Poems

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Abstract
THE EXTRA PANEL
Fred McCubbin ‘The Pioneer’ 1904

Where does it fit in the holy triptych,
the extra panel Fred left out?

Off to the left of panel one
where the new wife waits for the husband’s billy

and the horse is off in its hobble chains,
the dray a beginning arched by trees?

Her face has a late
Victorian poignance. It’s possible she might have known.

Or is it there
some weeks beyond

the hut that’s up in panel two
washed with sunlight in a clearing,

off to the right of the painting’s focus,
husband and wife and child in arms,

the rest from sweat as he sits on a log,
rubs his beard

and is talking softly,
his honesty and axe beside him?

Panel three is far too late
with its city that hangs as a vista there

brought by light through the thinning trees
and boasting its new span of progress.

The man who kneels at the slewed wooden cross
is a false lead only.
The Extra Panel

He might be the son, come back years later, or the pioneer himself still mourning the child.

But stare now hard between the panels, there in the space from two to three,

and have the scene develop slowly. You choose it from a random handful

although the trees remain the same, sturdy, dense and nineteenth century,

the undergrowth idealized slightly. The extra panel shows a child

(Fred’s brushwork here is less precise) tangled in the coils of strychnine

just there beneath the central tree that holds the whole thing all together

and two black parents crouched above her while in the distance is the hut,

its chimney quietly smoking.

THE TOUR

Once in 1868 a century of weather cleared, a shaft of sunlight coming down at Lord’s.
The first of summer ...
Twopenny, Mullagh, Dick-a-Dick, Cuzens and half a dozen others
stride out on the field, the first Australians there – against them in the batting order
a viscount, colonel and an earl.
And Dr Grace who’s looking on will put them in his memoirs.
We have the scorebook of that day. Johnny Mullagh 75 with his 'fine, free, wristy style' and Mr Lawrence, captain/coach, 'late of the English eleven' comes in next at 31. Three months at sea on the 'Parramatta' and 47 matches played – fourteen lost and fourteen won with nineteen to a draw. Some vaudeville thrown in as well, Mosquito with his boomerang, mock battles done with spears and Dick-a-Dick with club and shield against a hail of balls. Six months across the English counties; then home again by 'Dunbar Castle', a match in Melbourne passing through, home again to the western districts, stockmen in the paddocks lost – or drafted to the new reserves, 'Protection and Management' via the Act. 'Obscurity and early death', a shorthand guide to what was left – though Mullagh played his bat straight through for twenty years or so, topping the score against the English a final time in '79; also the smalltown competition, his own team heading the ladder always as he camped alone at 'Johnny's Dam' a rabbiter on Pine Hill station. And on that other Victorian scoreboard – seven hundred and seventy four fullbloods in the state. When Johnny died in '91' his bat and stumps were buried with him' and an obelisk put up. A sharp reversal in the weather had forced the close of play.
BREAST PLATES

Those breast plates of the 19C ...
still hard to see the reason why.
'King Billy of the Barwon Blacks',
'Tommy, King of Narrabri'.

Each time you see a white man stoop
towards an elder at his fire
the faces both have turned opaque
and give no index to desire.

Is it white or is it black
who wears the deep, ironic smile?
So hard to see it through the glass.
What kind of man escapes the file?

Some pinched hierarchic
Queen's official who wants to set the skies to right?
Or some off-handed public joker
laughing in the bar one night?

One's bestowed by Edward Milne
whose neat initials at the rim are 'fair exchange'
for artefacts,
an interest very
near to him.

'King Billy of the
Bandjalang' ... ?
A station owner
likes the thought
and shows his smith
a little sketch.
A town clerk of the
better sort

makes his trip out
to the dump.
A mission gives its
leading man
a brass plate for his
'dying pillow'.
The kangaroo and
emu on

their way towards a
coat of arms
are more bemused
in brass than he
who smiles to try
the trinket on –
while the donor's
there to see.

Much later they
are taken back
and under glass
are set on view,
the ribcages
behind them gone
together with the
names obscured

or simplified to
minstrelsy.
Toolbillibam
as good 'King Bill'
has set the fencelines
firm and square.
A smile supplants
the need to kill.

THE PHRENOLOGIST

And now the patients are all gone,
he takes the skull again –
yellow underneath the gaslamp,
an early winter’s evening,
his fingers tracing out with care
the small configurations.
A hansom cab goes by outside.
He thinks of the man in Harley Street,
whose gift it is ...
this skull from the antipodes, a genuine New Hollander
for his consideration.
And wonders at the half-ironic smile
when promised at the club.
As fingers lift the outer shell
he has a vision of the centre,
two soft handfuls in a hairnet,
the Organs and the Faculties
pressing claims into the bone.
And here, of course ... Locality,
so much enlarged, the faculty which makes them nomads
and here below it, much developed,
the hanging brow of their Perception;
then slipping back to almost nothing
the concave region of Reflection,
likewise this hollow at the temple,
seat of that Constructiveness
so notably deficient.
He’s seen the sketches of their gunyahs
crouching in the wind.
He glances up for reassurance
at Dr Spurzheim’s chart
to check a ridge that he’s forgotten.
Ah yes, the faculty of Time,
and well developed too, those dances and corroborees,
and then the hollow here beside it
the faculty of Tune,
so lamentably missing.
And now this heaviness down here,
this thickness down towards the base,
seat of the ignoble passions.
What more to summarize the case?
He puts the head aside and packs his bag,
stands a moment at the mirror,
runs a hand across his brow –
then higher where the hair has been;
feels the reassuring rise
so vital to the European,
the organ of Reflection there
pressed in hard against the bone.
He pauses at the door and smiles.
The foggy street is full of cabs
and rich with confirmation.