A Nation SACRED and PROFANE

Tom Fitzgerald's Nation is now journalistic history. But was its moment just a fleeting one? Adam Farrar spoke to Nation veteran Sylvia Lawson.

It's not much more than a year since my mother Anally threw out her - almost complete - set of back issues of Nation. With that rather regrettable side effect of the horrors of moving house, I might have lost my last easy access to a journal which, for 14 years, from 1958 until it was absorbed into the Nation Review in 1972 - shaped much of the intellectual, political and artistic culture of Australia.

The collection edited by Ken Inglis, Nation - the Life of an Independent Journal of Opinion, has made good that loss. The journal that I dimly remember in its failing years is restored, in full vigour, in this collection; with articles selected from five three-year periods presented as they would have been in any of Nation's fortnightly editions. Each period is introduced or, more importantly, located by Inglis. What this means is that it is the journal, not simply an archive of articles, which is represented for review almost two decades after the event.

Still, after all that time, why represent any journal? For more than half a generation - and a crucial generation which, through the 'sixties, built the springboard that we baby-boomers leaped off - Nation was an independent voice of criticism. More than that, it established a standard of journalistic writing which certainly hadn't existed and has been maintained only in patches since. It established the nationalistic cultural revival which we now take for granted. And it carved out a serious, sometimes left, sometimes liberal, critical voice which was genuinely influential.

Since Nation, Australia has languished for a long time without much by way of independent journalism. And perhaps it's this independent critical voice (or near) the mainstream of journalism which we look to in a collection like this to remind us. Certainly, it was hard won and hard preserved. Tom Fitzgerald financed it by mortgaging his home. And it was maintained on inadequate, and sometimes no, wages; by the dedication (and brilliance) of George Munster and other editorial workers like Marie de Lepervanche and Sylvia Lawson.

Of the editorial workers, Sylvia Lawson is the only one still prominent as a writer and journalist. (George Munster died some years ago and the royalties from the book go to the George Munster Award for Freelance Journalism.) But it was Sylvia who expressed reservations about the current 'recovery' of Nation when I talked to her recently - a conversation not so much about the Nation, but of what understanding it might mean for a re-establishment of such an articulate, independent critical voice.

Potentially I think it's got value as a model. But that can only be made actual insofar as new generations of people look at both its value and its limitations. And I don't think that's begun to happen yet, because the attention that's been paid to this retrieval, to this book (which I think in its own terms is actually excellent) has been very disappointing ... well, nostalgic, sort of solemn - as though it was a quasi-sacred thing. The notion of sacredness has in fact been spoken of by Hugh Stretton. He talked in his Wallace Worth lecture about "Tom Fitzgerald's Nation of holy memory". I don't know how Tom feels, but I hate that - the notion that something's beyond criticism, that it's such an unattainable and splendid and remote thing that it's inimitable. That's absolutely dreadful. I'm completely opposed to the nostalgia that has dominated the reviewing of the Inglis collection. One can respect history, including the history which involves oneself, without nostalgia. And that is to say one can respect it more or less critically. One can take a distance from the object. I hope the principal makers of Nation would - I like to think they'd agree with this.

Some of the sense that it is inimitable no doubt comes from the extraordinary personal imprint of Nation's makers.

I think a lot had to do with George's drive and intellect and Tom's very high journalistic competence and his enterprise in going...
out looking for people. The crucial thing was the giving of space. The making available of space and writers came out of the woodwork. And then Tom's sense of writing, which was quite extraordinary, his sense that this thing had to be very well written. I don't think he would have theorised it this way, but the way I'd theorise it retrospectively is that, without thinking of it in quite these terms, he did see good writing as of the essence of good thinking. These processes are not finally to be seen as separate.

If we are - as I am - looking for something from this 'retrieval' which can show us how to go forward, then the force of personality (or even vision) is not enough. It may well be possible to revive a longing for writerly excellence - or at least part of which is a commitment to serious understanding of the issues of the day. Of course, Tom Fitzgerald launched *Nation* into a desert of journalistic writing and criticism. But is that quite our case today? Sylvia points to a change which today may have limited any sense that there is even a need for such journalism.

Actually, since Ken Inglis' 'retrieval' book appeared, I've been struck by the number of younger people in different quarters or in publishing who have absolutely never heard of the publication, and who haven't particularly noticed the force of this retrieval. In other words, I'm struck (as one often is in other connections) by the fragmentation of the cultural, journalistic, publishing landscape. There is an argument that says there is no centre; there is therefore no place for a generalist publication - outside the taken-for-granted mainstream.

The line is that the scene is so fractured, so irrevocably fragmented, that one can only have the scattering of voices across, say, the plethora of visual arts publications, the more or less literary centred ones, the long running and more diverse periodicals like *Meanjin*, and then, interestingly enough, a number of monthlies now. The argument is that you can only have this fragmentation; that you can't imagine, let alone produce, a kind of centre. You have a cacophony of voices. But the funny thing is the cacophony at times still seems the same as a silence, because there still don't seem to be places outside the special little islands of journalism where all kinds of voices can be heard other than the obvious liberal ones.

It seems to me that there are signs that the situation Sylvia describes is breaking down. Journals like *Meanjin* are running more generalist essays; *Australian Society* has changed from a social welfare journal to much more of a generalist publication; *ALR*, too, is reaching towards that centre - or, as Sylvia puts it, "a space near the centre ... in the agora, in the market place ... where a whole lot of cultural and political and social concerns converge". So perhaps Inglis' reminder of what *Nation* could do is timely. But as a reminder - not necessarily as a model. This is precisely Sylvia's point about 'the sacred'.

I think any journal, any journalism, maps its place. A *Nation* for the 'nineties would not have those blind spots which Tom Fitzgerald himself has spoken about in radio interviews - blind spots in relation to feminism and in relation to Aborigines. Obviously today you're looking at a society which is very deeply marked by feminism and by Aboriginal politics, by the politics of ethnicity. I think what people could start from now, surely, is an informed left position in which politics have ramifications.
well and truly into the fields of culture. The cultural map has altered absolutely drastically. The left politics of '68 made interdisciplinary some kind of intellectual necessity in an enormous range of institutions across the western world. And all that means that cultural comment in every area just cannot be conducted in the ways it used to be, or under the headings, it seems to me, that Nation was able to use.

But if the couple of decades since Nation have been marked by new political priorities and by the shattering of cultural boundaries, surely a new critically aware, left, journalistic must be even more deeply marked (even if we don't yet know how) by the complete redrawing of the political map in Europe last year. Sylvia has already begun to argue (in Australian Society's last issue) that this creates a journalistic imperative.

We cannot carry on regardless. We must not carry on regardless because we're living in a time now in the West of a massive appropriation. That is, important and influential sections of western opinion are now trying to convince themselves and everyone else that we have, in some sense, 'won' - 'they' have come to 'us', as it were. This is outrageous nonsense and we've got to resist it. Particularly if the most important part of the game, as I take it to be, is helping Gorbachev - who's got to win against conservatism in the Soviet Union and against recalcitrant and meanness in the West. There's a lot of writing to be done. I mean 'helping Gorbachev' both literally and symbolically.

What it means, basically and primarily, is the continued insistence on the validity of the socialist ideal, even though bureaucratic, governmental, communism has crumbled. One should, I think, try to see the crumbling of the bureaucratic communist tyrannies as clearing ways towards socialism - towards social democracy even, if you want to put it that way. That is to say, toward the building and rebuilding of societies founded on notions of social justice - which nevertheless, and by the same token, allow for opposition and contestation on institutional and governmental levels. You can't have one party states. You can't have those tyrannies. You've got to have some kind of active debate and contention on the level of politics, on the level of the economy and on the cultural - which is to say the communicative - level.

If this is right, then journals like political and cultural discussion - books get reviewed all over the place as though books, as though writing, had no political aspect. I would hope we'd got to an end of the conservatism in Australian literary discussion (which became worse through the later 'eighties) in which literature equals the fiction of the refined sensibility and the development of the self; and that equals writing.

A lot of the liveliest writing in Australia is in the genre of the essay much more than in those dominant kinds of fiction. That's a provocative statement. But maybe we could in this journal both practice and attend to writing across a number of genres, and hopefully release young potential writers from the sense that in order to write they have to be producing conventional fiction. In this journal we're trying to imagine, satire and wit would have to constitute a dimension. I would not try to have a journal in which solemnity was totally conflated with seriousness. In fact, I think I'd try to have a journal that wasn't solemn at all. I see no reason for solemnity. I do see every possible reason for seriousness. But they're quite different. The exemplar which springs to mind is Archibald's Bulletin - one of the funniest publications that ever happened in English and also one of the most serious at times - between, say, 1886 and 1900. One dreams, for the future (particularly with some aspects of production being at least a bit cheaper, with the desk top facilities and so on) of a publication which, like the Bulletin of 100 years ago, could be independent and still pay people - both the editorial and technical labour and the people who write. Well, I can only say that I hope it's not impossible.

Ken Inglis' recovery of Nation reminds us that it wasn't impossible a couple of decades ago ...


ADAM FARRAR writes on social policy and social issues.
A Picture of SINCERITY

Lyndell Fairleigh spoke to Mr Movies, Bill Collins, about feminism, nostalgia ... and sincerity.

When Bill Collins speaks to you he is sincere. "I'll tell you what I really think and feel", he says, though he adds he may later change his mind. He distinguishes himself from the critics who follow fashionable theories or film orthodoxies and often dismiss popular films simply "because they refuse to be sucked in".

Bill Collins has let himself be sucked in, though that doesn't necessarily make him a sucker. He is personally involved. "One of the things I like about so many of the films of the '30s and '40s is that the characters often have goals or ideals. Sometimes they have obsessions. They were striving for something. And one was often made to feel that the striving was worth the effort, unless they were striving for something like power which, in itself, corrupts you. I love stories of people who are prepared to fight for what they believe. It's inspiring."

As though on a personal journey, he wants "to find the good things in movies and explore those". In a way, it began during the war years when he was growing up, although Bill is well aware that he could be "rationalising now from an adult point of view". Films "were like a trip into another world". They "weren't simply escapism, but a way of seeing the world". Films didn't only inspire him but gave him insights into character and behaviour.

And inspiring audiences is the ideal he has since set himself. "I am trying to make film more interesting, to encourage people to read more and enjoy music more. I am trying to teach them a lot of things and I use film to do it."

This passionate popularising marks Bill Collins' style and separates him from other well-known Australian critics or film commentators. It also opens him to criticism, even ridicule. He is the epitome of sincerity when he leans towards the camera to tell us about a particularly significant or interesting scene, an incident that occurred during shooting, the sad details of an actor's life. Both the trivial and the significant are dealt with in the same manner. It simultaneously strikes you as quite authentic and too good to be true. You are tempted to ask if he hasn't simply found the right formula, an image which sells? Here again, sincerity is at issue and to doubt it would, I suspect, be to doubt Bill Collins in every facet of his life.

Cynicism is more in our national character, of course. Talking about negative audience responses, for example, Bill says that: "Some don't like the hype, others don't like what they see as plugs for stores carrying records or books. I'm just trying to stop people writing to ask me where they buy soundtrack records. There may be nowhere else to go. If you look at it as a plug then you're too cynical."

While cynicism may secure safety with critical distance, does Bill Collins' sincerity indicate a lack of distance? Always looking for the good in films, never seeming to have a bad word to say about any of them, could suggest he has little more to say. But passing judgments on films is not the role he wishes to take, not as the host of The Golden Years of Hollywood. What's important for Bill Collins is whether you like the film and get anything out of it. Speaking of the extraordinary continued appeal of The Sound of Music, he says: "It must have something, it speaks to people. Analysing it is a critic's delight. But don't dismiss it if it's not for you."

He feels complimented when you ask if he is deliberately presenting a variety of films from the period so that viewers can decide for themselves. "I'm trying to say that you never know when it's going to be good. Keep your mind open to new stimuli. If you slavishly follow what critics say, you'll end up with a very narrow conception of film and what it can do for you. What it can offer you."

His most critical role lies in his choice of films. The double on Saturday night, for instance, or a season like the Andy Hardy films that ran over a month of Sundays at midday. Recently, The Golden Years featured Otto Preminger's Laura, a well-known, first-rate 'film noir' and fertile ground
for a radical feminist reading with A Woman's Face, a conservative and sentimental film starring Joan Crawford which was extremely popular at the time. Despite these formal differences, how much a woman's social identity is constructed by, and around, her appearance is at issue in both films.

Has his choice on this occasion been influenced by feminist criticism? He points out that When Ladies Meet, a lively comedy drama by female scriptwriter Rachel Carruthers, was screened the following week. Collins believes it could be read as an expose of how men manipulate women and women's images of men. "I have an American publication about women and the theatre. That was a great piece of resource material for that film. When I went back to When Ladies Meet, it was like seeing it for the first time. I have a huge personal library. I find looking at criticism interesting sometimes, especially criticism from the time the films were made."

Once again, there's the hint of a journey of personal discovery, somewhat at odds with the popular image of a man confined to the values of the 'thirties and 'forties. Bill Collins is indeed so identified with The Golden Years of Hollywood that it comes as a surprise to hear him denounce nostalgia as an impediment to intelligent viewing. An audience which wants to see old favourites repeated endlessly is his bane. "If there's anything that really turns me off, it's 'Oh, I love all those old movies you show, Bill. They bring back memories of when I was a little girl.' It's very disappointing when a film like The African Queen is among the top rating movies of the year and some that haven't been on television for years, and are very good films, get lower ratings. And when I ask people why they didn't watch them they say: 'I've never seen that one, so I didn't think it would be any good.' That's one of the greatest barriers to growth. They won't trust me to present something that might be particularly interesting to them. They feel secure in what they know they've enjoyed before."

But not all the audience wants to holiday in Brighton every year. For some of us, The Golden Years is an opportunity to view a variety of films from an era of filmmaking we enjoy, to compare technologies and themes, to get a sense of what was popular and the significance of diversions and experiments. For a woman in her thirties, like me, they provide access to another world, and not simply the world of film itself. Not because they reflect the reality of the times, but because they are constructed within it.

"Realism has nothing to do with it. Theatre is not real, in the sense that it's not happening in an alleyway or a bedroom. It's happening on a stage in a three-walled room or a stylised set. And the same thing applies to film. The reality is in the imagination and the heart more than in the fact of the thing itself."

And that's what sets the films of the 'thirties and 'forties apart for Bill Collins. "I don't watch movies of the 'forties for nostalgia, I watch them because I happen to like the way they're made. I love the clarity of the dialogue. You can hear every word, even if the characters are low-life or semi-articulate. In the theatre, a playwright writes dialogue to be heard. We don't want to listen to a lot of mumbling."

So don't ask Bill Collins what his favourite movies are, because he might "get sassy and say all the wrong things - just to be different. I love to present films of the 'thirties and 'forties, but I also love showing British films and I would dearly love to show some of the French and Italian classics. David Stratton and I have joked about swapping shows for a week. I love the movies on SBS. I like presenting newer films, controversial films, films that have something to say, if that doesn't sound too shallow, about sex or racial relations or man's inhumanity to man. My image is not only to do with movies made fifty years ago, because I have been reviewing new releases for years. So I don't like being straitjacketed as someone only into older movies. I'm for film, period. I love the medium."

Perhaps he's not even making a personal journey through the world of films, though he'd probably prefer that reading of himself. Next time you talk to him he may see things differently.

LYNDELL FAIRLEY is a freelance journalist.
MARKETING
our MERV


Cricket lovers, hasn't the Australian Cricket Board pulled the right rein with this sizzling hot summer of cricket?

Getting the Pakistanis and the Sri Lankans out here to weave their magic against A.B.'s Ashes winning crowd was a stroke of pure entrepreneurial genius.

The gate crews have been turning the public away in droves from day one.

The icing on the cake was the lightning fast trip from the new old traditional rivals, the New Zealanders.

A note of caution, my very good friends. This may have been the last summer that cricket sold itself.

As we head into the 'nineties, we have to look much more closely at how to promote the caper now that soccer has booted off a summer season and now that the heat is on with the bases loaded at the top of the sixth in the baseball brouhaha across the nation, screaming for the leisure dollar.

Cricket must learn from other codes and comps or, like the dinosaur, become too heavy and too stupid to survive.

Look how the Rugby League kicked on since linking up with the great Tina Turner who pointed out in one brief moment the raw, wild, untamed, sex appeal running round the paddock in shorts week-in, week-out in the toughest football competition in the world. Never have blokes, buttocks or balls looked better than when Tina told us... well... as nearly as I could discern, the subtext of the spray was you would be an idiot to yourself if you didn't do everything in your power to bag one of the guys and take him home to your place and get him nude real quick regardless of whether you were male or female.

Of course, cricket couldn't walk this racey road as the innate conservative nature of the game screams 'WHOA', before the pants are dropped and the lewd, bang-a-gong, get-it-on, sensuality of the players is revealed.

The bottom line is the nation has had a gutful of souvenir medals, baggy green caps, Greg Chappell slip slop hats, signed bats, record breaking balls, team photos and souvenir dol­lies from the '56 tour of the sub-continent.

To be honest, like you, I have a shed full of that rubbish at home. It's a joke. It's a farce! Something that should have been consigned to the ash cans of history.

Now the brains trust that has whipped Merv into a superstar has shown the way forward with a style of individual promotion that will blast cricket out of the doldrums of the current age and into the twentyfirst century.

The breathtaking breakthrough made by the Hughes handlers is that the big bloke isn't in the squad for his cricketing skill, but for his ability to play the character parts.

Merv plays the naive and innocent boofhead from up country who can't wait to ram his tongue into any hole as soon as the furniture is disturbed.

I, for one, can't wait until he graduates from the National Institute of Dramatic Art and can stroll out through the gate and take the new ball from the Punt Road end, as Hamlet with a skull tucked down the front of the trousers, or go out hoping to score a lightning fast fifty as Little John out of Robin Hood with a stump as his staff; or field at mid-on playing the heavy, the method acting way, with all the clout of Chuck Norris or Syl-
vester Stallone. In this part he doesn’t plant the lips on the mates, but plants the knuckle sandwich on the opposition.

The Merv Hughes think-tank hit pay dirt with the shoe ads, the aerobics books, the Merv Hughes bedtime hits, the smoke social appearances and the kiddies’ ‘get work’ endorsements.

With that fluff paying the rent how about a series of audio cassettes to play in the car on the way to the game called ‘Musings with Merv’.

On these, Merv spills his guts on the big issues that confront the nation like: vegetarianism - how it can work for you; home slaughtering - the pros and cons; Princess Di and panty hose - do they a have a future?; etc, etc.

You see, with Merv the sky is the limit because the nexus between results on the paddock and cashflow off it has been broken forever. It will end where all great promotions end, with a TV show on a top of the heap Channel Ten simply called ‘Merv’.

But, having said that, let’s open the whole Pandora’s Box of possibilities. I would kill for an album of songs by Stumpy Boon called ‘The Songs of a Short Leg’.

Stumps wouldn’t have to open the larynx himself; but he and his advisers could select them. Chestnuts like ‘Jump in My Car’, ‘The Real Thing’, ‘Funky Town’ (the Pseudo Echo arrangement), and ‘New York Mining Disaster’ would all be sung by the original bands under the baton of the maestro of the willow, one S Boon. Plus on green vinyl with red label, a bonus single of Stumps having a go at a personal favorite like ‘Running Bear’ and on the flip side ‘Has Anyone Seen Old Sid Around?’.

These would be the certified tunes that Boonie sang to himself while fielding in close.

There would be a simple film clip with Boonie mouthing a few lyrics while he tonced six after six at the Gabba.

Now, I might be wide of the slips cordon, but I would love to see how Swampy Marsh passed time in the gully day after day. Marshie’s recent dig in a beer commercial has ‘rager’ written all over it; and I would love to think that he had a volume of verse tucked away in the top drawer just itching to see the light of day.

You know the sort of gear: a personal selection of thoughts that kept him going through a summer in Britain last year.

The great thing here is, if Marshie hasn’t done it, it wouldn’t take long to rope him in from the boundary anyone of half a dozen cricket writers to do it for him. Names like Blowers, Johnners, Benners, and Lawrers all can write, or at least that is what the blatherings have been telling us for years; and ghosting is perfectly respectable for a busy bloke with a ton on his mind.

The bottom line, my very good friends, is that there is a goldmine out there just waiting for someone to get out there and shift the overburden, and get on with it.

H.G. NELSON is the alter-ego of Greg Pickhaver. H.G, along with Roy Slaven, presents This Sporting Life, Saturday afternoons from 2-6pm, on ABC radio’s JJJ-FM.
The death of Andrei Sakharov, at the age of 68, is a major loss to science, to his native country, and to humanity at large.

Sakharov was first and foremost a scientist, committed to the fundamental values of free inquiry and freedom of publication. In his book, Progress, Coexistence and Intellectual Freedom, published in English in 1968 after the manuscript was smuggled out of the USSR, the author stresses that intellectual freedom is essential to human society. This is the only protection against the "infection of people by mass myths which, in the hands of treacherous hypocrites and demagogues, can be transformed into bloody dictatorships".

The relevance of these remarks to current events in Eastern Europe, the USSR and China needs no emphasis. As Dr Silviu Brucan, a loyal communist for many years and now one of the leaders of the National Salvation Front in Romania, observed in an interview with a French journalist, authoritarian repression of ideas allowed Marxism to degenerate into a myth which became the justification for the rule of a psychopathic dictator, as it had previously done under Stalin. Dr Brucan went on to deplore the fact that so few Romanians had been able and willing to voice their dissent in public.

The same was true in the USSR, although there was more dissent than in Romania, and the struggle for intellectual freedom threw up a number of outstanding individuals like Sakharov.

Of course, most scientists subscribe to the same values as Sakharov, but few have had the courage and the persistence to stand up for these values in public. His political activities as one of the leaders of the dissident movement have somewhat obscured his contributions to scientific knowledge on the one hand, and to the freedom of scientists from political dictation, on the other.

Sakharov's contributions to physics were numerous, but they fall essentially into three areas. His early work on the Soviet H-bomb led him to study the possibilities of using nuclear fusion as a source of energy and he was one of the first people to suggest that a doughnut-shaped magnetic field or 'torus' could be used to contain the hot plasma produced by the fusion of hydrogen into helium.

The torus, or Tokamak, remains the dominant design in fusion experiments around the world. Secondly, Sakharov wrote a number of papers on the elementary particles of matter, and was again one of the first people to sug-
gest that atomic particles like the proton and the electron were built up out of even smaller particles, the 'quarks'. This, too, has become the dominant view of particle physicists. Thirdly, Sakharov made some important speculations in cosmology in which he argued that, if the universe were expanding (as Einstein was the first to suggest), then it was likely that matter was distributed throughout the universe in a non-uniform manner. This speculation has been one of the main driving forces behind recent discoveries in astrophysics, including the observation of quasars and pulsars.

It was precisely because Sakharov enjoyed such enormous prestige as a scientist that he was able to attract such worldwide support and attention both within the scientific community and outside it. Like Einstein before him, he recognised this and accepted the responsibility for making a public stand against tyranny, repression and the threat of nuclear war. On his 60th birthday, a celebration was organised in New York by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, attended by thousands of scientists and public figures. In a message on this occasion, Sakharov thanked them for their support and urged them to make efforts on behalf of lesser-known scientists and intellectuals who were not protected by their international fame.

Sakharov's support for scientific freedom was dramatically manifested by his opposition to Khrushchev in the 1960s. Although Khrushchev emphasised the role of the 'scientific-technological revolution' in the development of the USSR, he had no genuine respect for science or free inquiry. This was reflected in his enthusiastic support for the charlatan Lysenko who had also been patronised by Stalin as a great genius of biological science. Although Lysenko promised to do great things for Soviet agriculture, he failed to deliver, but was able to get rid of his critics who lost their official positions and, in some cases, died in jail. Khrushchev wanted the Soviet Academy of Sciences to elect Lysenko to membership. Sakharov led the opposition within the Academy, even though Khrushchev threatened to dissolve it if Lysenko was not elected. A major crisis was averted only when Khrushchev was deposed.

A number of people have tried to find special reasons for Sakharov's courage and persistence. One favourite theory was that Sakharov was of Jewish origin, like many of the dissident writers and scientists who suffered for their resistance to repression under the Soviet regime. In fact, Sakharov was a product of the Russian intelligentsia which had opposed Czarist oppression before the revolution, and which Stalin attempted to wipe out. His grandfather had been active in the campaign to abolish capital punishment under the Czarist regime.

In the end, we have no answer except to recognise the outstanding individual qualities of the man and to salute him as a heroic figure. His overriding concern, as he wrote in his book, was the "independence and worth of the human personality". And that should go for all of us.

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