’ that makes them ‘a sort of trilogy’.\(^{34}\) This continuity is, as we have shown, reinforced by Head’s use of imagery and symbolism. In her three novels, the forces upon which the physical and material well-being of the society depends are compared with those which guide their spiritual and political life. The metaphors inherent in the images introduced in the novels create structures of meaning which are universally intelligible and which are, at the same time, specifically related to the physical conditions of living in Botswana.

NOTES


5. In Tswana rainmaking rites, for example, the women sing the song, 'We come from Waterless Valley', said to be 'a figurative expression for poverty and distress'. Schapera, *Rainmaking Rites of Tswana Tribes*, p. 7.


7. See, for example, Alice Werner, *Myths and Legends of the Bantu* (London: Frank Cass, 1968), pp. 21, 41 and 50.

8. 'Friction' between chiefs could, it was also believed, cause scarcity of rain. Schapera, *Rainmaking Rites of Tswana Tribes*, p. 22.


15. Schapera, *Rainmaking Rites of Tswana Tribes*, p. 106.


17. Schapera has pointed out that chiefship remains hereditary. *The Tswana*, p. 51. Morafie's name, however, associates him with tribe (morafe) and thus with the old order which Maru wants to change.


19. The growth of enmity between Maru and Moleka also reflects both Bantu and Khoisan myths of the origin and separation of powers which were formerly combined either in the divinity or in the chief. Khoisan myth, as Janet Hodgson has observed, revolves around the death of the chief of the first race of men which caused 'the separation of the two shadows or presences of the chief to which are related the dualistic concepts of light and darkness, night and day, sky and earth, male and female, good and evil and life and death'. *The God of the Xhosa* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 36.

20. See pp. 74, 80 and 85 in addition to that cited in the text.


23. Among Khoisan peoples, for example, the moon was addressed as raingiver. Schapera, *The Khoisan Peoples of South Africa*, pp. 175-176.

24. In obeying his 'inner voices' Maru recognises a new source of control coming from within the self rather than from tradition or 'the will of the ancestors'. Secularization is also symbolized both by the implied break with custom and by the character of Moleka to whom he yields place.
25. For example, both Margaret’s happiness and her partial involvement with Moleka are suggested by the expression, ‘half suns glowing on the horizons of her heart’ (p. 92). Similarly Moleka attracted to Margaret is aware of a portion of his body ‘like a living, pulsating sun’ (p. 31).


31. See, for example, Hodgson, *The God of the Xhosa*, p. 36.

32. See, for example, Opland, *Xhosa Oral Poetry*, p. 12.


Douglas Blackburn’s
*A Burgher Quixote*

Many writers, some of whom have much more established literary reputations than Blackburn, have been attracted by the possibilities suggested by the situation in South Africa at the end of the last century for satire. However, without exception none of their works has endured or holds very much more than historical interest for readers today. All satire that is rooted in the particular and topical runs the risk of becoming obscure in time and overtaken by events that supplant the very issues it seeks to attack and ridicule; and herein lies much of the essential difference between Blackburn’s work and that, say, of Munro, Chesterton and Belloc. Their satires are focused on particular topicalities; their interest goes little beyond attacking specific personalities and incidents of the day. Blackburn’s satire, on the other hand, tries to encompass a much broader vision of human folly and hypocrisy as he attempts to come to grips with the nature of capitalist imperialism in conflict with and corrupting a rural and theocentric republic; he also focuses in a general sense on the chivalric tradition transplanted into the wilds of Africa. Thus, part of the intention of this paper is to show why Blackburn’s novel deserves consideration on its own merits and is, moreover, worthy of being acknowledged as one of the important works in the development of South African literature.

At least one contemporary critic and several of Blackburn’s contemporary reviewers are in agreement that *A Burgher Quixote* is a significant literary achievement. *Blackwood’s Magazine* described it as

a model of irony, simple and sustained. Nowhere is there any faltering, nor any forgetfulness of the method employed. And how great this achievement is will be understood if we consider the few ironists that our literature may boast. To the ironist one temptation is constant: he becomes so earnest in his desire to prove his point that he drops into argument, or even into morality. Of this cardinal sin Sarel Erasmus is always guiltless. He never knows, what is patent to the reader, that he is a sorry scamp. He preserves from beginning to end the beautiful appearance of sim-
The author of Prinsloo of Prinsloosdorp has given us another work, which will be read with entertainment by all who appreciate the best of fiction with a firm basis in fact. Among the scores of novels written in the late war the Burgher Quixote will stand out foremost in its power of literary expression and striking humorous portraiture.

In addition an earlier review, that appeared in The Spectator, of Blackburn’s Prinsloo of Prinsloosdorp (1899), the first novel in the Sarel Erasmus trilogy, described Blackburn as ‘a true disciple of Swift’.

The title of Blackburn’s novel invites a comparison with Cervantes’ Don Quixote. Although the heroes of both novels are from different eras and different social classes, they have more in common than is at first apparent. Blackburn’s Sarel Erasmus describes himself as ‘A Don Quixote, fighting on behalf of Great Britain against the folly and ignorance that have caused so much loss and suffering’. Like Cervantes’ hero, he is a pursuer of lost causes in a world he does not understand. Similarly, Sarel stands in many respects for an age that has passed. But, whereas Don Quixote’s monomania leads him into a twilight world of chivalric romance as he loses his grip on reality, Sarel struggles to adapt to the demands of the present. It is within the context of Sarel’s struggle, which in a sense stands as a paradigm of the Boers’ struggle to come to terms with the demands of the new century, that Blackburn is able to lay bare the inconsistencies, contradictions and inadequacies of both the old and new ways, using much the same techniques that Cervantes does. And it is here that the clue to much of the strength of A Burgher Quixote lies. Many of the follies and much of the hypocrisy that Blackburn ridicules are sufficiently generalised to enable his satire to transcend the moment and become universal in its application. Although the British and the Boers are the initial and most obvious butts of his ridicule, Blackburn’s criticism extends to exposing the false heroics of war, the dubious advantages of industrial capitalism, religious hypocrisy, the rationalised arguments people use to convince themselves of their own rectitude, indifference to suffering and, in the end, the romantic tradition of love.

Blackburn’s strength as a satirist lies in his ability to focus on the particular and the general at the same time, to be able to generalise the indi-
individual and topical sufficiently to give it a universal dimension. Thus, like *Don Quixote*, his novel avoids the pitfall of becoming too topical and therefore with the passage of time merely obscure. On the other hand, because *A Burgher Quixote* is founded in a particular era and set of circumstances, Blackburn is able to dramatise the general points he makes and give them a sense of immediacy. For example, the formal elements in his novel create a strong tension with the realistic description he gives of the world. That is, the formal pattern of the novel determines to a large extent the reader's attitude to the narrator and he story he tells 'boldly and honestly ... [of the] truthful story of the struggles after righteousness of a once oprecht Burgher of the late South African Republic [himself] with a full account of the temptations that assailed him at the hands of the clever and educated wicked, [who] in the end brought about his fall' (p. 1). Sarel begins and ends his 'truthful story' while sitting in jail, waiting to know what his fate will be. It is a story in which he has a large vested interest and which he little realises reveals more of the truth than he would care to admit. Although Sarel conforms more to the picaresque type of hero or traditional trickster than to the model provided by Don Quixote, he is, like his literary predecessor, paradoxically spiritually superior to those characters in the novel who have a firm grip on reality. For, although Sarel is a rogue with an eye to the main chance, he none-theless retains his naïveté in the face of modernity. As a consequence he never fully understands what is happening to him, and, instead of adapting to the world, becomes more often than not its victim. The knaves in *A Burgher Quixote* like those in Cervantes' novel are those who can handle reality most successfully. For all that, Blackburn's satire is never vicious. He never allows his indignation against human folly or greed or cowardice to overwhelm his sense of humour. His artistic integrity is such, in this novel at least, that he never resorts to invective, preferring instead to use the elements of irony and fantasy to make his point.

The principle that informs Sarel's character is an ironic one: if he condemns anything in other people he is likely to be found guilty of a similar offence fairly soon. For all his conniving and using his position as public prosecutor, smallpox tax-collector and market master for his own gain, Sarel remains a victim. He may be irredeemably corrupt, but his corruption remains on the level of that of the petty official. By comparison the world he inhabits is infinitely more corrupt, more self-seeking, more treacherous. His crimes are largely the result of self-deception.

He is persistently trapped by his own disclaimers to objectivity: 'I am not given to boasting, and least of all of my forefathers' (p. 5), he writes,
and then follow three pages of the deeds and achievements of his ancestors, which he recites with naive pride, oblivious of the irony that lies behind what he has to say. Unfortunately, space does not permit more than two paragraphs of Sarel’s family history to illustrate this point:

When I look back on the work I have done, — being yet only twenty-eight years of age, — I can see that people who put importance on good breeding have much good cause, for all the Erasmuses, with a few exceptions, have been marked by great qualities above their fellows, and all of them have done something out of the common, even the bad ones being horribly and unusually clever in their wickedness. It would seem that the family was destined to be, even as the original Erasmus was, teachers and instructors of their fellow-men, for the stories told of my ancestors in Cape Colony are largely made up of records showing their superiority. It was an Erasmus who first made up for a bad grape harvest by putting Cape gooseberries with the wine, which has since been the universal habit. Another Erasmus discovered the Dassie serpent — that great snake with the head of a rabbit and body of a reptile, only seen about the season of Nachtmaal; though there be those that say my ancestor came upon a puff-adder that was just swallowing a rock-rabbit. But those that said this did not stand well in the kerk, and afterwards were proved to be infidels.

A third Erasmus discovered a way to make medicine for smallpox and scurvy out of a prickly pear of a particularly malignant and fast-growing kind, that was making the best-ground on his farm useless. There happened to be in Simon's Bay certain British ships visited badly with both these diseases. My ancestor offered to make large quantities of the medicine if the captains would let their sailors dig up all the prickly pear roots, which they did. But when some of those who took the medicine got worse, the captains said that it was a trick planned by Erasmus to get his farm cleared cheaply, and they tried to make the Governor of Cape Colony order that the work be paid for; but the ships being English, and the governor a Hollander who hated Englanders, he refused, and there was nearly war between the two countries.

Sarel’s inheritance is almost amoral. He passes no comment on the dubious conduct of his ancestors. Whether they make wine with gooseberries, or discover fabulous creatures such as the Dassie serpent, seen, one is allowed to presume, only after copious quantities of surreptitiously consumed Communion wine meant for Nachtmaal, or whether they trick the English into clearing their farms, it is all one to him. Blackburn builds into Sarel’s character an element of innocence which disguises the satire that is implicit in much that he says, and therefore makes it that much more effective. Sarel’s ancestors may not have been much better than petty crooks given to occasional bouts of the DTs, but they were still smart enough to get the English to clear their farms for them for nothing. Blackburn ensures that Sarel retains the reader’s sympathy by showing him not only as the victim of external circumstance but also of his own
ineptitude. Sarel never gains from his roguery, nor does he whine or complain about how fate has treated him; he can muse philosophically that even jail has its advantages:

John Bunyan, Sir Walter Raleigh, and I are striking examples of the blessing that prison-life may become to those who know how to use and value it by thinking out, properly and fully, thoughts that have stayed but a short time in the heart during freedom; for when such finished thoughts are put upon paper, they become of value to our fellow-creatures. (p. 244)

Sarel’s choice of Bunyan and Raleigh with whom to bracket himself is not fortuitous. He wishes to be judged by association. There is a tradition of sympathy for the imprisoned underdog in Britain which his creator allows Sarel to exploit. Both Bunyan and Raleigh spent portions of their lives unjustly in jail, where they wrote their masterpieces; both were the victims of political forces beyond their control. Desirous to the last of seeming to be a virtuous man unjustly treated, Sarel cannot refrain from trying to turn the situation to his advantage and win the reader’s sympathy. The irony is compounded by the fact that, for all his unctuous and patronising tone, he has been duped and is in jail unjustly.

Another formal device that Blackburn uses that contributes significantly to the success of his novel is the first person narrator which gives the story a strong element that is perhaps best described as semi-dramatic. In other words, the success of the author’s narrative derives to a large degree from his mastery of the colloquial idiom; that is, the Taal transposed into English. Blackburn’s ear is faultless as he captures the flavour of the Taal, its vocabulary and syntax, in English. The result is an ideolect that savours not only of the Taal but expresses the literary pretentiousness of Sarel who can lay claim to having read at least Don Quixote, Pilgrim’s Progress and the writings of Sir Walter Raleigh and Shakespeare, from whom no doubt, as a second language speaker, he learnt most of his English. But there is another dimension to Sarel’s decision to tell his story in English not unrelated to the circumstances in which he finds himself at the beginning of his tale: he is anxious to impress his captors with his sincerity to become ‘a loyal British subject, and do all that lies [in him] to prevent Great Britain being again deceived by those who would perhaps form another corrupt Boer Government in some other part of South Africa’ (p. 16). Incidentally, he hopes this way to save his own skin and perchance to return to his ‘old profession of public prosecutor, but in a larger and better paying dorp’ (p. 16), that is, a dorp with a greater potential for the misappropriation of public funds.

Sarel’s explanations of his early achievements and conduct as a public
prosecutor before the war not only point to his own view of the world around him but also allow Blackburn to comment in passing on the corruption of Kruger’s pre-war civil service. The question that is left hanging is: what were the economic and social conditions that promoted such widespread corruption?

Of my six years’ experience as public prosecutor in the court of my father-in-law I will not occupy time in saying much, for if I once began to say all that I might, I should fill many chapters, as there is much in my career that needs explaining, especially to those who know not the ways of officials of the Transvaal. It is sufficient that I should say that by nature honest and kind-hearted, I was never properly understood or appreciated. I confess that I now and then made mistakes, for having to learn my law as I went on from a landdrost who knew none himself, and having to fight clever advocates from Johannesburg who knew more law than all the landdrosts and public prosecutors of the land, it was not to be wondered at that my law was not always of the best quality. But it should not be forgotten that my salary was not large, and even then, I was much more successful in getting convictions than my father-in-law was in having them upheld on appeal.

As is usual with public prosecutors, my most successful and profitable work was in breaking down in my cases, which was done by purposely putting in a wrong date or name in the summons and not defending it when the lawyer for the defence objected; for I hold with the great English lawyers who say it is better that fifty guilty men escape than that one innocent man be convicted. Therefore I could never see wrong in taking a reward to see the weak and merciful side of any case for the prosecution. I am not wishful to take part in the great and long discussion on the morality of officials who take payment from the public, for I have long since agreed with that Transvaal judge and the late President Kruger, who declared that it is neither wrong nor is it bribery to give an official a reward for paying special attention to your case, any more than it is unrighteous to give a policeman a few shillings for keeping an eye on your house while you and your family are at Nachtmaal. Such a reward is but an inducement to further vigilance; and I freely confess that I have often been able to see the weakness in my summons when I have been promised a reward if the accused should be acquitted. Otherwise I might have been careless and got a conviction that would have been upset on appeal, causing unnecessary expense, and making both my father-in-law and myself appear ridiculous — a thing no man who values his professional reputation can afford. (pp. 12-13)

When Sarel goes on to reveal how he and his father-in-law dealt with cases involving drunk miners, for example, Blackburn is able to touch on an issue that was the cause of much controversy and concern in the Transvaal at the time:

When prosecuting miners for drunkenness I always tried to find out how much money they had spent on drink in the dorp, which was often the whole of their monthly cheque; and in stating the case I would mention that the prisoners had spent so much, instead of doing as some did, go to Johannesburg and squander their money there, only coming back to finish their drunkenness in the dorp on credit. My
father-in-law always favourably considered such cases and made the fine no more than the prisoner had left. Naturally this good nature was made matter for spiteful comment by the Rooinek papers, which went so far as to state that my father-in-law was interested in canteens in the dorp when as a matter of fact he was only partly owner of one; while the ‘Critic’ actually declared that he issued permits for drunkenness, an utterly false charge, seeing that there was no such printed form issued to landdrosts. (pp. 14-15)

It should not be forgotten that prior to the war of 1899-1902 the partnership of A.H. Nellmapius, I.A.B. Lewis and Sammy Marks held a monopoly for the distilling of alcohol in the Transvaal. This was perhaps the most notorious of all the concessions granted by Kruger’s government, but certainly not the only one. Charles van Onselen points out that the consumption of cheap alcohol by black miners worked in favour of the mining companies: ‘the more money the mine-workers spent on liquor, the less they saved; and the less they saved the longer they worked before returning to the peasant economies of their rural homelands.’

It is significant that a large proportion of the shares in the company that held the monopoly was held by South African mining capitalists. In contrast to the petty corruption that Sarel and his father-in-law indulged in, there is by implication the much more ambitious, efficient and successful exploitation by the capitalist financiers of labour and resources on the Rand. Blackburn was under no illusions about the motivation and morality of the Uitlanders in Johannesburg:

Here in Johannesburg the men who by act or word admitted that one had any duty higher than the consideration of his own interests could be regarded with suspicion and contempt.... Who are the supporters and admirers of Rhodes in South Africa? Almost to a man they belong to the class who declare their faith in the doctrine of might against right, who shout for the extension of an empire or anything else if they can share in the plunder.... If the enslavement of the workers, the crushing out of the poor man and the perpetration of countless deeds of cruel injustice in the cause of capitalist ascendancy be a creditable work then Cecil Rhodes is of all men entitled to praise.

In comparison the corruption practised by Sarel and his father-in-law is of almost negligible proportions. But more importantly, Blackburn suggests that if it were not for what he calls in another context ‘the grossest, most material, unscrupulous and sordid community that civilisation has produced’ neither the opportunity nor the motivation for public corruption on anything like the scale that it was practised at the time would have existed. It is against this background that Blackburn retains the reader’s sympathy for Sarel. His artless and transparent claims to being ‘honest and kind-hearted’ and never being ‘properly
understood and appreciated' are so obviously attempts to rationalise the manner in which he accepts bribes. The tactic of confessing his mistakes is designed to gain the reader's sympathy, particularly as he goes on to depict himself as the victim of a poor education and the 'clever advocates of Johannesburg'. He tries, in fact, to paint a picture of himself as the poor boy who has been frustrated in his efforts to make good by the wiles of the 'clever and educated wicked'.

Part of Sarel's charm lies in the fact that he always overstates his case in order to make it sound the more convincing. As a consequence he reveals more to his audience than he realises. The little boast about his success at getting more 'convictions than [his] father-in-law [had] in having them upheld on appeal' is the first of several clues as to how he and his father-in-law, working together as public prosecutor and landdrost, managed to make the law a profitable business. However, Blackburn is careful to suggest that the processes of law are not entirely in the hands of unrestrained licence. Sarel the petty official may be able to get away with accepting bribes, but his father-in-law does not have the same success. Many of his judgements are reversed on appeal. The implication is that there is a limit to the corruption practised in the courts, that it is confined largely to the lower functionaries in the court, and is not found as readily in the upper echelons of the bench. Sarel's character gives Blackburn the opportunity, in the midst of all the comedy, to inject a note of restraint to counter the more violent accusations of the jingoese who would have blackened Kruger's administration irredeemably. Also, Blackburn always lets economic pressures show — Sarel was never paid enough to be honourable.

It is worthwhile spending some time examining Blackburn's picture of the Boers in this novel. In the following passage, for example, credulous old Piet Faurie is sold a bottle of foul sticky medicine by an English apothecary. The medicine is said to guarantee immunity from exploding lyddite shells, the terror of the Boer commandos:

Piet, being foolish, thought it must be good medicine because it had a dreadful smell, being what is called asafoetida. Piet took a very large quantity with him when he went with the commando to Sandspruit, and at first caused great trouble, for the Burghers would not have him in any tent because of the odour, until he told them it was a cure for lyddite, when they all begged some, and rubbed their heads so many times a day that the Kafir servants could only be got to come near them with the sjambok. But the cruel part of the business was that the stuff was no protection at all, as was proved very soon, for the very first Burgher killed by lyddite had not only rubbed his head, but his body, and had been living alone in the veld for a week, as the others would not have him with them. (p. 25)
This episode is amusing in its own right, but its humour is not untouched with pathos. Sarel, who spends most of the war in a double-bind situation, trying to defect to the British to save his own skin, is intent on exposing the Boers' lack of sophistication and gullibility. His object is twofold: to discredit his countrymen, and to present himself, by contrast, in a favourable light to his potential British audience. Unwittingly, he goes much further than that and reveals his own limitations as surely as he tried to ridicule his compatriots. For example, Sarel accepts without question the notion that 'Kafir servants' must be driven to work by means of a sjambok. The event elicits no comment from him, and he passes on immediately to the cruel fate that awaited the burgher who put his faith in the medicine to protect himself from being killed by lyddite. Without wishing to labour the point, the issue that is at stake here is Sarel's incapacity to recognise that the sjambokked 'Kafir servant' shares a common humanity with the Burgher who was killed. But it is the first person narrative form in the end that makes the throw-away line all the more effective as a comment both on Sarel's morality and the community from which he has derived his value system. The point that is being made is not so much about the gullibility of the Boers, but the really 'cruel part of the business' which is concerned with the Boers in general and Sarel's indifference to the 'Kafir servants'. The final effect is to re-enforce the notion that, whereas the Boers may be capable of feeling for their own, they remain indifferent to the suffering of others. This idea is given further strength by the fact that for all Sarel's attempts to disclaim his people and appear in a superior guise to them, he shares their values and attitudes, as for example when he describes how he dispensed justice to the black population:

...if we flogged all the guilty Kafirs, the landdrost got a name for cruelty with the Rooinek papers, and the Government would not pay all the fees of the jail doctor who examined the Kafirs for flogging; so there was nothing for it but to fine them what money they had, except when much labour was needed for the roads, when of course they were always sent to jail without the option of a fine. (pp. 13-14)

However, apart from the odd aside there are very few references to the black population in the novel. It would seem that for Sarel they were not an issue.

What English-speaking writers saw as evidence of Boer religious hypocrisy and exclusivism is used generally, in the fiction, as a vehicle to express moral outrage and re-enforce the negative stereotype of the bigoted and narrow-minded Boer. Few of the authors who were writing at the time of the conflict were able to distance themselves sufficiently to
use what they saw as the Boer attitudes to their religion as an integral part of a novel’s structure. Blackburn, however, was one of the few novelists at the time who used the relationship between the Boer and his religion and incorporated it into his overall fictional design. For example, after the apothecary’s medicine has failed to protect the Burghers from the fatal effects of lyddite, many of them feel that an unfair advantage has been taken of them:

In like ways did many unworthy Rooineks take advantage of the faith of trusting Burghers, thereby bringing the name of Englander into evil repute, as in the early days in the Colony and the Transvaal.

The predikant took the subject for his sermon one Sunday, and used words of wisdom when he made plain that while it was only right and godly to spoil an enemy, as did the Israelites the Egyptians, yet it was sinful to ride upon the ignorance of a Burgher; and he read the story of hairy Esau stealing the birthright of his brother and deceiving his father, for which he was justly punished by being made the servant of servants, as the British would be to the Boers whom they had so greatly deceived. The sermon had a very comforting influence, being preached on the Sunday after the battle of Elandslaagte when the people were beginning to doubt all that had been said about the Lord being on the Boer side. (p. 25)

While the reader may be tempted to laugh at the way the wily and ‘unworthy Rooineks [have taken] advantage of the faith of trusting Burghers’, such an attitude implies a particular moral stance which must compromise his view of what Sarel goes on to relate. However, here it is necessary to distinguish between Sarel’s intention and the author, Blackburn’s. Sarel is intent merely on showing up his brother Boers in a bad light in order to make his own standing with the British appear to the good. But it is what he unwittingly reveals that gives the reader a clue to the writer’s deeper intention. Firstly, the English are represented as sophisticated confidence tricksters, the Boers as gullible hicks. But the relationship between the two is more complex than that. The Biblical allusion to Jacob and Esau suggests that a special relationship exists between the two antagonists, a relationship as intimate, complex and fraught with the potential for jealousy and violence as the relationship between brothers. Far from being implacable enemies like the Israelites and Egyptians, between whom it is ‘only right and godly to spoil an enemy’, the implication is that the British and Boers are in fact bound to one another by bonds of blood. But there is a basic flaw in the predikant’s sermon. There are two stories in Genesis relating to Jacob and Esau. In both of them it is Jacob, not Esau, who resorts to dishonest means to deprive his brother of his birthright, not the other way around. The sermon may have been intended by the predikant to boost the flagging
morale of the Boers after their defeat at Elandslaagte, but Blackburn, by juxtaposing Rooinek exploitation of the 'ignorance of the Burgher' with the predikant's text on Esau, forces the reader to the uncomfortable conclusion that neither side has any claim to moral privilege. Further, it is worth noting that Sarel is uncritical of what the predikant has to say, noticing only the propaganda value of his speech for boosting morale. A further twist in this episode is the fact that it was Jacob who founded the people of Israel with whom the Boers identified so closely as God's chosen people. The parable had to be twisted if it was to have any value at all. It is a difficult thing to admit that the founding father of a people one has chosen to identify oneself with as the chosen people of God is depicted in the Bible as heartlessly materialistic and a confidence trickster.

Writing for a readership derived largely from a sophisticated imperial power, Blackburn was assured of a sympathetic response to any parody he might make of the Boers and their attempts to govern themselves according to the precepts of the Old Testament. This was particularly so as the official Anglican response to the war was that it was a holy war which was being waged in the interests of the black people of South Africa. The fact that President Kruger did not believe, on Biblical grounds, for example, that the world was round was perceived as added evidence of Boer backwardness and stubbornness.

In the following extract, Paul du Plooy represents a prejudice the British harboured about backward, bigoted, Bible-ridden Boers. Like so many deeply held views, it prevented the British from acknowledging very easily that there were other types of Boers. If one is to judge from the fiction of the time in which, for the most part, Boers are depicted as variations on Paul du Plooy, this kind of perception must have been widely held. However, in the character of Ben Viljoen, with whom he was well acquainted in real life, Blackburn presents the complementary hard-headed, practical side of the Boer people, which was not often perceived by the novelists. Viljoen is shown as no Bible-punching backvelder, but as a pragmatic Vechtgeneraal who has to cope with the immediate problems of keeping his men motivated and alert. According to Sarel, Ben Viljoen is credited with persuading General Piet Joubert to cross the border and invade Natal:

This success pleased him very much, for he was a young man who had had much to do with Rooineks, and did not care to read in his Bible how pride goeth before a fall. 'Nay,' said he, when an old Burgher named Paul du Plooy read him this, 'I believe that part which says the first shall be last and the last first, and the humble shall be exalted. That's me. So now go on horse-guard and take your Bible with you, and read it closer before you throw it at my head again.'
This Paul du Plooy had been a Dopper, but did nothing but study the Bible and quarrel with the deacons. He next went over to the Dutch Reformed Church, where the predikants are more college-learned; and they confuted old Paul so often that he left them and had a Church of his own made up of his family, though he was always trying to get Burghers to join, and did not even mind having Rooineks and Germans and a Jew, who only pretended to agree because Paul sold him tobacco cheaper than any one else, whereby the old man lost money.

When I heard Ben use these jeering words, and saw how abased the old Burgher was, I felt sorry for him; but before long I learned to mitigate my grief, for old Paul proved a great depression in the laager. He would come half-a-dozen times a day to Ben or the General, carrying his Bible and pointing out some verse which showed that the Boers were either in the right and were going to smite the Rooineks hip and thigh, or if we got a reverse it was a punishment for not holding more prayer-meetings, at which Paul did all the praying. As Paul always had a verse to prove what he said, and could talk more persuasively than an auctioneer, much time was wasted in listening to his discourses, which gave many Burghers an excuse for not fighting.

At last Ben Viljoen made an order that no more verses were to be shown him or the Burghers unless they encouraged fighting, and then they were not to be discovered until they had worked out true, — an order that puzzled Paul deeply, and for a time checked the output of prophecies. (pp. 33-34)

Here the reader is presented with a picture of a Boer who can quote from the Bible with the best of them to his own advantage. The difference is, he does so cynically, without any sense of trying to establish his own moral rectitude. Paul, in contrast, is concerned chiefly with assuaging his hurt ego. Unlike Viljoen, Paul is the victim of his own religious convictions. Viljoen reacts to the demands of the situation. In contrast Paul seeks prophecies and justifications. His position is a parody of that of the ancient seer or prophet whose function it was in ancient times to consult the oracles and give the commander advice about when it would be most propitious to join battle with the enemy. Putting one's trust in God, or the gods, before battle has long been a favourite ploy of generals, but seldom as effective as sound planning and imaginative and detailed strategy. Nonetheless, there is undeniable comfort to be drawn from the notion that the Lord is on one's side. Blackburn's Viljoen is well aware of the danger of committing all his military eggs to the Lord's basket; he prefers to leave his options open. Here Blackburn is touching on a weakness that bedevilled the Boer command structure at the beginning of the war. Initially, the Republic armies were dominated by cautious old men who were reminiscent, in many respects, of the patriarchs of the Old Testament. But after General Piet Joubert's death and General Cronje's defeat and capture at Paardeberg, it was Ben Viljoen and his contemporaries who took over: Louis Botha, De la Rey, De Wet and Smuts. It is
worth noting that when, after the war, Ben Viljoen, G.G. Munnik and C. Louis Leipoldt, all of them Afrikaners, came to write their novels in English about the war, none of them mentioned the Bible as playing any determining role in the lives of their characters or in the conduct of the war.

A crucially important element in Blackburn’s writing, particularly in *A Burgher Quixote*, is the use he makes of negative stereotypes of the Boers as a means of directing his satire at the very forces which were intent on exploiting and waging war against the Transvaal in the name of the high-sounding principles of imperialism. Blackburn uses the same technique to lay bare the false heroics of war and thereby strip it of its glamour. For example, many popular writers, including Kipling, referred to war as a game which should be approached in the same spirit as a Rugby or cricket match at a public school. The sentiments expressed in Sir Henry Newbolt’s ‘Vitai Lampada’ were well-known and applauded:

The sand of the desert is sodden red, —  
Red with the wreck of a square that broke; —  
The Gatling’s jammed and the Colonel dead,  
And the regiment blind with dust and smoke.  
The river of death has brimmed his banks,  
And England’s far, and Honour a name.  
But the voice of a schoolboy rallies the ranks:  
‘Play up! play up! and play the game!’

In contrast, it was a common belief, amongst the writers of popular fiction at any rate, that the Boers were cowards who took unfair advantage of cover and fled as soon as there was any possibility of being shot. In *A Burgher Quixote* Blackburn’s Boers appear at first glance to conform to this stereotype. At the beginning of the war they do not hesitate to apply for bogus medical certificates to avoid being called up for commando duty. In fact, Sarel ‘got a certificate from the district surgeon that [he] was suffering from an internal complaint that might prove fatal, not merely if [he] got into fighting, but even, as the doctor told [him] privately, if [he] got near to where the danger was’ (p. 22). For Sarel and his fellow burghers the acknowledgement of fear has nothing to do with their moral status, but is simply a part of the practical business of staying alive:

I have noticed, among other great peculiarities of the English that make them so different to us Afrikanders, one thing very particularly, and that not only in their talk, but in their books and newspaper writings. It is their obstinate refusal to confess like men that they know fear. How often have I heard young Rooineks, fresh come to
the country, boasting of being in danger, such as crossing a river in flood, or going close to a smallpox ambulance, and even playing cards during a thunderstorm, and saying they were not frightened. Now all this is vain boasting and unseemly, for it is natural and religious for men to have fear, as the Bible often shows; and for a man to proclaim that he knows not that godly feeling, which is given us that we may keep out of danger, is to confess himself a blasphemer. We Afrikanders are much more honest in this thing, for we are not ashamed to declare openly when we are afraid; and there is no phrase more often on our lips than, 'I got a bad schrick,' which means, 'I got a bad fright,' a thing no Rooinek would say, his vanity and ignorance of the Bible preventing him from being truthful in such matters. We have seen how dangerous such foolishness may be in war-time, for again and again, if the British had been more fearful, they would not have had so many of their soldiers killed. (p. 290)

Sarel has reason to suspect that the Rooineks are merely boastful in denying that they are ever afraid, for at the beginning of the war when he was given the job of recruiting men for commando duty many of the Rooineks who qualified were among the first to avail themselves of the racket Sarel and the district surgeon were working in false medical certificates.

Whatever the case, Sarel remains honest about his emotions, which is one of the reasons he retains the reader's sympathy to the end. Moreover, his experience never equips him to cope successfully with a world in which 'all's fair in love and war', in which honesty is regarded with 'suspicion and contempt'. Notwithstanding all his attempts to adapt to the new ways, he remains an amateur in a world increasingly dominated by professionals, be they soldiers or capitalist financiers.

It is difficult to reconcile the fact that although *A Burgher Quixote* was hailed as the Boer War novel of its day (it went through three editions shortly after it was published) it disappeared from view within a short space of time only to be rediscovered and recognised for its undoubted worth by researchers recently. In the absence of evidence it is only possible to speculate that Blackburn's humane values have not been hospitably received in the genre. However, by way of contrast it might be as well to place *A Burgher Quixote* briefly in the context of the other major works of satire that appeared at the time: H.H. Munro's *Alice in Pall Mall*, G.K. Chesterton's *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* and Hilaire Belloc's *Mr Clutterbuck's Election*. These writers, like Blackburn, focus on the war in a way that anticipates the sense of the absurd that has been characteristic of writers of war fiction of a much later and more cynical era. Whereas it may be generally expected that writers will conform to the ideological concerns of their times, research has revealed that this is not always the case. Satire especially tends to be non-conformist as it probes
and questions the received wisdom of the age. The satirists mentioned in this article are all to a greater or lesser extent exemplars of this asynchronous tendency of which Blackburn is certainly the best example. Unfortunately, there is not the space to devote to a similar examination of Munro, Chesterton or Belloc. Nonetheless, it is necessary to make some observations on their work before concluding. The element of fantasy, as the titles of Munro and Chesterton's novels suggest, is an important factor in determining the quality of their satire. For instance, Munro works within the absurd construct created by Lewis Carroll in Alice through the Looking Glass (1872). Munro has his Alice question a War Office spokesman, the White Knight (the Marquess of Lansdowne), about the tactics and weapons used in the war:

‘...have you ever conducted a war in South Africa?’ [asked the White Knight].

Alice shook her head.

‘I have,’ said the White Knight, with a gentle complacency in his voice.

‘And did you bring it to a successful conclusion?’ asked Alice.

‘Not exactly to a conclusion — not a definite conclusion, you know — nor entirely successful either. In fact I believe it’s going on still.... But you can’t think how much forethought it took to get it properly started. I dare say, now, you are wondering at my equipment?’

Alice certainly was; the Knight was riding rather uncomfortably on a sober-paced horse that was prevented from moving any faster by an elaborate housing of red-tape trappings.

‘Of course, I see the reason for that,’ thought Alice; ‘if it were to move any quicker the Knight would come off.’ But there were a number of obsolete weapons and appliances hanging about the saddle that didn’t seem of the least practical use.

‘You see, I had read a book,’ the Knight went on in a dreamy far-away tone, ‘written by some one to prove that warfare under modern conditions was impossible. You may imagine how disturbing that was to a man of my profession. Many men would have thrown up the whole thing and gone home. But I grappled with the situation. You will never guess what I did.’

Alice pondered. ‘You went to war, of course —’

‘Yes, but not under modern conditions.’

By means of burlesque and irony Munro ridicules the outmoded thinking of the War Office and the red tape that characterises the bureaucracy. He turns the British conduct of the war into a grim joke in order to lay bare the gross inadequacies of the generals and the Secretary of State for War, and their failure to realise that the enemy might go to war ‘under modern conditions’. The White Knight goes on to explain why the British troops in South Africa were sent obsolete equipment: if it fell into the enemy’s hands it would be of little use to him.

These writers, then, Munro, Blackburn, Chesterton and Belloc, reflect a view of war which is at odds with the more generally accepted heroic
picture that has pertained since the turn of the century to the present time. The point is not that a satirical view was unusual because it clashed with prevailing modes, but that the satire of these authors took the particular slant it did. Their satire does not have the savage wit of a Swift or a Pope, but conceives of the actions of men as grotesque, almost whimsical, attempts to come to terms with a bizarre and unpredictable universe which has more in common with the world as seen by an Ionesco or a Beckett than the world of static values and innocence of Henty, Hemyng or even Kipling.

NOTES

1. Some of the well-known authors and their now largely forgotten works that have contributed to the satire on the conflict include: H.H. Munro (Saki) {Alice in Pall Mall, 1900}; Frank Harris {How to Beat the Boer: A Conversation in Hades, 1900}; G.K. Chesterton {The Napoleon of Notting Hill, 1904}; and Hilaire Belloc {Mr Clutterbuck's Election, 1908}.


3. Quoted in Gray, p. 85.

4. Quoted in Gray, p. 86.

5. The other two are A Burgher Quixote and I Came and Saw (1908).


12. In a letter to Blackwood's in which he gives William Blackwood notice that he will be sending him the Ms. of A Burgher Quixote which he regards as 'the work of [his] life', Blackburn spells out his qualifications for writing with authority about the Boers:
   'Although I have followed up the new line I created in Prinsloo, and though the new work is strictly humorous, I have been very careful to keep as my objective throughout my desire to interpret and convey to English readers that strange mental attitude of the Boer which is always so great a puzzle to the newcomer, and leads to so much misunderstanding. I think I am justified in saying that I am accepted by South Africans as the leading literary exponent of Boer character. I have made a careful study of him for ten years, and have watched him in the Dorp, Veld, City and Battlefield, and I think I know him well, for he has been a delightful study. I have been on commando with him in two Kafir wars and had the specially good fortune to be the only English correspondent on the Boer side up to Elandslaagte,
where I was at the request of certain Hollanders put under arrest and conveyed over the border to Delagoa Bay, and later I went to the front on the British side and was badly wounded at the Battle of Pieter's Hill. Since then I have been recuperating in Natal and writing the present book, which as an old journalist — I think I am senior acting pressman in the Transvaal — is a successful attempt to present the Boer as he is, with due regard to his good as well as bad points and his limitations.' (Blackburn to Blackwood, 29 September 1902. *English in Africa*, p. 35.)

13. This presentation of the figure of the opportunistic Britisher who takes advantage of the relatively unsophisticated Boers and cheats them out of almost all they own has a long tradition in South African literature. Bonaparte Blenkins in Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* provides the literary model for a type for whom, for Schreiner and for Blackburn, 'Cecil John Rhodes is the embodiment of the unscrupulous plutocratic idea, a person utterly destitute of those humane considerations that should underlie the acts of a benefactor of his species' ('An Open Letter [To Mr W.T. Stead]', *English in Africa*, p. 10).


15. Blackburn and Viljoen had become good friends when they had both worked on *The Sentinel* newspaper in Krugersdorp in the late 1890s. Viljoen was eventually to succeed him as the paper's last editor. Manfred Nathan, himself a Boer War novelist, records in his autobiography *Not Heaven Itself* (1944) that Viljoen was the prototype of Sarel Erasmus. If this is true, Blackburn certainly did not stick closely to his original in creating his narrator. In a letter to his publishers Blackburn says of *A Burgher Quixote* that he was 'expecting a review of it by Ben Viljoen who [had] returned to Johannesburg and [was] the man of the hour' (Blackburn to William Blackwood, 4 July 1903, *English in Africa*, p. 39).


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**NEXT ISSUE — THE CARIBBEAN**

The next issue will be a Caribbean issue. Apart from fiction and poetry, it will include articles on Derek Walcott, Jean Rhys, Sam Selvon, Wilson Harris, and Orlando Patterson.
BAOBAB FRUIT PICKING (OR DEVELOPMENT IN MONKEY BAY)
(for Mary and David Kerr)

'We've fought before, but this is worse than rape!'
In the semi-Sahara October haze, the raw jokes

Of Balamanja women are remarkable. The vision
We revel in has sent their husbands to the mines

Of Jo'burg, to buy us large farms, she insists.
But here, the wives survive by their wits & sweat:

Shoving dead cassava stalks into rocks, catching
Fish in tired chitenje cloths with kids, picking

Baobab fruit & whoring. The bark from the baobab
They strip into strings for their reed wattle,

The fruit they crack, scoop out the white, mix with
Goat milk, 'there's porridge for today, children!'

The shell is drinking gourd or firewood split
(They used to grate the hard cores into girls’

Initiation oil once). 'But you imported the Boers,
Who visited our Chief at dawn, promising boreholes!'

These pine cottages on the beach shot up instead, some
With barbed wire fences fifty yards into the lake!

(What cheek!) Now each week-end, the 'blighted-tomato-
thighs in reeking loin-cloths' come, boating, grinning
At them baobab fruit picking. 'My house was right
Here!' Whoever dares check these Balamanja dreamers?

BURNING THE WITCH FOR RAINS (THE DARK CASE)

Is this perhaps the last of our old sluts
This witch frowning vacantly, condemned only

By her snuff-black gums & the stark veins?
When did matriarchal bones living in rotten

Thatch hatchback become a menace, people?
& does she muse upon her grimy shroud or

The bane of our brittle existence? Malignant
Village vigilantes stack up dry acacia twigs

& brambles, smarting for the witch's fire
After our cheek flaying, head shaving ritual.

The stern, omnipotent hand uncovers official
Evidence: exhibit one, an amorphous dark case

She's supposed to have locked up lightning
& thunder so the rains don't come. When one

Zealot opened it at the station, the box's
Bowels growled like bloodhounds, blinding him.

(The curious jury of kids bends with laughter)
Exhibit two, the bag of fertilizer she stole.

The malcontent apparently still believes in her
Mixed-planting with ashes & compost manures; how

Dare the rebellious dreadlocks resist as barking
Youth-leagers dive for their bloody antic rites...?
GYPSY FIRE, WOOD MOUNTAIN

The leap of flame, crack of wood essence
bursting in the burning, the sparks
thrust from the fire’s core
like satellites spun through the night,
these hold us here, gathered
around the late night fire circle.

We talk. Or we may lapse completely
into the long silences of fire-watching,
watching ourselves becoming the first
fire-fascinated people crouched
around the first dancing flames.
We read our history in the firelight.

Look closely into the flicker and whirl.
Somewhere in the fire the child stares back,
all that you have been. All that you’ve known.
Look closely. Each moment is there
lingering on the edges of the fire dance.
Know yourself if you would. Look again.

AIDE MEMOIRE

The world begins and ends in memory
What I remember is what I am.

My memory is imperfect, so am I.
I would not live with all I have known.
Did that blade of grass I plucked
as a boy to vibrate with my breath
really burst the air with shrillness?
Or does the sound it may have made
or even the soundlessness really matter?
A remembered world holds a reality
and a truth far stronger than echoes.
In the cupped hands of remembrance
the thin green reed of what we are
trembles with a rare sound that is ours.

JOHN THIEME

Robert Kroetsch and the Erotics of Prairie Fiction

Literary forms are products of the particular soils in which they have
grown and new settings may be expected to germinate new species. At
the same time the notion of 'regional' writing frequently elicits a contrary set of expectations: literature which is seen as characteristic of a particular locality habitually evokes the specificity of its landscape and society through modes which are akin to traditional classic realism. The Canadian Prairie novel is clearly, like most New World literary forms, the product of cultural cross-pollination, and yet seminal twentieth-century examples of the genre, such as Sinclair Ross's *As for Me and My House* (1941) and W.O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind* (1947), do little to upset the conventions of classic realism. Their focus is primarily on the small town and, although tension is generated by the exploration of its
relationship to the vast spaces of the Prairie, this focus makes superficial adherence to a fairly traditional fictional form possible. More recent Prairie novels are, however, hybrids of a different kind and many display all the characteristics of post-modernist fabulation, metafiction and deconstruction. As Laurence Ricou puts it, at the beginning of an essay on Robert Kroetsch’s *Badlands* (1975) and the American Tom Robbins’s *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1976):

The West has always been a mystery to the East. Recently, and I’m commenting here in a positive sense, the West has become a mystery to itself. The tracing of that mystery is made possible by the current prominence of whimsy as overt artistic procedure.... The new West according to Kroetsch and Robbins is a West made by women and whimsy, by a peculiarly gentle combination of whim and fantasy.

The world so imagined is neither Horizon nor Dodge City, but somewhere more exotic and magical and other-worldly: it’s a place of mystery, at once deceptive yet alluring. In fiction, much of this shift originates in the self-reflexive and comic qualities of the post-modern novel.

For Robert Kroetsch such a fiction is a natural enough emanation from the Prairie world. Landscapes which allow the eye uninterrupted vision to the horizon, except in those limited instances where humanity has imposed its presence, foreground the fact that apparently secure social and literary structures are no more than the temporary signatures of particular men and women. The conventions of classic realism begin to seem at best an inadequate vehicle for attempting to render the Prairie experience in fiction and at worst a totally irrelevant set of artificial rules, based on discourses of enclosure and regulation originally generated by European social situations.

Kroetsch’s novels are concerned with unnaming, uncreating and uninventing structures, so that habitual modes of perception are collapsed and the ground prepared for a primal encounter with the natural world, in which the writer may assume the role of Adam, the originator of all language. Kroetsch’s post-modernism is not, however, like the post-modernism of Borges and many of his American followers, an essentially asocial stance, but rather a direct response to the sense that a Prairie literature needs to be remade in an image which bears some relationship to the land. Kroetsch is not, like his Western Canadian contemporary Rudy Wiebe, a moralist, but he shares with Wiebe the desire to deconstruct received versions of Prairie history and replace them with a home-grown rather than a transplanted discourse.

In a 1979 essay entitled ‘The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction: An Erotics of Space’ Kroetsch examines Willa Cather’s *My Antonia* (1918) and *As for Me and My House* as paradigm Prairie texts. He suggests that
they are paradigmatic because they 'contain the idea of book', they give us 'a sense of how book and world have intercourse', discover the 'guises' and 'duplicities' of the western plains and 'offer, finally, an erotics of space' ('Fear', p. 47).

Throughout this essay Kroetsch repeatedly asks the question 'How do you make love in a new country?' He does not provide an explicit answer to this question, but he makes it clear that there is a relationship between love-making and story-telling, between actual erotics and textual erotics. Like such European theorists as Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva, writers with whose work he clearly has more than a nodding acquaintance, Kroetsch appears to be using erotics as a metaphor for literary creation and in a later essay, 'On Being an Alberta Writer', he comes back to the question 'How do you make love in a new country?' and offers an answer: 'One way to make love is by writing.' Since the concept of love is itself a linguistic construct — 'without writing,' Kroetsch says, 'I sometimes suspect there would be no such thing as love' — at this point erotics and writing begin to seem interchangeable. The relationship between the two no longer seems metaphorical, but rather metonymic.

Kroetsch's comments on My Antonia and As for Me and My House in his 'Fear of Women' essay are centrally concerned with the problematics of Prairie space. Both novels, as he sees it, portray the difficulty of establishing 'any sort of close relationship in a landscape — in a physical situation — whose primary characteristic is distance' ('Fear', p. 47). One way of containing space, he suggests, is to write a book: 'the literal closedness of the book' ('Fear', p. 47) imposes parameters. So the act of producing a text can be seen as parallel to the attempt to achieve a close relationship.

For Kroetsch, as both theorist and novelist, gender issues are of crucial importance, both in terms of social and literary relations. On the social level he explores stereotypical male and female roles and implies that a new basis for the man-woman relationship needs to be worked out in the Prairies. For the writer there is an analogous problem: the need to invent an appropriate syntax for describing such social relations.

As he sees it, the basic paradigm of the man-woman relationship in Prairie fiction is expressed by the dichotomy 'house: horse', a binary opposition which he paraphrases in various ways: 'To be on a horse is to move: motion into distance. To be in a house is to be fixed: a centering into stasis. Horse is masculine. House is feminine. Horse: house. Masculine: feminine. On: in. Motion: stasis. A woman ain't supposed to move. Pleasure: duty' ('Fear', p. 49). He also argues that traditionally
the expansiveness of storytelling is male and the closed space of the book is female. So woman comes to be equated with confinement both in the sense that she represents the domestic side of Prairie experience — she is the Penelope who stays home while her Odysseus ventures into the world — and in the sense that she is a Muse figure for the male, who is frequently a putative artist. Like Margaret Atwood in *Survival* (1972), Kroetsch describes a situation in which the artist is ‘paralysed’ and fails to produce any art at all. Jim Burden, the main narrator of *My Antonia*, is warned off the Middle European and Scandinavian immigrant hired girls of the Nebraska plains. He reads the *Georgics*, dwells on Virgil’s statement ‘I shall be the first, if I live, to bring the Muse into my country’ and realises that the immigrant hired girls are his potential Muses. Yet he deserts them, exhibits the fear of women by fleeing to the East and, by so doing, relinquishes the possibility of a close relationship with the Prairie landscape. On the other hand, the text of *My Antonia* provides just such a consummation, not only by celebrating the fortitude of the hired girls, but also by stubbornly refusing to travel East with Jim Burden and continuing to confine itself to the predicament of Prairie womanhood. The ‘My’ of the title can be read ironically, if we assume it is a product of Jim Burden’s authorial voice: he never has possessed Antonia except in temporary imaginative flights of his own. She is, however, as it were owned by the book in the sense that she has been instated as its eponymous heroine and has as good a claim to being regarded as the protagonist of this Western history as Jim Burden.

In *As for Me and My House*, the narrator Mrs Bentley is herself the Muse. Her husband Philip, the newly appointed minister of the symbolically named Prairie town of Horizon is another paralysed artist, obsessed with drawing pictures of Main Streets with their rows of false-fronted stores, a rather obvious metaphor for the hypocrisy of small-town society. Kroetsch comments that Philip Bentley has met and married his Muse, but the irony latent in this remark is immediately apparent to the reader of the novel, since the narrative assumes the form of Mrs Bentley’s diary, and, as Kroetsch notes, she is ‘almost pure talk, pure voice’, while he is almost ‘pure silence’ (‘Fear’, p. 48). Their marriage is a consummated, but sterile union. They have no children, but Philip becomes a father after he sleeps with a younger woman, who conveniently dies in childbirth, leaving the Bentley’s to take over the child they have been unable to conceive together.

*As for Me and My House* is riddled with ironies. These begin with the title. Initially and most obviously, it refers to the sermon which Philip always preaches to new congregations, which is based on the text ‘As For
Me and My House We Will Serve the Lord', but as the novel proceeds it becomes clear that Philip lacks any true sense of religious vocation and a moot point whose house the title is referring to. Kroetsch's 'Fear of Women' essay provides textual illustrations of how the novel's portrayal of the gender divisions of the society conforms to the horse: house dichotomy and ultimately it seems that the house of the title refers most obviously to Mrs Bentley's situation, trapped in her marriage to a feckless, failed artist, who for the most part treats her with indifference. Yet, it could be argued that Philip too is a victim of their situation, since he is a man who has been unhorsed into housedom by virtue of becoming a preacher and who has had his potential role of artist taken over by his Muse. The mode of narration has subverted the stereotypical gender patterns which the novel appears to have constructed on a thematic level, particularly through its association of the heroine with the fixed, claustrophobic house. Kroetsch writes: 'The male who should be artist is overwhelmed. The bride expects to receive as well as give. How do you possess so formidable a woman?' ('Fear', p. 49).

He concludes his essay by suggesting that marriage, the primary metaphor for social and literary relations in the Old World, ceases to have this function in the literature of the Great Plains. European models of gender relationships defy neat translation into this particular New World context:

... We cannot even discover who is protagonist: Antonia or Jim Burden? Philip or Mrs Bentley? Male or female? Muse or writer? Horse or house? Language or silence? Space or book? ... Here, the bride, so often, without being wife, turns into mother. The male cannot enter into what is traditionally thought of as marriage — and possibly nor can the female. The male ... takes on the role of orphan or cowboy or outlaw. He approaches the female. He approaches the garden. He approaches the house....

And only then does he realize he has defined himself out of all entering. If he enters into this marriage — and into this place — it will be he — contrary to the tradition of the past — who must make radical change. It will be he — already self-christened — and not the woman this time — who must give up the precious and treacherous name. ('Fear', p. 55)

In short, Kroetsch is outlining a situation in which traditional European gender roles may appear to obtain — the male is a wandering Odysseus, the female a domestic Penelope (the horse: house dichotomy) — but this is an illusion, for male travelling appears to be more a form of self-evasion than a quest, while women appear to be transcending the role of passive Muse figures, but find no fulfilment, because traditional marriage has broken down and a new ground for union has yet to be
established. In *Survival* Margaret Atwood comments on the absence of the Venus figure in Canadian Literature and Kroetsch is identifying a similar absence, as he remarks on the young woman’s progression from being a bride to being a mother without ever being a wife. The situation will only be remedied when a new syntax is established for Prairie relationships and, as Kroetsch sees it, the male must surrender his notion of autonomous identity — usually a requirement of the female, symbolised by her relinquishing her maiden name on her wedding day — if this is to come about.

I would suggest that Kroetsch’s fiction is, among other things, concerned with such redefinition of male identity and that his novels are structures which enact the quest for a new textual erotics. One can see how he both employs and transcends the stereotypes he identifies in his ‘Fear of Women’ essay by examining his third novel, *The Studhorse Man* (1970).

*The Studhorse Man* relates the adventures of Hazard Lepage, the eponymous hero, who travels through Alberta desperately trying to find a mare for his stallion Poseidon to cover, so that the breed may be preserved. Hazard’s occupation is a dying one, and, on one level, the novel may be read as an elegy for its demise, but at the same time the studhorse quest is fairly clearly related to the problematics of Western erotics that Kroetsch discusses in his ‘Fear of Women’ essay.

Hazard has been engaged to Martha Proudfoot for thirteen years. Martha is the owner of five mares that would seem to offer the solution to his problems, but instead of marrying her and settling down, Hazard roams the Prairies in quest of adventures, which mainly take the form of erotic interludes with other women. The novel is a post-Joycean comic Odyssey — the structure is actually patterned on Homer — but the main effect of the epic analogy is to draw attention to the metamorphosis which the traditional heroic quest pattern has undergone in the Western Plains. Hazard’s grail, the survival of the Lepage breed of stallion, would be comparatively easy to attain, if he were to sacrifice the values of ‘horse’ to those of ‘house’, and, with marriage having ceased to function as the primary metaphor for social relations, he eschews this in favour of a wandering picaresque career, in which he shows little respect for civil or social institutions. Indeed, he seems to epitomise the asocial, Rabelaisian world-view which Kroetsch, taking over the terminology of the Russian formalist critic Mikhail Bakhtin, elsewhere refers to as the ‘carnival-esque’.

Hazard is, of course, also the embodiment of the fear of women syndrome. This comes out clearly through the association of the mare
symbol with its French homonym, la mer. During World War I he has been told by a fortune-teller encountered on a battlefield, «La mer sera votre meutrière» ('The sea shall be your murderess'). As he journeys around Alberta, it becomes clear that 'mare' and 'mer' have become fused in his mind. Anything more than a casual encounter with a woman is feared by him as tantamount to death.

This can be seen in a scene where his virtue is assailed — and found wanting — by one of a number of predatory women whom he encounters on his travels. In Edmonton he is taken to bed in the provincial museum by a lady supposedly named P. Cockburn, an assistant curator who specialises in making 'life-sized wax figures' of 'illustrious Albertans' (p. 31) for the museum. He has been carried there while unconscious and awakens to find himself in a replica of the bedroom of the chief factor of the Hudson’s Bay Company post from which the city grew. P. Cockburn says she must make a model of Hazard; he replies by whispering '«Make my horse live»' (p. 33). Terrified of history, he opposes it with sexuality. And it seems he wins, though, as on many other occasions, the first-person narrator finds it impossible to provide us with precise details, since his only source of information is, he tells us, the sparse, phallogocentric account which Hazard has given him. So it would seem that Hazard’s lovemaking defeats P. Cockburn’s desire to immortalise him in art and the narrator’s attempt to provide a comprehensive and reliable chronicle of what has happened. Just before this, Hazard’s horse Poseidon has engaged in a battle with a bronze statue of a horse and throughout the novel the same conflict, between raw kinetic energy and the supposed stasis of the work of art, is being enacted on a formal level, as the narrator strives, with little success, to write the definitive biography of Hazard’s life. The museum episode ends with Hazard escaping, wearing a redcoat taken from the wax figure of a mountie — later he dons the garb of a clergyman — and this disguise typifies his trickster-like subversion of the symbols of Western Canadian authority, as well as his repudiation of official versions of history. Phallic energy is the central metaphor of this subversiveness, but it is treated ambivalently, since Hazard’s evasions obviate the possibility of his fulfilling his quest. Moreover, the narrator, Demeter Proudfoot, presents an alternative viewpoint.

Demeter acts as a foil to Hazard and, although he is his faithful biographer, is as far removed from him as Nick Carraway is from Jay Gatsby. At first Demeter is a rather shadowy figure, but he is clearly not at all like Hazard. His voice is far less obviously Western than Hazard’s. He mediates Hazard’s ‘vulgar’ (p. 37) speech, making it more literary. After
telling the reader in the second chapter, ‘the scent of spring was in that yeasty wind, the high raw odor of mares and spring’ (p. 12), he pulls himself up and says: ‘Hazard did not say «mares and spring». We were chatting together on the ranch where finally I caught up with him and he said in his crude way, «That raw bitch of a wind was full of crocuses and snatch»’ (p. 12).

So the novel is concerned with the relationship between two kinds of discourse, with Demeter’s voice attempting to make something more conventionally literary out of the Western vernacular and thereby implicitly foregrounding the problem of writing about the Prairie world. He also represents the ordering impulses of the artist, who tries to impose system on the contingent nature of his subject — it is no coincidence that this subject is named ‘Hazard’. Demeter is a self-styled biographer and has the Boswellian obsession with comprehensiveness, but finds himself constantly defeated in his endeavour to give an exhaustive account, since he writes of a situation, where, as Kroetsch sees it, there is no firm basis for a relationship between man and woman, between storytelling and book, between writer and reader. Consequently the text which he produces is one which corresponds to the model of non-consummation. Despite his meticulous research and his longing for comprehensiveness, his biography is elliptical and incomplete. There are narrative lacunae, accounts of episodes where he has been forced to speculate and even a reference to an omitted chapter which was to have contained some of his own theorising. He tells his readers that he is giving them an ‘extremely objective account of the life of one good man’ (p. 145), but finally succeeds in conveying exactly the opposite impression.

The reader tends to arrive at this impression, not only because the palpable inadequacy of the source material foregrounds the fact that the biography is a very partial construction, but also because it transpires that Demeter is a madman, who is writing his narrative while sitting naked in a bathtub. So, if at first Hazard seems to be a wildly hyperbolical character, whose abnormalities verge on insanity, the reader now has to consider the possibility that he is the norm of sanity, compared with whom someone like Demeter is insane. Certainly this casts an interesting light on the role of the conventional biographer and the implication appears to be that Demeter’s desire for completeness is an insane ideal in this context. The whole thrust of the novel is towards incompleteness, and when he tells us of the missing chapter, in which he intended to propound his theory of nakedness, it is as if one is in the world of Tristram Shandy, where all is false starts, digressions and regressions, and the mode of the novel comes to constitute a parody of linear narrative. Tristram
Shandy is, of course, the paradigm of novels which use erotics as a metaphor for textual progress — or rather lack of progress, since, after the first page where the hero is conceived (and a botched conception it is) there is no consummation or climax to be found in the novel, and there are numerous instances of the theme of sex as unfinished business. If, like Victor Shklovsky, one takes the view that Tristram Shandy is the ‘most typical novel of world literature’,\(^ {18} \) then the problems which Tristram confronts as narrator are the problems of all novelists and biographers. From here it is, of course, but a short step to reappraising Demeter’s madness, as the insanity common to all novelists in their endeavour to capture the ungraspable ‘realities’ of an external world in language. So, while there can be little doubt that a parodic element is at work in the presentation of the novel’s narrator, it may be a mistake to see Demeter as simply the butt of authorial satire. In an interview Kroetsch has confessed to feeling sympathetic towards him\(^ {19} \) and it may even be that there is a degree of self-projection\(^ {20} \) in the character of Demeter.

Demeter is also a foil to Hazard in terms of the more specific erotics of the novel. Given the name of a female goddess at birth, he is an androgynous figure who represents a sharp contrast to Hazard’s assertive manhood. Since he is eighteen and Hazard is fifty-one, it is possible that Kroetsch is suggesting that the stereotype of the tough Westerner has been eroded with the passage of time. Be this as it may, in the latter stages of the novel it becomes increasingly clear that he is Hazard’s rival for possession of Martha, symbol of both Prairie womanhood and the Western world more generally.

After his various peregrinations, Hazard arrives in the vicinity of Martha’s home, only to be caught in a fire and apparently burnt alive. Martha comes to visit his naked body, which has been placed in the icehouse of the local beer parlour while awaiting the arrival of the undertaker; she caresses its every part, sexually arouses him and a consummation takes place. Demeter decides that his duty as biographer means he must visit the icehouse:

> The biographer is a person afflicted with sanity. He is a man who must first of all be sound of mind, and in the clarity of his own vision he must ride out into the dark night, ride on while all about him falls into chaos. The man of the cold eye and the steady hand, he faces for all of humanity the ravishments and the terrors of existence. (p. 152)

He comes upon Martha and Hazard, and the shock of what he sees seems to propel him into madness. He now takes over Hazard’s role as studhorse man and brings about the union of Poseidon and Martha’s
mares. Having done this, he barricades himself in Hazard's house, like a Western hero making his last stand. It is a house which from the opening of the novel has represented a curious expression of the horse-house dichotomy, since Hazard keeps horses inside it, and now as Demeter identifies Martha as his Muse and she comes to him, apparently willing to let him make love to her, another kind of resolution appears to be about to take place. But they are interrupted by a wild cry, which sounds centaur-like — half horse, half man. The binary oppositions of Prairie life — horse: house, human: animal, man: woman — all appear to be breaking down and at this moment Poseidon's hind hoofs smash a hole in the patterned wallpaper of the house's dining-room. It is unclear whether the cry has come from Hazard or Poseidon — at this moment the two seem to be fused together — and a further collapse of separate identities appears to have occurred with the smashing of the wall, since its pattern depicts lions and fleurs-de-lis. This is presumably suggestive of the two solitudes of Anglophone and Francophone Canada (Hazard is himself of French extraction) and so another Canadian duality is breaking down. So at this point, very close to the end of the novel, a number of received dualities, including those of conventional gender stereotyping, seem to be falling apart and the potential for a new identity emerging.

The actual ending is, however, more ambivalent. Poseidon kills Hazard and Demeter is taken away by the police without having consummated his love for Martha. The future of the Lepage stallion is assured, but only thanks to a means which represents a repudiation of the organic Prairie world, which Hazard has typified. Eugene Utter, a confidence-man who has appeared earlier in the novel, ensures the survival of the Lepage stallion, since he takes over Poseidon for the purpose of servicing mares, so that they will provide quantities of estrogen for a Montana firm with which he has made a deal. Estrogen, Demeter explains, comes from PMU, or Pregnant Mares' Urine. So one has the irony that the perpetuation of the breed for which Hazard has struggled so manfully is achieved with Poseidon becoming the lynch-pin of a contraception industry! And worse still, though not inappropriately in the context of the novel, the PMU is supplied to an American firm.

In the final chapter Demeter presents himself as having contributed to the saving of the Lepage stallion and supplies the reader with a detailed analysis of the economic basis of producing Pregnant Mares' Urine:

Surely those PMU farms that dot the plains of Alberta are memorial enough to my foresight and courage. Each barn contains an average of fifty mares, standing in two neat rows that face each other, harnessed with an ingenious device not unlike a
cornucopia so that their urine might run through long clear sterilized tubes under their bellies, then be collected in neat square one-gallon plastic containers.

One mare yields from two-thirds to three-quarters of a gallon of urine per day. The farmer sells that product at approximately a dollar ninety-five per gallon, depending of course on the nature of his contract and immediate market conditions. A mare might in one season produce enough to gross the farmer three hundred and fifty dollars. He will have to buy ten dollars' worth of straw and forty dollars' worth of oats. He will have to lay out a little money for mineral supplement (seaweed kelp), for the mare is allowed no salt and little protein. And each mare, let me repeat, must be pregnant. (pp. 172-3)

The precise detail given here echoes the economic arithmetic of Swift's 'A Modest Proposal' and two paragraphs further on Demeter makes a point of stressing his own 'modesty'. Though Swift's use of the language of animal husbandry for his narrator's proposal that Irish children should be eaten for the good of the nation is more shocking, the use of the same kind of terminology in The Studhorse Man emerges as far from coincidental once one appreciates the extent to which human and animal — Hazard and Poseidon — have been fused. Moreover, Demeter's whole persona has a distinctively Swiftian quality about it: the biographer who writes from an insane asylum would seem to be a first cousin of such Swiftian authors as the figure who writes 'A Digression concerning the Original, the Use, and Improvement of Madness in a Commonwealth' from Bedlam. Yet Kroetsch stops short of Swift's monstrous parody. Arguably this is because Demeter emerges as a type of the author, whose attempts to provide total coherence are doomed. On another level, it may be that the explanation for this lies in the Western cultural context: he is as much a victim of the conflict between energy and stasis, between Establishment and Carnivalesque values as Hazard. And as an androgynous figure he is a victim of the erotic paradigm described in the 'Fear of Women' essay and prominent throughout the novel.

The Studhorse Man does not, however, end on a pessimistic note. Demeter's final paragraphs tell us that Martha has given birth to a daughter, whom he believes to be Hazard's child. She is called Demeter Lepage and so she seems to represent a fusion of the two main characters. Demeter clearly finds this namesake sympathetic — she has 'grown up to be something of a lover of the horse' (p. 175) — and 'as a kind of fatherly advice' he dedicates his 'portentous volume' (p. 175) to her. This new Demeter is, then, at least metaphorically speaking, daughter of both Hazard Lepage and Demeter Proudfoot and emerges as the true inheritor of the Prairie earth. In the Eleusinian mysteries the goddess Demeter is the centre of a cult of seasonal renewal and so the ending
suggests the promise of a new rebirth for gender relations in the Prairies, in which the female takes over ‘the precious and treacherous name[s]’ of the male.

NOTES

1. This is a revised and enlarged version of a paper given at the British Association of Canadian Studies Conference, University of Birmingham, April 1984.
2. ‘Field Notes and Notes in a Field: Forms of the West in Robert Kroetsch and Tom Robbins’, Journal of Canadian Studies, 17, 3 (Fall 1982), 117.
4. Robert Kroetsch: Essays, eds. Frank Davey and b p Nichol, Open Letter, 5, 4 (Spring 1983), 47-55. Subsequent references to this article are included in the text and cite ‘Fear’.
6. There are numerous references to both in Labyrinths of Voice: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch, eds. Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1982).
8. Ibid.
9. In The Studhorse Man Hazard Lepage is a latter day Odysseus, while Martha Proudfoot is his waiting Penelope. Cf. Badlands (Toronto: new press, 1975), p. 3, where Anna Dawe writes: ‘...women are not supposed to have stories. We are supposed to sit at home, Penelopes to their wars and their sex.’
13. See Ch. 10 of Survival.
16. The Studhorse Man (1969; Markham: Paperjacks, 1977), p. 12. Subsequent references are to this edition and are included in the text.
17. Cf. similar references in A Tale of a Tub and Tristram Shandy.
20. Demeter is 18, the same age as Kroetsch was in 1945, the year in which the novel is set. See also Labyrinths of Voice, p. 21: ‘I had allergies so that I couldn’t do a lot of the male work.... And the one place where I found a kind of open field was the garden because a garden is ambiguous on a farm. It involves women’s work but often the men help.... All this has to do with my wrestling with this notion of erotics right now in my writing.’ Cf. ‘On Being an Alberta Writer’, Robert Kroetsch: Essays, p. 73.
A horizon
is dancing towards me.
Scrub-grass wake from their poverty,
clap hands as if lush green, bow-tie audience.
A cow bellows at something
it knows is coming.
The sky stains.
Sun will soon catch spear-points of rain.

Moving,
moving all the time,
my wheels spit out miles like grape-seed.
Behind green holocaust
horizon torched with kerosene.
This other now coming,
coming closer with the sweet eyes
of new promises,
or green lies?
Leslie Choyce

CHASING FLIES WITH A VACUUM CLEANER

Late fall and they’re on the run from winter
sneaking in through cracks under the eaves
then congregating at windows
where they rage and dance
and ricochet around in an elaborate geometry.
They want warmth,
they want safety, they want
a place to get out of the impending doom
like all of us.

I’m the one with the coiled hose
and the long silver sucking tube
who betrays their best instincts,
who has learned the psychology
of winged refugees
about to die.

I can capture hundreds in a minute
and still be greedy
to get the last one
who has held firm against the vacuum
and now goes smashing himself
from pane to pane
until the hollow winds predict his path
and suck him
straight to dust.
AUSTRALIA

Best known early in his career as a highly individual poet and then as conservationist and author of *A Million Wild Acres*, Eric Rolls says it took him twenty years to discover that what he really wanted to do was to write non-fiction with the intensity of poetry.

His *Celebration of the Senses* (Penguin) is a terrific book: observant, thoughtful, funny, sexy — a great affirmation of life that challenges the repression of sensuality in Australian writing by men. This paperback edition adds an important and moving postscript to the original that makes you go back and read the whole book in its light. Interesting to put beside A.B. Facey’s *A Fortunate Life*.

So many outstanding publications mean that any reviewer can do no more than hint at the pleasures of this year’s Australian fiction. My own favourites are David Malouf’s *12 Edmondstone Street* and *Antipodes* (Chatto & Windus), and Helen Garner’s award-winning *Postcards from Surfers* (Penguin). Malouf and Garner share an apparently simple style, and behind an almost childlike clarity of vision, an unobtrusive concern with ways of seeing.

The fictional/non-fictional title piece of *12 Edmondstone Street* is at once the best evocation I know of the spaces in the Australian house, and an essay on memory. And the stories in *Antipodes* again confirm the impression that Malouf’s strength lies in the novella and short story, rather than in the longer novel.

An uneasy marriage between the fine craft of her style and the unbearably depressing characters and situations of Helen Garner’s early work made it frustrating to read. But *Postcards from Surfers* continues the celebratory mood of her outstanding novel *The Children’s Bach*. The pain is still there, but it’s again balanced by humour. Only one of the stories here doesn’t work — and that’s when Garner tries on an ocker male voice — but that’s a brief diversion and serves to highlight the keynote of this collection, which is Garner’s unfliching honesty.

Thomas Keneally’s *A Family Madness* (Hodder and Stoughton) takes as its starting point the tragic phenomenon of family murder-suicide.
Straddling two worlds like most of Keneally’s novels, *A Family Madness* focuses on the suburban flatness of western Sydney, and the psychic scars of World War II brought to it by a Belorussian migrant family. In a conventional enough contrast, historical detail makes the European scenes slow to read, and gives the alternating Australian scenes the illusory light and freedom which is the catalyst for the final tragedy. Although the European scenes are unnecessarily demanding, *A Family Madness* remains a fine novel, and a natural successor to *Schindler’s Ark*.

Keneally himself has praised Thea Astley's *Beachmasters* (Penguin) as her finest novel so far. While not as bleak as her previous novel, *An Item from the Late News*, *Beachmasters* suggests that Astley is reserving her rich comic talent for the short story now. With Greeneland somewhere in the background, she returns to the South Pacific setting of her novel *A Boatload of Home Folk* for this movingly written account of cultural paternalism, failed revolution and the loss of innocence.

Another novelist with an inclination towards the exotic, Christopher Koch, in his Miles Franklin Award-winning novel *The Doubleman* (Chatto & Windus) tells a story of the Australian folk music scene in the 1960s. Readers who enjoy *Across the Sea Wall* and *The Year of Living Dangerously* may find the more familiar subject matter here disappointing, but the novel’s symbolism and its treatment of the occult have certainly polarised critical opinion.

As Peter Carey seems bound to do with his determination to be a novelist. Reviewing his *Illywhacker* (UQP), Elizabeth Webby delivered the line of the year when she said that inside this massive novel was a great short story struggling to get out. It’s a terrific book in parts, but too long, nevertheless. A frightening image for Carey’s fiction here in the Best Pet Shop in the World, which, like Australia, is owned by the Mitsubishi Company and peopled with the extraordinary inventions of Herbert Badgery, the 139-year-old narrator who won’t, or can’t, die.

Equally inventive but more tightly constructed and with a real double-take ending is Elizabeth Jolley’s novel *Foxybaby* (UQP). It’s been argued, most recently by Fay Zwicky, that Australia lacks the experience and the awareness of true evil and that what emerges in Australian literature, therefore, is authoritarianism, wickedness or naughtiness. Elizabeth Jolley’s fiction is a case in point. There is pathos and loneliness beneath the wonderfully playful complexity of its surfaces, but it is life-affirming. Like *Miss Peabody’s Inheritance*, *Foxybaby* leaves the reader with pleasant echoes of an imagined childhood, its naughtiness drawn again here from English school fiction.

The best new novelist is Kate Grenville, already highly praised for the
short stories in *Bearded Ladies* (UQP). Here, in the quickly retitled *Lilian’s Story* (Allen & Unwin), she tells the story of a woman who, though not lovely, learns to love herself. Reciting Shakespeare for a shilling, bullying a young father into letting her hold his baby, from one point of view she is eccentric, from another she is intelligent and hurt. Another first novel *Benton’s Conviction* (A & R), by the underrated poet Geoff Page, manages to make with its anti-war theme a distinctive addition to the literature of World War I, and by now that’s not easy to do!

While Helen Garner and David Malouf produced short story collections that are for me among the top three Australian books published this year, other short fiction titles are particularly strong. Like Sumner Locke Elliott, whose new novel *About Tilly Beamis* (Pavanne) is rather disappointing, Morris Lurie is a great master of dialogue and rhythm, and his *The Night We Ate the Sparrow* (Penguin) constantly delights you with its sureness of touch and its offbeat humour. The tricky subtitle ‘A memoir and fourteen stories’ is only the beginning: any one of the fifteen pieces might be either.

Frank Moorhouse’s *Room Service* (Viking) collects the stories centring on Francois Blase, the Balmain Bushman, and reprints Moorhouse’s contribution to the Drover’s Wife Parody Show; Beverley Farmer in *Home Time* (Penguin), Tim Winton in *Scission* (Penguin) and Olga Masters in *A Long Time Dying* (UQP) produce outstanding collections of stories, with only Masters occasionally succumbing to some of the dangers of matching that style with plain subject matter.

And finally Gerald Murnane’s wonderfully titled *Landscape with Landscape* (Norstrilia) is not quite a novel nor, with its self-conscious and overlapping narrative, are its six pieces discrete. Reading Murnane’s short novel *The Plains*, I felt like a child trying to walk on a sandhill for the first time, with it slipping out from under, and me constantly groping for a foothold. Here, the more familiar settings are deceptively supportive and the book is genuinely and unexpectedly funny. Murnane has moved a long way from the conventional Catholic background of his early work. Understandably, perhaps, the critics don’t seem to know what to do with him, and small press publication continues to buy them a silent time for reading and thinking. But paperback distribution and a wider audience are at last beginning to change all that...

So unusually strong is the year’s work in fiction that it overwhelms the poetry and drama by comparison. Robert Gray’s *Selected Poems* (A & R), however, would be remarkable in any year. It’s no doubt a bit late in the century, but no Australian poet has learned better the lessons of Imagism. An intriguing combination of Zen spareness and Australian
colloquial ease, Gray’s poetry has so often tended towards the pure image that the substantial size of this volume comes as a surprise. The extraordinary clarity and conviction of Gray’s visual sense have always delighted me; what shocked me reading across his whole career here at one go is the intense loneliness of the landscape. The poet and the rain, the poet and the abattoir, the poet and the harbour ferries. So much beauty. So few people.

The other interesting collection this year is Laurie Duggan’s *The Great Divide* (H & I). Although, like John Tranter, Duggan is under the impression that Australian writers had not heard of Modernism until 1968, the new accessibility of the poetry here shows him crossing the Great Divide which the self-styled ‘Generation of ‘68’ did so much to help build in contemporary Australian poetry. Like Nigel Roberts and Tranter himself, Duggan has an appealing sense of humour and readers who enjoy it will be pleased to find it in his well-known ‘South Coast Haiku’, ‘(Do) The Modernism’ and others. A particular discovery for me, though not in Duggan’s characteristic style, was the autobiographical ‘Adventures in Paradise’.

Although David Williamson’s *Sons of Cain* (Currency) and Ron Elisha’s *Two* (Currency) should not be missed, the best Australian play in years is Janis Balodis’s *Too Young for Ghosts* (Currency). Balodis parallels the nineteenth century experiences of the explorer Ludwig Leichhardt with the alienation of Latvian migrants in Stuttgart and on the Queensland canefields after the Second World War. His play moves brilliantly in production, but as with the work of his contemporary, Michael Gow (*The Kid, Away, On Top of the World*), the great advantage of being able to read the playtext is to take in fully the classic richness of its language.

And finally to children’s books. As Elizabeth Jolley knows, if you make your readers laugh — and lots of them — you probably don’t deserve a literary award, and the prize-givers seem determined to ignore the writer every primary school child in Australia is reading: Robin Klein. Her *Penny Pollard’s Diary* (OUP) and *Hating Alison Ashley* (Penguin) should have been books of the year in their time, and although her new novel *Halfway Across the Galaxy and Turn Left* (Viking) is not in my view quite as good, you would get a less cautious response from a class of ten-year-old Australian readers. Anyone interested in Australian feminism will want to take Klein’s work into account.

Ivan Southall returns to form in *A City Out of Sight* (Puffin), his belated sequel to an early novel, *To the Wild Sky*. Thurley Fowler’s Book of the Year, *The Green Wind* (Rigby), is a gentle evocation of Australia in the
1930s; and although the Protestant/Catholic concerns persuade some critics that James Aldridge’s *The True Story of Spit MacPhee* (Viking) is a novel about, rather than for, children, its depth and sensitivity will reward older readers.

The limited space generally available for reviewing children’s books, the range of books published and the often diverging responses of their adult and child readers make the criteria for a brief overview unusually complex. But Elizabeth Hathorn aims simply to relate the experience of a new school to readers not well catered for (seven year olds) and in *Paolo’s Secret* (Methuen), she gets there. A book that, however modest, succeeds beautifully — on its own terms. And it’s not often you hear a reviewer saying that!

MARK MACLEOD

CANADA

At a time when Canada’s government is preparing to discuss free trade with the United States, Canadian writers are reassessing the nature and meaning of borders in their work. Janette Turner Hospital’s *Borderline* (McClelland & Stewart) employs the metaphor most explicitly, using a border crossing from the United States into Canada as a trigger for considering the dividing lines we draw and redraw between worlds, cultures and individuals. Farley Mowat’s autobiographically-based *My Discovery of America* (McClelland & Stewart) stems from the refusal of American authorities to let him cross the border to enter the United States. New novels by Margaret Atwood (*The Handmaid’s Tale*, McClelland & Stewart) and Robertson Davies (*What's Bred in the Bone*, Macmillan) have been extremely well received in the United States, which conveniently appears to have rediscovered Canada this year, just as the question of our cultural sovereignty seems destined to appear on the bargaining table.

Atwood’s novel is set in an American future, where people look north to Canada as their only hope of escape from the totalitarian, misogynist theocracy which has taken over the United States. Davies’ is set in Canada’s past, when colonials still thought of England or Europe as the avenues of escape from stultifying small-town new-world values. *The Handmaid’s Tale* is Atwood’s most political novel yet, but its feminist implications enable readers so inclined to ignore the most serious questions it asks about the direction of democracy in America, and where one should draw the line between the needs of the collective and of the
individual. The issue raised by What’s Bred in the Bone — where does one draw the dividing line between originality and imitation in art? — should be interesting, but is not. This novel reads like a stilted parody of Davies’s earlier work and it is boring. Davies’ The Papers of Samuel Marchbanks (Irwin) reprints the three Marchbanks books with new notes by the author, continuing the play between curmudgeonly Marchbanks and gentlemanly Davies.

Gwendolyn MacEwan’s Noman’s Land (Coach House) blurs the boundaries between myth and reality as it continues Noman’s search for the ever elusive Canadian identity. In Ann Ireland’s A Certain Mr Takahashi (McClelland & Stewart), winner of the Seal first novel award, two Toronto girl friends share an adolescent crush on a Japanese concert pianist that turns into a self-destructive obsession with otherness on several levels of experience. Sarah Sheard’s Almost Japanese approaches the same subject from a different angle. In Robert Harlow’s Felice: A Travelogue (Oolichan) a Vancouver housewife discovers herself against the backdrop of the Polish Solidarity movement and the history of injustice represented so memorably by Auschwitz. George Ryga’s concern with injustice leads him to dramatise the plight of Mexicans working as slaves in the southern United States in In the Shadow of the Vulture (Talon). Marie Jakober’s Sandinista (New Star) follows a range of characters involved in 1977 in the Nicaraguan revolution, including a Canadian priest who faces a crisis of faith during the struggle.

Novels set in Canada include Paul Quarrington’s The Life of Hope (Doubleday), a satirical, bawdily humorous mystery story; Constance Breresford Howe’s Night Studies (Macmillan), human drama with a night school setting; Joan Barfoot’s Duet for Three (Macmillan) focussing on a mother-daughter relationship; Morley Callaghan’s Our Lady of the Snows (Macmillan), a recycled story about a golden-hearted whore that seems to haunt its author as much as it does the bartender Gilhooley; and the grimly impressive David Adams Richards’ Road to the Stilt House (Oberon), an intense account of the day-to-day interactions of the poor in the isolated Maritimes.

The most acclaimed short story collections continue the obsession with crossing or re-drawing borders. Neil Bissoondath’s Digging up the Mountains (Macmillan) introduced an exciting new talent who also happens to be V.S. Naipaul’s nephew. Ranging widely — from Toronto to Trinidad, Central America and Japan — these stories deal powerfully with the classic immigrant themes of dislocation and belonging, and the borderlines between the political and personal in ordinary lives. Austin Clarke deals with similar themes, but replaces Bissoondath’s predomi-
nantly bourgeois perspective with that of the down and out in *When Women Rule* (McClelland & Stewart). Bharati Mukherjee’s stories in *Darkness* (Penguin) are charged with the new energy she discovered when she moved from Canada to the United States. For her, ‘«Indianness» is now a metaphor, a particular way of comprehending the world’. Stephen Guppy’s *Another Sad Day at the Edge of the Empire* (Oolichan) plays with the implications of Vancouver Island as simultaneously at the edge of a continent and the centre of this writer’s magic-realist world. Mavis Gallant’s *Overhead in a Ballroom: Stories of Paris* (Macmillan) imply a more conventional acceptance of the ideas of centre and fringe. Jane Rule’s *Inland Passage* (Lester & Orpen, Dennys/Naiad), contains stories of lesbian and heterosexual lives and loves. Judith Merril’s *Daughters of the Earth and Other Stories* (M&S), is future fiction, mostly written twenty years ago but still powerful boundary-breaking work. Two accomplished craftsmen demonstrate their versatility in Hugh Hood’s *August Nights* (Stoddart) and Leon Rooke’s *A Bolt of White Cloth* (Stoddart).


year's more outstanding publications. Irving Layton, true to form, provided the year's biggest controversy, through his violent objections to Elspeth Cameron's *Irving Layton: A Portrait* (Stoddart) and the publication of his own autobiographical version of his earlier years in *Waiting for the Messiah* (McClelland & Stewart).

At last we have a good anthology for teaching Canadian drama in *Modern Canadian Plays*, ed. Jerry Wasserman (Talon) and a collection of supplementary material in *Contemporary Canadian Theatre: New World Visions*, ed. Anton Wagner (Simon & Pierre). Radio drama, long ignored, achieved some recognition with the publication of *Words on Waves: Selected Radio Plays of Earle Birney* (CBC/Quarry).


DIANA BRYDON

NEW ZEALAND

The year was dominated by a book that was published in 1984, a book with an impact so forceful that literature became news. *The Bone People* and its author Keri Hulme have hauled writing on to a stage otherwise occupied by a legal victory over rugby mavericks, the bombing of the *Rainbow Warrior* by French agents, a declaration banning nuclear-armed and -powered ships from New Zealand waters and cricket Test victories abroad. Heady times indeed.
Predictably, publishing has not had to deal with the same excitements in 1985. But The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse, edited by Ian Wedde and Harvey McQueen, will have, in its quieter way, a considerable influence on the way in which New Zealand writing is perceived. This is the second such Penguin (the first was selected and introduced by Allen Curnow in 1960) and Wedde takes the opportunity in his Introduction to re-evaluate the past, to take stock of the present and to suggest new possibilities for the future definition of a New Zealand literature.

It is a stimulating and provocative piece of writing and the expansive selection which follows it reveals a precise and astute literary judgement. To my mind the collaboration between the editors, and between them and the publishers, has resulted in an excellent, essential, anthology.

Two other anthologies, both of fiction, quarry sites of sectarian interest. Women’s Work (Oxford), edited by Marion McLeod and Lydia Wevers, is a strong, exciting collection of stories from 1963 onwards. With writers like Mansfield, Frame, Grace and Hulme I doubt that anybody thinks other than that women occupy a central place among New Zealand writers: on the other hand, with a tradition like this to draw on, it would be crazy not to celebrate their achievement.

The New Fiction (Lindon), edited and introduced by Michael Morrissey, is a rather odder phenomenon. The organising principle is that postmodernism defines these fictions, but what that concept might mean is far from clear in the lengthy and obtuse introduction. Many of the stories, postmodern or not, are good and certainly deserve to be published. Whether they deserve to be yoked to the task of dragging this ‘theoretical’ treatment along with it, though, is another matter.

Individual authors also had collections of short fiction published. The best of these was Vincent O’Sullivan’s Survivals (Allen and Unwin/Pat Nicholson Press), while Joy Cowley’s Heart Attack and other stories (Hutchinson) and Philip Mincher’s All the Wild Summer (John McIndoe) — a sequence of twelve pieces — have much to recommend them. Keri Hulme’s Lost Possessions (VUP) is a short story presented in the form of diary entries, one per page, so that it takes on the look of verse. It has been published separately from the forthcoming Te Kaihau: The Windeater (also VUP) which will collect eighteen of Hulme’s stories.

First novels include one published posthumously — James K. Baxter’s early and only story Horse (Oxford). While it hardly rates as a success in literary terms, it does have other interest as it weaves a probably fairly factual tale from the incidents of student youthfulness.

Better at exploiting the possibilities of the adolescent-growing-up genre is Lloyd Jones’ Gilmore’s Diary (Hodder and Stoughton). Plenty of
humour here, although it drops away towards the end. D.H. Binney, an established artist, has also written a first novel called *Long Lives the King* (Heinemann), which has attracted positive reviews.

The reputations of two practising novelists are reinforced by their latest publications. Marilyn Duckworth follows *Disorderly Conduct* with *Married Alive* (Hodder and Stoughton) while Heather Marshall’s latest book is *A Nest of Cuckoos* (Hutchinson).

Likewise poetry collections included both strong first books from new writers and interesting new work from the established. Among the former, Helen Jacobs’ *This Cording, this Artery* (Blackberry Press), Hugh Lauder’s *Over the White Wall*, Robin Healey’s *Night Kitchen* (Mallinson Rendel) and John Newton’s *Tales from the Angler’s Eldorado* (Untold Books) stood out while the latter comprised Kendrick Smithyman’s *Stories about Wooden Keyboards* (AUP/OUP), Brian Turner’s *Bones* (John McIndoe) and Peter Olds’ *After Looking for Broadway* (One Eyed Press).

Janet Frame has completed her autobiographical trilogy with *The Envoy from Mirror City* (Hutchinson). The whole project has been exciting and refreshing. We await extended commentary from the established critics of her fiction.

Although *And* has completed its four-issue project, its influence certainly continues — and thus it has achieved its stated aim: to cause a fundamental shift in the pattern of critical discourse here. Perhaps the most beneficial effect has been on *Landfall* whose four guest editors each produced stimulating and provocative issues of the quarterly in 1985. Another spinoff has been *Splash* (c/- Dept. of English, University of Auckland). *Islands* and *Untold* continue their own ways.

An entertaining year, though the Booker from Okarito rather hogged the limelight!

SIMON GARRETT

PAKISTAN

Poetry in 1985 had the lion’s share with three remarkable collections by poets who are well-known. Taufiq Rafat published his first book at the age of fifty-eight, *Arrival of the Monsoon: Collected Poems 1947-78* (Lahore: Vanguard, Rs100). Rafat’s work was known widely from magazines and anthologies and this collection is very welcome. Zulfiqar Ghose published *A Memory of Asia: New and Selected Poems* (Austin, Texas: Curbston, $14.95), which gives us twenty-five poems (about one fourth) from his
previous three books, plus twenty new, uncollected poems. The new poems are a delight and show Ghose working the language along new tracks and finding fresh excitements. Daud Kamal’s *A Remote Beginning: Poems* (Budleigh Salterton, U.K.: Interim, £2.40) is his second collection and provides further evidence of work in a given mode in which Kamal specializes. Economy is the hall-mark; the imagery is attractive; the words set up tentative echo-systems which send the reader on beyond the poem towards an understanding. Alamgir Hashmi contributed poems to such anthologies as *Soundings: A Poetry Anthology* (Deerfield, IL: Lake Shore Publishing, $7.95) and *Light Year ’86* (Cleveland: Bits Press/Case Western Reserve University, $13.95), as well as to *The Toronto South Asian Review* (IV 2 44-51).


Among translations into English may be mentioned *Hasham Shah: Sassi Punnun* rendered into English verse from Punjabi verse by Christopher Shackle (Lahore: Vanguard, Rs100); Tahira Naqvi’s translation from Urdu of seventeen short stories by Manto in *The Life and Works of Saadat Hassan Manto*, Leslie A. Flemming/Tahira Naqvi (Lahore: Vanguard, Rs200); and the verse translations of Faiz Ahmed Faiz’s several Urdu poems by Naomi Lazard and Agha Shahid Ali in ‘Special Feature: Faiz Ahmad Faiz’, *Sonora Review 8* (Tucson, Arizona). Other languages are also beginning to get interested in contemporary English works: Afzal Ahsan Randhawa has translated Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* into Punjabi.

The Manto volume cited above also offers a very good study of Manto’s short stories by Leslie A. Flemming, an American scholar who has spent many years studying the life and the works of this major Urdu writer. The critical section in this book is a reprint of the earlier Stateside edition. Another reprint to note is *A History of Sindhi Literature* by L.H. Ajwani (Karachi: Allied Book Co., Rs45), which was originally published in 1970. Among articles, Zulfikar Ghose’s ‘Bryan’ (*The Review of Contemporary Fiction: B.S. Johnson/Jean Rhys Number V*, 2, 23-34) deals with the early writing careers of B.S. Johnson and Zulfikar Ghose as well as with their mutual friendship. Alamgir Hashmi’s ‘Muhammad Sadiq and the Historiography of Urdu Literature’ (*Viewpoint X*, 27, 27-29) reviews the English tradition of the historiography of Urdu Literature in
light of Muhammad Sadiq's work and assesses its present achievement. Much other critical work in the form of reviews and articles concerned such writers as Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Zulfikar Ghose, Alamgir Hashmi, Muhammad Iqbal and Salman Rushdie.


In bibliography, the bibliographic series launched by the Institute of Islamic History, Culture and Civilization of the International Islamic University in Islamabad is expected to cover a wide range of topics, including language and literature. The volumes published so far relate mainly to politics and culture.

Among journals, the pace was usual, except that *Explorations* was not published at all. *Cactus*, a new literary magazine, has begun to publish poetry, fiction and translations in Lahore. *My Beautiful Launderette* by Hanif Kureishi, which caused rave reviews in England both as a stage play and as a film, drew only poor audiences to private screenings in Pakistan. Aesthetic and cultural gaps will maintain it as a controversial item, indeed as a British cultural curiosity which is edifying in some ways. A number of poetry readings were held in the year, nationally and internationally. Zulfikar Ghose gave readings at the 1985 International Festival of Authors in Toronto. Taufiq Rafat, Daud Kamal, Alamgir Hashmi, Waqas Ahmad and other Pakistani poets gave major readings, along with several poets from India, Bangladesh and the USA, at the International American Studies Conference held at Lahore in November 1985, as well as at the Quaid-e-Azam Library in Lahore.

It was a year full of activity and output which, nonetheless, left its absences behind: poet and journalist G. Allana died in March; while Nazir Ahmad, well-known translator and commentator of Punjabi and Urdu works, died in Lahore during August.

ALAMGIR HASHMI
We may begin by citing two poetry anthologies that appeared in 1985: *The Poetry of Singapore*, published by the ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information, and *Sincerely Yours*, published by a small publishing house, Tate Publishing. The first took about four years to appear, the second less than a year. The first is handsomely bound and printed (no one knows what the official costs incurred were, but one guesses they were high!), the second, modestly so with the costs shared by those who are featured. The first boasts of the ‘established’ poets, the second, of none except those the publishers felt merited more attention. It would be interesting to see how these two anthologies are judged by later generations. *Sincerely Yours* has not yet been reviewed, *The Poetry of Singapore*, on the other hand, has attracted critical attention and copies of the book have been sent free to schools in the island. No editor’s name appears in *Sincerely Yours* (though it contains Foreword by the present writer — hence all this could well be very interested comment). *The Poetry of Singapore* contains an impressive list of editors with Edwin Thumboo as General Editor and Lee Tzu Pheng as the Editor for the English section. I am told on good authority that the selection and editing of individual sections was left completely to the respective editors. The ‘official’ anthology contains poems in all the four official languages of Singapore while *Sincerely Yours* contains poems written only in English. One offers new voices, the other old voices. Speaking as one who has been part of the literary scene in Singapore for nearly twenty years I’m saddened to see that the official anthology — at least as far as the English section is concerned, merely reiterates what many in Singapore know: that poetry is regarded as precious and still confined to an élite. In 1976 Edwin Thumboo brought out his definitive *The Second Tongue*. Ten years later only two new poets are added while two who appeared in Thumboo’s anthology of 1976 (including the present writer) are omitted. I do not find the English section at all representative and indeed wonder if the energies and resources could not have been better utilised. After all, since 1980, some very good poems have been published in *Singa* — the Ministry’s official journal. Singapore definitely has more than eighteen poets writing in English and the absence of many does a gross injustice to those who have published poems in many different places but fail to make it to *The Poetry of Singapore*. Alas.

The Department of English Language and Literature of the National University finally brought out collections of poetry sponsored by the Shell Creative Writing Fund. To date three collections have appeared:
Tranquerah by Ee Tiang Hong (Malaysian poet, now living in Australia), No Man's Grove by Shirley Lim (Malaysian poet, now living in the US) and No. 5 by Simon Tay, a Young Singaporean. All three collections are well worth purchasing for they contain some powerful expressions. He continues with his favourite theme of historical impingement, Lim explores modes of inner response, while Tay strikes an experimental note. While these collections are strongly recommended there is anxiety about their distribution and one hopes that some arrangement will be made whereby these books are made readily available both in Singapore and elsewhere.

In fiction there was a good deal of activity as well: at least three individual collections of short stories appeared: Lim Thean Soo's Blues and Carnations, Wong Swee Hoon's The Phoenix and Other Stories, and R.H. Hickling's The Ghost of Orchard Road & Other Stories. This last mentioned is actually an expatriate, a Professor of Law, now retired, who, having had many years of living in Singapore, now attempts to immortalise this through writing. The stories are witty, occasionally cutting (especially when he deals with university matters) but almost always entertaining. They do not, I feel, make for permanently interesting literature, but provide a most useful insight into how someone who has lived in Singapore for many years, but as an expatriate, now views his experiences. Lim Thean Soo is, as we all know, a long established writer of poems and short fiction. Blues and Carnations is yet another interesting and entertaining book from this untiring author — here there is Singapore's past creatively conveyed, a past familiar to the author. I still believe that more stringent editing can strengthen Lim's fiction, but it is his prerogative to publish it as he thinks fit. His characters are remarkable and offer an insightful look into life as it was, and is, lived. Wong Swee Hoon is a comparative newcomer to Singapore's literary scene. But she is already making a name for herself — here are stories with which most Singaporeans can so easily identify themselves. The sheer variety afforded by the plural society is here captured in moving, topical stories almost intended to arouse interest. In some ways the fictions here are too 'ordinary' (as Lim's are 'extraordinary') but they appeal — and that matters. Wong is young as a writer but has great potential to be the second Catherine Lim of Singapore and give us a book of stories which will become a household name.

There was, too, a great deal of excitement in drama, but here I will single out one play in particular that was the rave of 1985: Emily of Emerald Hill. Brilliantly produced and directed by Max Le Blond, the play attracted full houses on all the nights it ran. The Minister for
Culture raised the possibility of casting it over television and it has been invited to Edinburgh for the 1986 Commonwealth Arts Festival. The play is an elaborate monologue (wonderfully rendered by the inimitable Margaret Chan) written by Stella Kon, centring on a Baba-woman’s experience of changing times. After Robert Yeo’s powerful political plays such as Are You There Singapore and One Year Back Home, Singaporean audiences needed something like Emily. This powerful dramatisation of a culture, a period, a life-style that is now fast becoming only a memory in modern Singapore, evocatively transformed English language drama from a theoretical possibility to a challenging reality. It will be exciting to watch what happens now.

1985 was not a particularly fruitful year for criticism. Apart from the odd review, few, if any, decent articles on Singapore writing appeared anywhere. Many of the well-known names in literary criticism here have been busy — but writing articles for various books targeted to appear in 1986. We will have to wait and see what these articles augur. The petty jealousies continue, and the critics search for viable idioms to express their viewpoints.

KIRPAL SINGH

WEST INDIES

1985 saw, in the untimely death of Shiva Naipaul, at the age of forty, the silencing of an important voice in Caribbean literature. In 1984, Naipaul undertook a six-month journey to Australia and the Far East gathering material for a book on which he was working when he died. The Observer (27 October) published from this unfinished work an extract in which Naipaul describes his visit to Sri Lanka and reflects on his alienation from religion. The uncompleted manuscript will be part of a collection of his work to be published by Hamish Hamilton in 1986. In the May 18 issue of the Spectator, Naipaul wrote ‘A Thousand Million Invisible Men’, an essay on the concept ‘Third World’, which he dismisses as ‘a term of bloodless universality’ that ‘robs individuals and societies of their particularity’. An extract from this essay was published posthumously in the September issue of Harper’s.

One of the more important pieces of fiction of the year was Wilson Harris’s Carnival (Faber), a novel that explores the Dantesque spiritual journey of Everyman Masters, the protagonist, who instructs the narrator-biographer, Jonathan Weyl, to write ‘a biography of spirit as
the fiction of my life'. Weyl begins with an account of Masters's current life in London, then provides extensive flashbacks to his earlier days in 'New Forest, South America', which evidently is Guyana. The novel is intricately constructed with characteristic cyclical and antithetical patterns. Many of the symbols of Harris's earlier novels reappear here, including El Dorado, but the pervasive symbol is the Caribbean Carnival, which, with its concomitant masks, takes on metaphysical and transcendental significance.

In Canada, Neil Bissoondath, the thirty-year-old Trinidadian now residing in Canada, published an impressive collection of fourteen stories entitled *Digging up the Mountain* (Toronto: Macmillan), his first book. The stories, set in Trinidad, Canada, Europe, and Latin America, are mature and polished and reveal a sharp but sympathetic insight into the lot of the dislocated and alienated individual whether he is a Trinidadian businessman threatened by his island politics, a young Japanese girl in Toronto trying to free herself from stifling customs, or a Canadian traveling amidst the impoverished in Spain. Bissoondath is V.S. Naipaul's nephew. His pared prose and his critical but understanding voice invite comparison with Naipaul, who has said of Bissoondath: 'I'm staggered by the talent which is already so developed'.

Jamaica Kincaid, the Antigua-born resident of New York, who is a staff-writer for *The New Yorker*, followed her outstanding volume of short stories *At the Bottom of the River* (1983), written in an appealing lyrical prose, with *Annie John*. This work, a collection of linked stories, traces the growth of a young girl in Antigua. It was runner-up in the recently-created Ritz Paris Hemingway Award Competition for the year's best novel in English. Kincaid's earlier volume won the Morton Douwen Zabel Award for fiction in 1984. Austin Clarke, the Barbadian-Canadian novelist, published a new volume of stories, *When Women Rule* (Toronto: M & S). The eight stories are poignant accounts of West Indians in Canada. the protagonists all lead bleak lives filled with disappointments and frustrations. Peter Abrahams published an epic novel, *The View from Coyaba* (Faber), which spans two centuries of Jamaican life from the days before emancipation to the fall of Michael Manley's government in 1980.

Several works of fiction by younger and newer writers were published by small presses. These include Rooplall Monar's *Backdam People* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press), a collection of stories set on sugar estates of the author's native Guyana and told in the distinctive creole of the Indo-Guyanese (similar to that used in David Dabydeen's *Slave Song*). Cyril Dabydeen's *The Wizard Swami* (Calcutta: Writers Workshop) is a novella on the rural life of Indo-Guyanese protagonists. Norman Smith's *Bad*
Friday (New Beacon) tells about the desperate life after leaving school of a West Indian youth in England. Amon Saba Saakana’s Blues Dance (Karnak House) describes the life of another black youth who gives up his life of crime on becoming a Rastafarian. Faustin Charles describes the West Indian experience in Britain in terms of the spiritual and psychic in The Black Magic Man of Brixton (Karnak House). Karnak House also brought out Neville Farki’s The Death of Tarzana Clayton, which depicts how Tarzan, perceived as a colonial oppressor, is killed by his adopted African brother.

A few fictional pieces focusing on the experiences of women were published, mainly by small presses. Hazel Campbell’s Woman’s Tongue (Jamaica: Savacou) is a volume of eight stories about the unhappy lives of some Jamaican women. Andre Schwarz-Bart’s A Woman Named Solitude (San Francisco: Creative Arts) is a novel about the mystical life of a slave woman in Guadeloupe. Michelle Cliff’s The Land of Look Behind (Ithaca, New York: Firebrand Books) describes in prose and poetry the personal and political conflicts of a Jamaican woman. Faber published Caryl Phillips’s The Final Passage which relates the spiritual and emotional effect of a young woman’s travels within the Caribbean and her migration to Britain.

There were several reissues of established works. Faber (London and Boston) published Harris’s Guiana Quartet (Palace of the Peacock, 1960; The Far Journey of Ouidin, 1961; The Whole Armour, 1962; and The Secret Ladder, 1963) in a single volume of 464 pages. Faber published also Abraham’s This Island Now (1966), a novel which describes post-colonial political life on an unspecified West Indian island. The Plains of Caroni, Sam Selvon’s novel of the effects of technological changes on the domestic and social lives of Trinidadian sugar-workers, was republished by Williams-Wallace, Toronto. Three other works by Selvon were reissued in the attractive Longman Caribbean Writers series (which eventually will have critical introductions): his first novel A Brigter Sun (1952), the perennially popular The Lonely Londoners (1956), and the collection of stories set in Trinidad and London Ways of Sunlight (1957). John Hearne’s The Sure Salvation (1981), his latest novel, which reveals a darkening vision of society, was reissued in paperback by Faber. Heinemann published in the Caribbean Writers series a collection of Jean Rhys’s stories, Tales of the Wide Caribbean, with a substantial introduction by Kenneth Ramchand. Included in this volume is the brilliant piece ‘I Used to Live Here Once’, one of the shortest stories in West Indian literature but extremely well-crafted, accommodating reading on a gothic and several social-realistic levels.
A handful of poetry volumes were published this year: Dionne Brand’s *Chronicles of the Hostile Sun* (Toronto: Williams-Wallace) is a group of poems on the Grenada revolution; Fred D’Aguiar’s *Mama Dot* (Chatto & Windus); Amyrl Johnson’s *Long Road to Nowhere* (London: Virago); Desmond Rutherford’s *Speak Love to Me* (London: Akira); Amon Saba Saakana’s *Tones and Colours* (Karnak); and Olive Senior’s *Talking of Trees* (Kingston: Calabash).

James Berry edited a new anthology *News For Babylon: The Chatto Book of West Indian-British Poetry* (Chatto & Windus/Hogarth Press) which has works by forty poets in Britain with roots in the Caribbean. It includes older writers like Wilson Harris, Andrew Salkey, and John Figueroa and newer figures like Fred D’Aguiar, Grace Nichols, and Linton Kwesi Johnson. Lorris Elliott published *Other Voices* (Toronto: Williams-Wallace), an anthology of fiction and poetry by forty-three Black writers in Canada, most of whom are from the Caribbean, including such authors with published volumes as Dionne Brand, Cyril Dabydeen, Lorris Elliott, Claire Harris, Arnold Itwaru, Charles Roach, and Edward Watson. In *Caribbean Plays for Playing* (London: Heinemann), the editor, Keith Noel, included plays by Dennis Scott, Kendal Hippolyte, Alwyn Bully, and Zeno Obi Constance. He provides brief notes and comments on the history of Caribbean drama.


In criticism, there was a reprint of Edward Kamau Brathwaite’s *Contradictory Omens* (Mona: Savacou), a work first published in 1974, in which the author discusses the impact of creolization of Caribbean culture. V.S. Reid published *The Horses of the Morning* (Kingston: Caribbean Authors), a full biography of Norman Manley. David Dabydeen edited *The Black Presence in English Literature* (Manchester University Press). Carole Angier produced a biographical-critical study of Jean Rhys (New York: Viking). Beverly Ormerod wrote *An Introduction to the French Caribbean Novel* (London: Heinemann) in which she analyses the main themes of French West Indian literature, making comparison with the rest of the Caribbean. Mark McWatt edited *West Indian Literature*
and Its Social Context, the proceedings of the Fourth Annual Conference on West Indian Literature, which includes papers on Naipaul, De Lisser, Lamming, De Boissière, Rhone, and Lovelace.

Several journals produced issues focusing on Caribbean writings. The Journal of Caribbean Studies (Fall) has articles on Austin Clarke, Caribbean-Canadian writers, calypso, and a short story by Jan Carew. The Journal of Commonwealth Literature (20, 1) carries pieces on Cyril Dabydeen, the Naipauls on Africa, the aboriginal in Palace of the Peacock, and C.L.R. James’s barrack-yard. Komparatistische Hefte (Bayreuth) devotes Number 9-10 to European-Caribbean literary relations; it includes an essay by Carew and an interview with John Hearne. Wasafiri (Spring), the journal of ATCAL (London), has an interview with Selvon and an article on Indian-African relations in Caribbean fiction. And finally, John La Rose, the publisher-bookseller, has started a new periodical, New Beacon Review, which has a few pieces on Caribbean literature. The first issue, July 1985, includes poems by Brathwaite and Salkey.

VICTOR J. RAMRAJ

Book Reviews


Douglas Blackburn (1857-1929) was a British journalist, writer and novelist who spent a large part of his grown-up and working life in South Africa — more specifically the Transvaal and Natal. He produced journalistic books on topics like Thought-reading, or Modern Mysteries Explained (1884), The Detection of Forgery: A Practical Handbook (1909) and Secret Service in South Africa (1911) as well as a biography of Edith Cavell (1915), wrote articles for such diverse journals as the Johannesburg Star, the Standard and Diggers' News, the Daily Mail and the British humanitarian and pro-Boer New Age, and edited a series of short-lived one-man magazines of his own in both England and South Africa, from the Brightonian to the Transvaal Sentinel and Life: A Sub-Tropical Journal. On top of this he published seven novels dealing with South African themes, the two best-known of which were probably A Burgher Quixote (1903) and Richard Hartley, Prospector (1905) that were brought out by William Blackwood and Sons in Britain.
By now, however, the literary work of Douglas Blackburn has been almost completely forgotten and with it a whole important phase in the history of colonial South African literature. The reasons for Blackburn’s works having been excluded from the canon of literary history seem to have had less to do with their value than with their controversial contents and style, and in order to redress the balance and bring Blackburn back to the attention of readers, Stephen Gray, who is professor of English at Rand Afrikaans University in Johannesburg, has produced this short monograph for Twayne’s World Author Series.

Reconstructing Blackburn’s biography has not been easy. Not only was he an extreme individualist, who kept crossing the borderlines that divided the ideological universe of his period, particularly and most interestingly the one that separated the Boer world of the two old republics from that of British civilization — Blackburn also continually and habitually lied about his life and exploits and made up disguises and masks for himself. Consequently, the initial part of Stephen Gray’s job, which he describes as that of ‘a sleuth on the track’, was to get the record of Blackburn’s life straight and clear away the accumulated misinformation.

The most important part of Gray’s book consists in his re-introduction and interpretation of Blackburn’s seven novels, which he considers ‘landmarks in the development of South African fiction’ and which he divides into three groups: *Kruger’s Secret Service* (1900) and *Richard Hartley, Prospector* (1905), which are both in a sense ‘antinovels’, the satirical Sarel Erasmus trilogy, comprising *Prisloo of Prinsloosdorp* (1899), *A Burgher Quixote* (1903) and *I Came and Saw* (1908), and finally the two ‘antiromances’ *Leaven: A Black and White Story* (1908) and *Love Muti* (1915).

The prefix ‘anti’ is central to Stephen Gray’s interpretation which sees these unusual texts as basically ironical and as parodies of stereotypes of colonial fiction. Thus *Richard Hartley, Prospector* turns the typical Rider Haggard plot-pattern upside down by letting its group of white heroes embark on an expedition into the interior, not to explore and civilize barbarism, but with the purpose of selling a Maxim gun and ammunition to Chief Magato and his rebels against Boer rule in the Zoutpansberg. The heroes are not Quartermain-like paragons of moral uprightness, but fortune hunters who have failed in their quest for a bonanza on the Rand and for political power in Pretoria respectively and ‘are tied together by no ideals other than economic expediency’.

In a parallel way *Love Muti* answers and overturns John Buchan’s imperialist allegorizing of the suppression of the Bambata rebellion of 1906 in *Prester John*. Blackburn’s version of David Crawfurd, Charlie Rabson, who arrives in Natal ‘to prove himself’ eventually does this by giving in to subversive passion. He reconciles the dualism between ‘civilization’ and ‘savagery’ by marrying ‘coloured’ Letty and settles down with her in a Johannesburg that Blackburn turns into a utopian rather than prophetic ‘vision of a harmonious and productive golden land of opportunity, in which differences of colour, gender, and of class are subsumed within a greater whole, for a greater common good’.

One of the important points of the interpretation is that the text only acquires its meaning through intertextuality — through its dialogue with another text: Like *Richard Hartley* it ‘could not exist without its forbears in the tradition’.

Irony and parody are also central in the novels Gray points to as Douglas Blackburn’s masterpieces, *A Burgher Quixote* and *Leaven: A Black and White Story*. The former is a picaresque saga of the Boer War — Stephen Gray calls it ‘the only novel of stature to have emerged from the South African War’ — and its Cervantes-like protagonist is the uprooted Afrikaner Sarel Erasmus who is trapped between the two worlds that seem to be at war, the ‘old’ one of the Boer republics and the ‘modern’ one of British and mining
capitalism. The action takes the hero through a series of dramatic episodes on both sides of the battle front, and 'like Cervantes before him, Blackburn exposes the defects of the former system in the light of the barbarities of its successor'. At the end of the story Sarel is in a British prison, the war is coming to an end, and the world has changed without the hero having realized properly the issues that were at stake and that were to determine his fate. What comes out underneath all the irony, however, is a certain 'elegiac tone' that bemoans the passing of the old Z.A.R. world, which in spite of its ridiculous and backward features and its suppression of black Africans to Blackburn like other eminent pro-Boers of the period remained 'a fine example of a socialist society in principle and in action', as Stephen Gray puts it.

In Leaven: A Black and White Story the reader is again presented with a view of South African society from beneath. This time the picaro is a black African, the Zulu Bulalie, who commits patricide in order to be allowed to leave his traditional kraal and try his luck in the industries and cities of white modernity. Once more the plot is a careful reversal of colonial stereotypes: Instead of a civilizing venture into the heart of darkness Leaven traces the development of a 'savage' character's odyssey through a capitalist and Christian world that is exposed as one of greed, exploitation and hypocrisy. Bulalie is cheated, he is exposed to the hysterics of colonial morality when falsely accused of sexual assault and consequently flogged in the most vicious manner, he is dragged off by a labour agent and becomes a mineworker and a compound resident on the Rand, and finally he dies after an attempt to save the life of a naïve British missionary, who has tried to convert him. Altogether an impressively comprehensive catalogue of central aspects of black, proletarian experience in South Africa in the late 1890s, and Leaven is a much more 'serious' work than Blackburn's earlier novels in the sense of its irony being much more grim.

The moral of the story seems to be — and here Stephen Gray elaborates on the earlier analysis of the novel by Isabel Hofmeyr in her thesis from 1980 on 'Mining, Social Change and Literature' — that the collision of the worlds of 'kaffir socialist' tradition and white capitalist modernization has catastrophic effects. Where Hofmeyr saw this as Blackburn's contribution to the build-up of segregation and 'separate development' ideology, Gray attempts a more positive interpretation: though Blackburn does romanticize traditional African society as 'socialist' and extols the virtues of the 'raw' Africans as opposed to those 'corrupted by civilization', he is primarily concerned with the destructive, exploitative and decadent nature of white capitalist existence. In contrast, 'Bulalie's type contains the inner resourcefulness and smartness to outlive his master in the end'.

Clearly this is all fascinating stuff, and Stephen Gray has made a very valuable contribution in digging out Blackburn's seditious novels from the slag heap of historical oblivion and cultural repression. Since Blackburn's works have been so successfully lost from memory, Gray's rather short book is necessarily taken up to a considerable extent by introductory presentations and paraphrases, and in a few cases one would have liked the interpretations to be more systematic and thorough and for Gray to have been more specific about the cultural and political contexts of Blackburn's writing. In what sense of the word, for instance, was Blackburn — as Stephen Gray asserts — a socialist? The period in the 1890s and 1900s when Blackburn was active as a novelist saw the rise of a wide variety of socialist groupings and shades of socialist thought, both in Britain and in South Africa, and the South African War — the central topic of the Blackburn novels — provided a main focus for the spelling out of their differences. Stephen Gray does not situate Blackburn's socialism within this spectrum of debate. Nor does he come to terms with the striking ambiguity of his romantic anti-capitalist idealizations of the Boer republics as 'socialist' or of 'kaffir socialism'. How do Blackburn's pro-Boer idylls relate

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Stephen Gray says that one of the reasons why Blackburn's novels have been so effectively forgotten and neglected by literary historians may be their topicality and close relationship with journalism. And he argues very plausibly that the orientation of the texts around specific contemporary events and discussions adds to rather than detracts from their literary merit. But this then calls for a critical approach which is both cogent in its analysis of themes and structures in the text and directed towards a reconstruction of its political and historical context. To a certain extent Gray's book is aimed at such a reconstruction — primarily in the form of his attempt to produce a coherent outline of Blackburn's biography. But in the first place he does not get to the bottom of the life history — apparently the available material has been too scanty for Gray to be able to produce a clear and faceted picture of the person and his development, and one does not feel that the code to the 'hidden' Blackburn has been broken definitively. In the second place the book does not give its reader a precise understanding of the social world in which Blackburn moved, and in which his writings were interventions. Gray stays quite cautiously within the limits of his discipline and does not, for instance, venture far into the exciting world of Witwatersrand social history in the period, which Charles van Onselen and others have recently helped to open up — van Onselen's New Babylon and New Nineveh are not even mentioned.

Stephen Gray's primary purpose has been to make readers aware of Douglas Blackburn's existence as an author who should be taken seriously and to point to his literary production as an important object for new research. As a re-introduction and an inspiration for further investigations his book is most welcome, and it is not surprising that it perhaps raises as many questions as it answers.

PREBEN KAARSHOLM


A useful, unassuming introduction to the work of Witi Ihimaera, one of New Zealand's leading writers and the author of the first collection of short stories (Pounamu, Pounamu, 1972) and the first novel (Tangi, 1973) to be published by a Maori writer. Based on careful personal analysis of Ihimaera's writing, backed by references to previous criticism and, extensively, by explanations and comment provided by the author himself, Introducing Witi Ihimaera is a balanced and intelligent presentation of the author's production up to The New Net Goes Fishing (1977), with brief references also to his libretto for Waituhi, which has since been performed in Wellington, and to The Matriarch, the novel the author is still engaged in writing. Probably due to space restrictions, the book contains no reference to the other novel, Maui/Mauri/Maori, that Ihimaera has planned as the first of the two novels.
that are to complete the series on the life of Maori in urban areas initiated by *The New Net Goes Fishing* story collection, but which are still, as yet, unwritten.

The major defect of *Introducing Witi Ihimaera* is indeed its brevity. Although the examination of individual works is sensitive and stimulating, the introductory section on the author’s life and background seems inadequately sketchy, particularly with regard to Maori life and culture. The purpose of this chapter seems to be mainly that of indicating the principal biographical elements in Ihimaera’s novels and stories, pointing not only to similarities but also to differences, and warning against too easy an identification between the two. Although this is undoubtedly useful, elements which may not be directly present in the author’s creative work, but which have considerable bearing upon it, could have been presented in greater detail. The brief description of the Ringatu religion, as also the information that the author was himself brought up as a Mormon (his grandfather and parents having been converted to the Mormon faith, when and how we are not informed), while occasionally attending Ringatu services which ‘made a vivid impression on him, which remains to this day’, is frustratingly scanty and the bibliography, restricted to a selection of works by and on Ihimaera, provides no indications as to where to seek further information. Again, while the description of Rongopai and its history is illuminating, particularly for its emphasis on the syncretic aspects of the meeting-house and on the ‘ambivalence’ and ‘tension’ that characterized the environment in which Ihimaera grew up and that was to be a prominent feature of his creative work, the reader feels the need for a wider frame of reference. Published in New Zealand, the book is probably intended for a mainly local public for whom many of the references need little or no explanation. As, however, readership is likely to include others besides New Zealanders, further information and, most particularly, a glossary, would be welcome. Although Witi Ihimaera is notoriously opposed to glossing the Maori terms used in his own work, the case of a book intended to ‘introduce’ his work to ‘students and the general reader’ is surely different.

Separate chapters are devoted to *Pounamu, Pounamu, Tangi, Whanau* and *The New Net Goes Fishing* and each, in its turn, is subdivided into lesser units in order to scrutinize more closely the inner articulation, whether structural or thematic or both, of each work. The attentive comparison and analysis of different versions of single stories (the three versions, for example, of ‘Tangi’ — the short story, not to be confused with the novel of the same name, which constitutes yet another version) is particularly successful, providing concrete illustration of Ihimaera’s constant search for more and more effective means of expression. The structure and symbolism of his stories and novels are examined in depth, with particular attention to his complex time schemes, his use of interior monologue and his alternation of passages in the habitual past, the simple past and the present. Although more attention could, it is felt, have been paid to the musical element in Ihimaera’s work and his adoption of musical paradigms, Corballis and Garrett provide a lucid explanation of how the various strands of narrative interweave and acquire significance and how the particular forms of characterization, plot and setting are dictated by the nature of the world the author is depicting and constructing and by the notion of community on which it is founded.

Despite his predominantly Maori subject matter, his emotion, lyricism and avoidance of individualistic characterization (although the authors note that the characters of *The New Net Goes Fishing* tend in fact to be less ‘allegorical’ and more individualized than those of *Pounamu, Pounamu*), Witi Ihimaera is not, we are reminded, simply a ‘Maori writer’. Pointing to some of the European and Pakeha influences and analogies present in his work (from *The Wanderer* to *Madame Butterfly* to Katherine Mansfield’s use of symbolism), Corballis and Garrett emphasize his liking for the kind of cultural synthesis or dual
heritage sketched out in ‘Return from Oz’, the final story of The New Net Goes Fishing collection, noting how the desire for synthesis seems to underlie the subject and style of the novel on which Ihimaera is currently working.

JANE WILKINSON


W.J. Keith’s book is the first in the Longmans Literature in English series to treat Commonwealth Literature and will be followed by similar volumes on Indian, African, Australian and Caribbean literatures. It looks like a valuable model for the others in the way Professor Keith tells the story of the emergence and development of a distinctively Canadian tradition of writing in English. He does it with authority; who better to write such an Introduction than the former editor of the University of Toronto Quarterly, who is also a teacher, critic and reviewer actively engaged in trying to improve the quality of critical writing in Canada? Keith’s characteristic preoccupations with tradition and the necessity for evaluative criticism inform the shape of this history.

In his Preface, Keith points out how slow a Canadian literary tradition was to develop; as he says, ‘it is a literature most impressive in its contemporary achievements’, by which he means since the 1950s, and the design of the book reflects this. There is a brief Introduction on Canadian history and geography, followed by a four-part structure: Part One treats Canadian writing from the eighteenth century to the early twentieth century and takes less than a quarter of the book, so leaving space for discussion of the twentieth century development of major genres, Poetry, Fiction and Others (Drama and non-fictional prose), in Parts Two, Three and Four. There is a Chronology at the end which visually demonstrates Keith’s argument about late flowering, also a short general Bibliography and very useful Notes on Individual Authors.

The emphasis on contemporary writing is part of Keith’s historical argument and he pays most attention to those modern writers whose debt to the past is most obvious, for he is interested in showing how a ‘Canadian literary and imaginative tradition gradually but doggedly became recognised and established’. This approach discerns distinctively Canadian traces from early on, when writing in Canada consisted of the reports of travellers, explorers and early settlers — very much the mapping of a new country and ‘the naming of parts’, confrontations with strangeness, vivid regional awareness, and writing by women out of small isolated communities. These features together with ambivalent responses towards Britain, Europe and the United States, constitute the Canadian literary inheritance, and Keith shows how present-day writing in Canada sustains these continuities. Not surprisingly, much Canadian writing is characterised by its eclecticism as much as by its nationalism. True, there are so many interesting writers since the 1960s that no history format could allow enough space to treat them adequately, but Keith manages to make a dash through a host of contemporary names feel like an intelligently ordered itinerary, ending his account with emphasis on women’s writing, experimentalism and postmodernism. He also maintains his evaluative principles in his short critical discussions, and one is grateful to have literary values so privileged over historical interest.

I must say the section on Canadian Drama is the least satisfactory in the book. Probably
the most exciting work has been French Canadian, but Keith sees 'healthy native drama' as still in the future while ignoring the activity of theatre workshops, the annual Stratford Drama Festival, and some new names.

The story of Can Lit has already gone beyond these pages (written in 1982-3) but with Keith's book as guide we shall better recognise historical continuities through individual differences as new Canadian books appear. This is a valuable study for everyone interested in Canadian Literature, Canadians and non-Canadians.

CORAL ANN HOWELLS


During the past few years Polanki Ramamoorthy has contributed poems to *New Quest, Modern Trends in Indo-Anglian Poetry, New Letters, India*, and similar journals that are given to publishing the work of writers who are not yet established and recognised. More recently, some of his work was selected by Chinua Achebe for inclusion in *Okike*, and Edward Brathwaite commended many of the individual poems that have been gathered in this first volume of the writer's work. Now, with sixty poems as a basis of judgement, it is possible to make a reasonable assessment of Ramamoorthy's position in English-language poetry in India.

Most noticeable is Ramamoorthy's outlook: at times cynical, at times stoical, he constantly presents the reader with examples of the futility of most endeavours and the ironies of religious pieties in a culture divided between superstition and humanism. Occasionally he can be fanciful and lighthearted, but mostly he is droll, serious, and even pessimistic. The title poem, 'Rangoli', provides a good introduction to his work:

Crawling out of a mudhole
an old man stood, bowed,
hands folded in greeting

Too old to cobble or carry night soil
the untouchable kept watch
while others went out for work

Beneath his trembling knees
his splayed feet bared
on the smooth cowdung-pasted floor
arabesques of rangoli.

Most of the poems are about the disparities of life: in India, of course, but (by implication) also throughout the world. The characters (untouchables, the uprooted, beggars, scavenger girls or woodchoppers in many of the poems, and ants, bees, snakes, cows, crows, snails, cats, and rats in others) are essentially interchangeable: all are subject to the same ironies of life, the same ineffable laws of being, the same general anonymity in cosmic movement; all can, with justification, repeat the words of 'Elemental Thorn':

128
I am a snail in the shell
whose only daring is the horn
which sucks the air it stabs
and hangs out naked in a teat.

'The Uprooted' reminds us that man is not beyond using 'the bait/ of a father's wheedling call and outstretched arm' to entice a bone-thin child to stumble on and so die — just to get a memorable photograph. 'What's the time?' impresses us with the meaninglessness of time in a world of endless struggle for underfed child-labourers, children to whom the evangelist of another poem would comment, 'Rejoice that the lord has chosen you for this grief'. And repeatedly the poet reminds us that 'Pity is in exile ... and must visit only as an exile'.

At times the fatalism of Ramamoorthy's outlook becomes oppressive, but this is just one aspect of his cultural inheritance, which has instilled a clear acceptance of 'such finalities/ of life and death'.

A.L. McLEOD

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THE YEAR THAT WAS

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