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**'In Search of a National Idea'**  
**Australian Intellectuals and the 'Cultural Cringe'**  
**1940 – 1972**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Department of History  
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences  
The University of Sydney

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### **Statement of Originality**

I certify that, to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work.

The thesis has not been submitted for any other degree or any other purpose.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

Rollo Hesketh, 28 April 2018

### **Statement of Attribution**

Parts of the Introduction and Chapter 1 of this thesis have been published as ‘A.A. Phillips and the ‘Cultural Cringe’: Creating an ‘Australian Tradition’, in *Meanjin*, volume 72, number 3, Spring 2013, pages 92–103. I researched and wrote, and am the sole author, of both the magazine essay and the thesis chapters.

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## ABSTRACT

The ‘cultural cringe’ was a powerful force shaping Australian ideas in the post-war years. Struggling with both the heavy cultural shadow of Britain and the brutal apathy of Australian philistinism, intellectuals tried to find ways to escape the colonial rut of a meagre, material culture. This thesis will, for the first time, place together the work of eleven writers and explore their responses to a cultural insecurity they all felt with peculiar intensity. Ultimately, it will be argued that the ‘cultural nationalists’ – A.A. Phillips (who coined the term ‘cultural cringe’ in a 1950 essay), Clem Christesen, Nettie and Vance Palmer, Brian Fitzpatrick and Russel Ward – failed in their quest to define and celebrate a distinctive cultural tradition unique to Australia, free of the tentacles of Britishness. Others such as Manning Clark and Bernard Smith created powerful visions of Australia, but struggled to make these resonant or relevant in an Australia that by the 1960s was changing rapidly. Donald Horne and Patrick White despised cultural nationalism, seeking other ways to ‘create’ Australia; but it was Judith Wright who came closest to the successful realisation of an original idea of Australia, incorporating the Aboriginality of the continent, and in so doing a successful refutation of the hated cringe.



**“One is given the place one is born into, but first and last one is a human being.  
And the humanity is much more interesting than the locality or nation.”**

*John McGahern, The Guardian, 2002*

**“Before long we’ll think up a way of being somehow begotten by an idea.”**

*Fyodor Dostoevsky, Notes from Underground, 1864*

**“You academic types sure know how to make a simple thing complicated.”**

*Gerald Murnane, Sydney Review of Books, 2018*



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*Rollo Hesketh, November 2018*



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## INTRODUCTION: 'The Endless Seminar'

It was a visceral hatred. Hatred of being made to feel inferior; of the obsequiousness of those who would tug the forelock to the supposedly superior British, blandly allowing an intolerable situation to continue. When A.A. Phillips coined the term 'cultural cringe' in a 1950 *Meanjin* essay, he was putting a name to a sentiment and a resentment well-known and profoundly understood by his contemporaries in the intellectual and literary world of post-war Australia.<sup>1</sup> In a similar way to Donald Horne's 'lucky country', the term has been distorted, coming to refer to Australians' inherent lack of faith in their own culture, often at the popular level. This is divorced from the originally intended meaning, which was explicitly linked to 'high' culture. Phillips wished to create a national culture that conceded no inferiority to Britain, and indeed was unembarrassed to be Australian: 'temper, democratic; bias, offensively Australian', as Joseph Furphy famously put it nearly half a century before.<sup>2</sup> But Phillips lamented the 'intimidating mass of Anglo-Saxon achievement' looming over Australian writers, suffocating the rambunctious, democratic spirit so alive in Furphy. Australians needed to have the confidence to ignore the monolith of British culture, as his hero had done. The problem that really galled was a 'certain type of Australian intellectual', 'forever sidling up to the cultivated Englishman, insinuating "I, of course, am not like these other crude Australians. I understand how you feel about them; I should be more at home in Oxford or Bloomsbury"'.<sup>3</sup> He wanted to consign this obnoxious insecurity to the past, replacing it with the self-confidence required by every mature nation.

Therefore, Phillips' objective was to illustrate the existence of an 'Australian Tradition'; a tradition developed in spite of British culture. And he wanted this to feed a vital and flourishing

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<sup>1</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'The Cultural Cringe', *Meanjin*, vol. 9, no. 4, Summer 1950, pp. 299–302. The essay was later revised and re-published in Phillips' collection of essays *The Australian Tradition: Studies in a Colonial Culture*, Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1958, pp. 89–95. The differences between the two versions are discussed in Ian Henderson, "'Freud has a name for it': A.A. Phillips' 'The Cultural Cringe'", *Southerly*, vol. 62, issue 9, 2009, pp. 127–47.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Furphy, Letter to *The Bulletin*, 4/4/1897, cited in Manning Clark, 'Furphy, Joseph (1843–1912)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, Canberra, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/furphy-joseph-6261/text10785>, published in hardcopy 1981; accessed online 22/12/2017.

<sup>3</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'The Cultural Cringe', *The Australian Tradition*, pp. 89/91.

contemporary scene, one where ideas could find expression in an environment which had previously only shunned them. An Australia confident in itself, he surmised, must have its own, confident culture; it must not be second-hand or second-rate, and it must be *Australian*. These were notions and goals he defined and promoted over a long, rich career as a critic, even as cultural mores moved on and his own ideas became unfashionable, derided as embarrassing and elitist. Of course, his conception of a ‘cultural cringe’ was to be taken up across a spectrum of scholarship and commentary, but his reliance on a nationalist literature owing much to the nativist tenets of the ‘legendary’ 1890s meant that his chosen route out of the cultural rut was one clouded by xenophobia and racism.

Intent as he was on the promotion of a democratic culture, he also yearned for what he called a ‘cultural crust’ of substance – an intellectual layer at the top of society which could influence the tone of national conversation, therefore ending ‘the estrangement of the Australian intellectual’ by providing individuals with, as he put it, ‘a protective insulation’.<sup>4</sup> But the tension between these twin desires – a tradition democratic in stamp and provincial in origin, and an intellectual class cocooned from the people’s philistinism – was one Phillips and his fellow cultural nationalists could never reconcile. Poet Les Murray has called Australia ‘the vernacular republic’ – the ‘folk’ idea of Australia ‘the real matrix of any distinctiveness we possess’, a sentiment with which Phillips would have strongly agreed. Likewise, he would find common ground with Murray’s diagnosis of what makes such a culture almost unbearable for the writer surrounded by it: to ‘live consciously outside it or in opposition to it, without expatriating oneself, is a crippling strain’.<sup>5</sup> Phillips and his confreres worked in tougher times for the Australian writer than Murray, and they never got the credit they deserved for their pursuit of the fundamentally worthy aim of making the writing life more tolerable. In fact, far from receiving any credit, in the end they found themselves mercilessly attacked by their intellectual successors, as we shall see. But even if

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<sup>4</sup> A.A. Phillips, ‘The Cultural Cringe’, *The Australian Tradition*, pp. 90–1.

<sup>5</sup> Les Murray, ‘The Australian Republic’, in *The Quality of Sprawl: Thoughts about Australia*, Potts Point, NSW: Duffy & Snellgrove, 1999, p. 73. See the title of his 1976 anthology: *The Vernacular Republic: Selected Poems*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1976.

only in coining the term ‘cultural cringe’, Phillips for one went some way to helping Australia break free of its cultural shackles, giving generations of Australian thinkers and writers something to challenge in the name of a more mature nation, a nation to be taken seriously by its own citizens and the world.

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The idea of the cultural cringe originates in the debates over national identity sparked by the Second World War. Research in the papers of Australia’s intellectuals of that era illustrates the constant debate going on between them, as they sought a greater platform for their ideas, audience for their work, and a national profile – they did not want to be hidden away in the margins of society, an ‘alternative culture’.<sup>6</sup> Phillips excoriated the cringe in the context of an intellectual environment in which Australia’s culture was endlessly being defined, debated and promoted amongst these people. Reading their papers one finds oneself in a small, echoing world, a claustrophobic space – their correspondence (largely to one another) brims with frustration and anxiety, as do their journals and magazines, lectures and essays, all of which might as well be letters to each other, too. There was a small clique, many of them friends, but some of them isolated and alone. The methodology employed in researching this thesis was nothing so much as sifting through the intellectual ideas of an era, present in endless lines of boxes in the libraries of Canberra, Melbourne and Sydney; uncovering the connections between the writers and thinkers who were seeking answers to these questions. Even those opposed to each other – such as Phillips and Horne – still swam in the same currents. But who was listening? Who cared? The problem for the historian is the sense that hardly anyone was or did, that this was a conversation between initiates; that the intellectuals of post-war Australia were preaching to the converted, and everyone else was blithely happy to ignore them. Their impact on society was minimal – was not the real stuff of nation-building going on elsewhere? However, their voices ring through the years as their concerns and ideas continue to have relevance in a nation still uneasy with its image and its culture. Digging in their papers

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<sup>6</sup> John McLaren’s term, in *Writing in Hope and Fear: Literature as Politics in Post-War Australia*, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 13.

one finds the archaeology of national identity – for while Donald Horne, one of the subjects of this thesis, might have berated the ‘nation without ideas’,<sup>7</sup> nevertheless he was one of those figures ‘in search of a national idea’, as C.R. Badger put it in a *Meanjin* essay of 1944.<sup>8</sup> The search was not an easy one: what is Australia? How can the nation produce ideas, literature and art of quality and worth? How can this colonial outpost be made independent, mature and *interesting*?

Richard Haese called the intellectuals and artists of the forties the ‘rebels and precursors’;<sup>9</sup> those who in their rebellion began the arguments that would rage for decades. They wished to step out from the shadow of Britain; define themselves as something other than British; turn Australia’s gaze towards new parts of the world, most obviously Asia; gain government and public patronage of the arts; and, perhaps most importantly, give Australia and Australian writers, artists and intellectuals a self-confident pride which was as noticeable for what it was not – parochial, swaggering, philistine, and of course British – as for what it was – Australian. All agreed with Phillips that ‘a cringing culture cannot be a healthy culture’.<sup>10</sup>

Australian intellectuals have written about and agonised over the same things ever since. Richard White describes the search for a national identity as a ‘national obsession’.<sup>11</sup> It has spread far beyond the confines of academia, its challenges occupying the minds of editors, writers, artists and broadcasters through generations. Journalist Tony Stephens, writing about historian Russel Ward (definer of the ‘Australian Legend’ and subject of a later chapter) sarcastically jokes that it is ‘about time Australians had a decent debate about national identity’: in fact, the ‘so-called debate’ is ‘ceaseless’.<sup>12</sup> ‘It is probable that many Australians now spend more of their spiritual energy on the quest for national and communal

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<sup>7</sup> Donald Horne, manuscript of ‘Nation without ideas’, published in *Der Monat*, West Berlin, 1963, Donald Horne Papers, Mitchell Library, Sydney, MLMSS 352, Box MLK 2177.

<sup>8</sup> C.R. Badger, ‘In search of a national idea’, *Meanjin*, vol. 3, no. 3, Summer 1944, pp. 161–3.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Haese, *Rebels and Precursors: The Revolutionary Years of Australian Art*, Melbourne: Allen Lane, 1981.

<sup>10</sup> A.A. Phillips, ‘The Ham Subsidy’, *Meanjin*, vol. 9, no. 1, Autumn 1950, p. 29.

<sup>11</sup> Richard White, *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity 1688–1980*, Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1981, p. viii.

<sup>12</sup> Tony Stephens, ‘Mate, you’re a legend’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17/5/2003; found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/05/16/1052885396799.html>; accessed: 2/9/2011.



identity than any other theme', groused Murray;<sup>13</sup> 'that aching tooth', newspaper editor John Douglas Pringle called it, involving 'endless fussing and fretting' (novelist David Malouf); an obsession (Murray again) 'which cripples the spiritual energies'.<sup>14</sup> 'I warn you now,' said Robin Boyd as far back as 1968: 'this whole thing is old hat'.<sup>15</sup> Donald Horne, a man (as we shall see) who seemingly could think of little else, actually flatly denied the existence of 'something called the Australian national identity', but he probably only said this to draw people's attention to the endless debate.<sup>16</sup> 'Endless' being the operative word, with former Prime Minister John Howard claiming victory in his quest to end the 'endless seminar'; his government, he said, having successfully 'emphasised our nation's traditional values', resurrecting 'greater pride in our history' and becoming 'assertive about the intrinsic worth of our national identity'.<sup>17</sup> The fact that Howard disparagingly employed the term 'seminar' illustrates his contempt for academic theorising, and the attitude of conservatives to the cultural cringe is seen further in the publication of books questioning its very existence.<sup>18</sup>

The political nature of the debate should come as no surprise. The so-called 'history wars' reached a frenzied pitch in the period of Howard's government, undoubtedly fuelled by each side's desire to definitively classify an Australian national image.<sup>19</sup> The debate's political edge can be framed in the context of the opposing forces of monarchism and republicanism, the labour movement and conservatism, a European identity versus an Asian future. Paul Keating invoked a picture of the 1950s as 'that awful cultural cringe with which (Robert) Menzies held us back for nearly a generation'.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Les Murray, *The Quality of Sprawl*, p. 28.

<sup>14</sup> Pringle, Malouf and Murray all cited in Tony Stephens, 'Mate, you're a legend'.

<sup>15</sup> Robin Boyd, introduction to 1968 edition, *The Australian Ugliness*, Melbourne: Text Publishing Company, 2010 (first published 1960), p. 7. Boyd here was actually talking about 'the war against ugliness', a close cousin of the incessant debate on national identity. See Chapter 8 for more discussion of Boyd.

<sup>16</sup> Horne also cited by Stephens, although he may in fact be referring to Horne's claim not to understand the meaning of the term 'nationalism' and having to go to the public library in order to look it up – see Donald Horne, *Into the Open*, Sydney: HarperCollins, 2000, p. 160. See also Chapter 8.

<sup>17</sup> John Howard, 'Our Proud Record', *The Australian*, 7/3/2008, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/our-proud-record/story-e6frg73o-111115731350>; accessed 26/8/2011.

<sup>18</sup> L.J. Hume, *Another Look at the Cultural Cringe*, St. Leonards, NSW: The Centre for Independent Studies, 1993.

<sup>19</sup> See: Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars*, Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 2004 (first edition: 2003).

<sup>20</sup> Cited in John Murphy and Judith Smart, 'The forgotten fifties: aspects of Australian society and culture in the fifties', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 28, no. 109, October 1997, p. 2.

Historians have investigated this phenomenon, Stephen Alomes looking at what he refers to as the ‘colonial cultural cringe’ and its role in the ‘shaping of a colonial culture’. He discusses the ‘assertion of imperial superiority’ shaping Australian culture, and the historiography has focussed on manifestations of this perceived superiority, along with the nationalist challenge to it.<sup>21</sup> The context of the cringe has become wider and more pervasive than just the literary world, or even the academy, incorporating politics and foreign relations.

‘Historical consciousness plays a great role in the formation of national consciousness’, wrote Hannah Arendt,<sup>22</sup> and Neville Meaney has outlined a standard ‘teleology of nationalism’, his term suggesting design and purpose in the slow historical march towards a national identity. This historical progression – national, rather than material, progress – began with the belief in a latent impulse for independence amongst the first arrivals at Sydney Cove. It continued through the early-nineteenth century fight both against transportation and for colonial self-government; the ethos of the goldfield diggers and the Eureka Stockade of 1854; the flowering of an Australian voice in the 1890s, which led to the concrete political expression of one national identity in Federation; the Anzacs as an expression of Australian distinctiveness during the First World War; Billy Hughes’s fight for separate representation both at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 and in the League of Nations; John Curtin’s public expression of a new direction in the heat of war in 1941, and his subsequent battle of wills with Churchill; and finally, Labor’s assertive foreign policy during and after the war, with H.V. ‘Doc’ Evatt to the fore.

This easy understanding of Australia’s struggle with its own identity has been described as the ‘Whiggish’ interpretation of Australian history – the ‘Radical National School’, linking the rise of

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<sup>21</sup> Stephen Alomes, *A Nation at Last? The Changing Character of Australian Nationalism 1880–1988*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1988, pp. 218–23. See also Gavin Souter, *Lion and Kangaroo: The Initiation of Australia*, Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 1992 (first published 1976) for an account of, as he says, ‘British-Australian sentiment’ (p. xi) and W.K. Hancock, *Australia*, London: Ernest Benn, 1930 (first Australian edition: 1945). Says Hancock: ‘Australia has been too much glorified by simple patriots, who imagine that civilisation started with the voyages of Captain Cook, and too much vilified by splenetic tourists of the English middle classes, who fail to find in Tumburumba the mild amenities of Tunbridge Wells. In this petty bickering of rival provincialisms the historical necessities are ignored.’ (p. 225)

<sup>22</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York: Harvest, 1999 (first published 1951), p. 271 (footnote).

national identity to the labour movement and the Labor Party, supposedly the ‘chief agents in defining and prosecuting Australian nationalism’.<sup>23</sup> Radical nationalism followed on the heels of the early twentieth century’s pioneers in Australian historiography, historians such as G.A. Wood and Ernest Scott. Wood’s most famous piece of writing is probably his essay ‘Convicts’, which was the first work to challenge the negative image of the convicts, declaring that ‘the real criminals stayed at home’. Such an argument had a clear impact on the radical nationalists.<sup>24</sup> Scott, meanwhile, was, despite his lack of a degree, the first Professor of History at the University of Melbourne, and perhaps his most famous work is *A Short History of Australia* (1916).<sup>25</sup> Historian Kathleen Fitzpatrick, a former student of Scott, described him as a ‘remarkable man’ who ‘detested cant and hypocrisy’. The *Short History* was, she says, ‘for many of us our first introduction to the history of our own country’.<sup>26</sup>

Cultural nationalism, at its height in the forties and fifties with Phillips a leading light,<sup>27</sup> took its cue from the radical nationalists. The ‘legendary’ 1890s, apogee of Australian nationalism, was also the bedrock of Phillips’ Australian Tradition.<sup>28</sup> This radicalism was a thread connecting the 1890s to the 1940s, Stuart Macintyre arguing that the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) engaged in ‘cultivation of national traditions’ in the period between the wars.<sup>29</sup> The most influential historian in the first half of the twentieth century to pursue this nationalist theme along socialist lines, particularly with an eye to Australia’s economic development and dependence on Britain, was Brian Fitzpatrick (briefly husband

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<sup>23</sup> Neville Meaney, ‘Britishness and Australian identity: the problem of nationalism in Australian history and historiography’, *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 32, no. 116, April 2001, pp. 76–7.

<sup>24</sup> G.A. Wood, ‘Convicts’, *Royal Australian Historical Society, Journal and Proceedings*, vol. 8, pt. 4, 1922, pp. 177–208. Manning Clark challenged Wood’s interpretation of the convicts, as he challenged radical nationalism: see Chapter 4.

<sup>25</sup> Ernest Scott, *A Short History of Australia*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1947 (first published 1916).

<sup>26</sup> Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *Solid Bluestone Foundations*, Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1998 (first published 1983), pp. 171–4. See also Fitzpatrick’s essay ‘Ernest Scott and the Melbourne School of History’, *Melbourne Historical Journal*, no. 7, 1968, pp. 1–10. For Scott’s lack of academic qualifications, see Kathleen Fitzpatrick (again), ‘Scott, Sir Ernest (1867–1939)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/scott-sir-ernest-8367/text14683>, published first in hardcopy 1988, accessed online 9/11/2018.

<sup>27</sup> See: A.A. Phillips, ‘Cultural nationalism in the 40s and 50s: a personal account’, draft manuscript for an essay in *Australian Intellectuals*, undated (1970s), The Phillips Family Papers, 1876–1985, Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library of Victoria, MS 12491, Box 3386, Folder 7a.

<sup>28</sup> For the ‘legendary’ 1890s, see: Vance Palmer, *The Legend of the Nineties*, Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1963 (first published 1954).

<sup>29</sup> Stuart Macintyre, *The Reds: The Communist Party of Australia from Origins to Illegality*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998, p. 315.

to Kathleen), described by Ward as the ‘spiritual father of all the radical nationalists in Australia’.<sup>30</sup> Ian Turner mentions those who followed, including historians such as Ward, Robin Gollan, Geoffrey Serle and himself, as well as critics and writers such as Nettie and Vance Palmer, Phillips, Katharine Susannah Prichard, Frank Dalby Davison, Clem Christesen, Stephen Murray-Smith, and others.<sup>31</sup> Many of these people are subjects of this thesis, illustrating the influence of the radical nationalist perspective on the intellectual currents of the 1940s and 50s. History, it has been argued, has possessed ‘unusual cultural authority’ in Australia,<sup>32</sup> and the problem for the historian trying to unpick the historiography of nationalism and national identity is further exacerbated by the lack of ‘distance’ maintained by so many historians who are themselves ‘fellow travellers’ (to co-opt a socialist moniker which seems to fit). Nationalism has influenced its own study, its chroniclers ‘believers in the nationalist legend’: ‘the study of the ideology has been infected by the ideology’.<sup>33</sup>

This tangled historiography of nationalism is visible in the work of so many subjects of this thesis; it is made more complex by Meaney’s contention that the radical nationalist interpretation represented for a long time a ‘thwarted’ history.<sup>34</sup> The problem for the nationalists of those years was that Australia seemed to be ‘the reluctant nation’, as David Day, himself reluctantly, concluded. ‘The Great Betrayal’ of Singapore, when ‘Britain deliberately left Australia at the mercy of Japan’, did not lead to the independent spirit and national self-confidence desired.<sup>35</sup> In fact, as James Curran has stressed, even Curtin, beloved of radical nationalists for his stoushes with Churchill, had shown his

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<sup>30</sup> Russel Ward, *A Radical Life*, South Melbourne: Macmillan, 1988, p. 222; for Fitzpatrick’s radical economic history of Australia, see: *British Imperialism and Australia 1788–1833*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1939 and *The British Empire in Australia: An Economic History, 1834–1939*, Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1941. Fitzpatrick and Ward discussed in depth in Chapters 5 and 6.

<sup>31</sup> Ian Turner, ‘Australian nationalism and Australian history’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 3, issue 4, 1979, p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> David Goodman, ‘The promise of history’, *AHA Bulletin*, December 1994 – April 1995, pp. 43–7; cited in Tom Griffiths, *The Art of Time Travel: Historians and their Craft*, Carlton, Vic.: Black Inc., 2016, p. 8.

<sup>33</sup> Douglas Cole, ‘The problem of ‘nationalism’ and ‘imperialism’ in British settlement colonies’, *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2, May 1971, p. 161; the last quotation is Cole’s citation of Kenneth Minogue, *Nationalism*, New York: Basic Books, 1967, p. 45.

<sup>34</sup> Neville Meaney, ‘Britishness and Australian identity’, p. 76.

<sup>35</sup> David Day, *The Great Betrayal: Britain, Australia and the Onset of the Pacific war, 1939–42*, North Ryde, NSW: Angus & Robertson, 1988; cited in Deborah Gare, ‘Britishness in recent Australian historiography’, *The Historical Journal*, vol. 43, no. 4, December 200, p. 1151.

imperial colours, by the last years of the war desperately seeking to reaffirm Australia's Britishness and shore up the strength of the Commonwealth in the Asia-Pacific sphere.<sup>36</sup> Meaney says that Day has been forced to conclude that 'Australians, in the face of the greatest provocation, were unwilling to cut the British ties, affirm their own separate identity and embrace what he called a "possible independent destiny".'<sup>37</sup>

For historians such as Day, the chief way their nationalism is defined is through what it is not; or at least, what it fights against: Britishness. The question of Australian identity is intrinsically connected to the relationship with Britain. In the 'teleology of nationalism', every step is a step away from Britain. Deborah Gare has argued that this preoccupation with Britishness in Australian historiography only asserted itself in the 1990s.<sup>38</sup> In the eighties, during the celebrations of the bicentenary of the arrival of the First Fleet, the focus had been on cultural history and the lives of ordinary Australians.<sup>39</sup> However, this shifted as the republican debate took control of the agenda. Historians concentrated on tensions in Australia's relationship with Britain; challenging, for example, previous assumptions of Australian soldiers' experiences in the First World War – the examination of their 'disgust' with British officers the 'first major challenge' to the sense of Britishness.<sup>40</sup> An 'Anglo-Australian' elite ruled Australia up until 1941, says Christopher Waters, viewing the world through 'an imperial imagination' which 'dominated Australia's institutional memory, its sporting memory, its religious memory, its military memory and its ceremonial memory'. Britishness was 'central' to identity; however, the election of a Labor government, swiftly following the outbreak of the Second World War, broke this hold on the Australian imagination. Australians being a practical people, this was tied to the

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<sup>36</sup> James Curran, 'A crisis of national meaning: Prime ministers and the dilemma of Australian nationalism', lecture given 19/4/2004, Curtin University of Technology, Perth, at <http://john.curtin.edu.au/events/speeches/curran.html>; accessed 9/9/2011. In a 1944 speech Curtin proclaimed British and Australians 'one people'. Similarly, according to Meaney, Britishness meant more to Curtin's Labor successor Ben Chifley 'than to the British themselves' – see 'Britishness and Australian identity', p. 79.

<sup>37</sup> Neville Meaney, 'Britishness and Australian identity', pp. 76–7.

<sup>38</sup> Deborah Gare, 'Britishness in recent Australian historiography', pp. 1145–55.

<sup>39</sup> See for example: John Rickard, *Australia, a Cultural History*, Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1988.

<sup>40</sup> Eric Andrews, *The Anzac Illusion: Anglo-Australian Relations during World War I*, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1993; cited in Deborah Gare, 'Britishness in recent Australian historiography', p. 1148.

realities of the post-war world: the two countries suddenly had different interests, Australia ‘beginning to identify its new, independent interests in the global arena’.<sup>41</sup>

So it was a pragmatic independence, but independence nevertheless. Was Australia escaping the shadow of Britain? It was a deep, dark shadow, and not so easy to jettison. Judith Wright discussed ‘the reality of exile’ clashing with the ‘reality of newness and freedom’: to her, as we shall see, this was something retarding the birth of a poetic voice wholly and unambiguously Australian.<sup>42</sup> Only when such an idea of the nation had been affirmed could true identity – incorporating an understanding of the ancient continent and its *entire* people – be achieved. Bernard Smith, another subject of this thesis, also identified this tension, but he did not necessarily see it in such a negative light. Rather, he saw it as the governing principle of Australian art: artists, believing themselves part of a European tradition but finding themselves perched at the end of the world, made of this situation something identifiably and peculiarly Australian. Australian art, in this reading, was not exotic, in fact it owed a great deal to the Western Tradition and the ideals of Home. Such an argument did not find a receptive audience in the international art world of the sixties, fixated as it was on an idea of the exotic otherness of Australian art so deplored by Smith.<sup>43</sup>

But Smith understood the allure of Britain, the Australian identification as ‘more British than the British’: ‘the British myth’, says Meaney, ‘made more sense in Australia than Britain’.<sup>44</sup> It was indeed just that, a myth, something untainted by the reality of life in Britain itself. And Australians loved nothing so much as myths: myths fed the historical imaginations of Phillips, of the Palmers, of Ward

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<sup>41</sup> Christopher Waters, *The Empire Fractures: Anglo-Australian Conflict in the 1940s*, Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 1995, pp. 6/15/18; cited in Deborah Gare, ‘Britishness in recent Australian historiography’, pp. 1152–3.

<sup>42</sup> Judith Wright, ‘Australia’s Double Aspect’, in *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1965, p. xi. See Chapter 10.

<sup>43</sup> See: Bernard Smith, ‘The Emergence of Australian Painting’, manuscript of lecture given at the National Gallery of NSW, 1953, Bernard Smith Papers, National Library of Australia (NLA), Canberra, MS 8680, Box 3, Folder 18. These ideas discussed in Chapter 7.

<sup>44</sup> Neville Meaney, ‘Britishness and Australian identity’, pp. 79/82. Geoffrey Partington says the same, arguing that the ‘shared sense of Britishness’ was accentuated by the ‘sharp contrast’ with the Aborigines, and because the ‘different populations of the British Isles were mixed together as they had never been before even in Britain’s American colonies’; *The Australian Nation: its British and Irish Roots*, Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publications, 1994; cited in Deborah Gare, ‘Britishness in recent Australian historiography’, p. 1148.

and Manning Clark. These writers obsessed over myths, and could not conceive a nation without them. Clark's prerequisite for cultural importance was talent in the line of myth-making: as Anne Pender points out, he conferred this status on Barry Humphries, who with his suburban myths had 'enrich(ed) the culture', giving it life and verve where previously it had been (classic Clark) 'dominated by straitners'.<sup>45</sup> 'Men cannot feel really at home in any environment until they have transformed the natural shapes around them by infusing them with myth', said Vance Palmer, illustrating that the replacement of the British myth with an Australian version was a clear priority. He believed myth-making gave 'isolated communities something to hold in common',<sup>46</sup> and he implored his fellow Australians to fight for these myths.<sup>47</sup> The most famous was Ward's 'Australian Legend':<sup>48</sup> 'the only serious attempt', according to Meaney, 'to articulate an authentic Australian myth; that is, a myth which could support an exclusive Australian nationalism'.<sup>49</sup> The subjects of this thesis were makers and articulators of myths – one of the most powerful motives in post-war Australian thinking. Essay after essay harped on the theme, while literary magazines earnestly convened intellectual conclaves to discuss and dissect the 'Australian Myth'.<sup>50</sup>

Writers, according to Susan McKernan, felt 'a responsibility to assist in the development of a new nation free from the shadow of Britain or its successor in Western power, the United States of America'.<sup>51</sup> Badger's rallying cry for a 'search for a national idea' reflects *Meanjin's* vigorous, war-inspired nationalism: the phrase could be the cultural nationalist motto. But the moment of optimism was short-lived, and the subsequent era saw only the continued intellectual wringing of hands – the seeming inability to make any headway against the prevailing mood of cultural apathy leading to despondency

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<sup>45</sup> Manning Clark, cited by Anne Pender, *One Man Show: The Stages of Barry Humphries*, Pymble, NSW: HarperCollins, 2010, p. viii.

<sup>46</sup> Vance Palmer, quoted by Russel Ward, 'Vance Palmer: Homo Australiensis', *Meanjin*, vol. 18, no. 2, Winter 1959, p. 243.

<sup>47</sup> Vance Palmer, 'Battle', *Meanjin*, vol. 1, no. 8, March 1942, pp. 5–6.

<sup>48</sup> Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1966, (first published 1958).

<sup>49</sup> Neville Meaney, 'Britishness and Australian identity', p. 83.

<sup>50</sup> Phillip Adams, Tim Burstall, David Martin, Stephen Murray-Smith and Albert Tucker, 'The Legend and the Loneliness: A Discussion of the Australian Myth', *Overland*, no. 23, April 1962, pp. 33–8.

<sup>51</sup> Susan McKernan, *A Question of Commitment: Australian Literature in the Twenty Years after the War*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989, p. 5.

and despair.<sup>52</sup> This was the context in which Phillips launched his scathing diagnosis of the cringe. His was another attempt to inspire change, but the tale of this thesis is the tale of intellectuals thwarted in their desire to ‘improve’ Australia – Australians seemed quite happy to remain unimproved and unmoved by the protestations of poets, novelists, critics, artists and historians.

What follows, therefore, might be seen as an account of the failure on the part of intellectuals to cut through and make an impression on their fellow Australians, to lead the conversation, to shape national identity and ideas. Theirs was the Sisyphean task of Australian letters, the ‘battle’ (their term) for Australian recognition of the life of the mind. David Walker has written of the ‘dream’ of such intellectuals and their ultimate ‘disillusion’. Figures such as Vance Palmer, playwright Louis Esson, publisher Frank Wilmot and critic/academic Frederick Sinclaire made the conquest of philistinism their life’s work, but when the task proved too great, they became embittered and even angry at a nation that spurned their efforts or, worse, simply ignored them.<sup>53</sup> This was one of the things felt most keenly by Australian writers: their invisibility.

Why such apparent failure and disillusion? The break with Britain did not, or could not, happen just like that. Meaney argues that Australians had two views of Britain and her Empire: either the ‘metropolitan superior, the heart of the Empire’, with Australia ‘the colonial subordinate, a peripheral adjunct’; or, the Empire as a ‘multi-polar structure’ in which ‘all the white constituent elements were entitled to consideration and dignity’.<sup>54</sup> Nationalists of the first decades of federation, holders of the latter view, still saw themselves as part of the Empire, privileged within it. The debate occurs within the frame of Britishness; Britishness is not denied: ‘even those who urged a more self-respecting nationality did so within the assumptions of a British culture’.<sup>55</sup> And writers such as the Palmers were too much a

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<sup>52</sup> See in particular Chapter 2 for discussion of *Meanjin*’s optimism during the Second World War, and increasing pessimism thereafter.

<sup>53</sup> David Walker, *Dream and Disillusion: A Search for Australian Cultural Identity*, Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1976. See Chapter 3 for more on Palmer’s disillusion; Esson also considered in that chapter.

<sup>54</sup> Neville Meaney, ‘Britishness and Australian identity’, p. 83.

<sup>55</sup> Neville Meaney, ‘Sidere mens eadem mutato?’, in Neville Meaney (ed.), *Under New Heavens: Cultural Transmission and the Making of Australia*, Port Melbourne: Heinemann Educational Australia, 1989, p. 3.



product of their colonial age to make the decisive break from Britain, or the telling assertion of Australianness. When Ward's Legend is described as 'exclusive', we take this to mean free of the shackles of Britishness. But as Richard White points out, not only 'is the idea of 'Australia' itself a European invention, but men like Charles Darwin and Rudyard Kipling have contributed as much to what it means to be Australian as Arthur Streeton or Henry Lawson'. National identity is not 'born of the lean loins of the country itself', as the nationalists would have it, 'but is part of the 'cultural baggage' which Europeans have brought with them, and with which we continue to encumber ourselves'.<sup>56</sup> Carolyn Holbrook sees something of this in the 'ascendancy' of the Anzac Legend: exploring the history of an idea, she contends that because 'European roots are tamped so lightly into Australian soil', Australians are ever more obsessed with 'staring intently... into the past'.<sup>57</sup> The shallowness of the roots only magnifies their seeming importance.

Because of the depths of the attachment and the reliance on Britain as provider of symbols and meaning, in official and ceremonial life, let alone in the collective consciousness, any rupture would naturally lead to a void – and how this was to be filled was the primary cause of the 'endless seminar'.<sup>58</sup> The natural replacement would seem to be a republic. Mark McKenna argues that the original republicans threatened their republic 'to protect their right to be afforded the privileges of the British constitution'. The 'beckoning republic' was, he says, 'a direct result of their allegiance to the Constitution and Crown of England. They were loyalists first, and republicans second, a gathering of extremely reluctant rebels'.<sup>59</sup> So even republicanism was a disappointment, rooted in Britishness. The 'national idea' could not escape the 'feet of British clay' possessed by Prime Ministers Hughes, Curtin and Chifley.<sup>60</sup> The radical nationalist claim for the critical role of the Labor Party seems hollow, and Chifley's

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<sup>56</sup> Richard White, *Inventing Australia*, pp. viii–ix.

<sup>57</sup> Carolyn Holbrook, *ANZAC: The Unauthorised Biography*, Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2014, p. 7.

<sup>58</sup> See in particular James Curran and Stuart Ward, Chapter 3 – 'Falling between two stools: solutions', *The Unknown Nation: Australia after Empire*, Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2010, pp. 91–126.

<sup>59</sup> Mark McKenna, *The Captive Republic*, Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 58, cited in Deborah Gare, 'Britishness in recent Australian historiography', p. 1154.

<sup>60</sup> Neville Meaney's term, 'Britishness and Australian identity', p. 80.

defeat in 1949 ushered in the long Menzies era. Christesen's sense of disappointment was crushing – his often bitter correspondence attests to this.<sup>61</sup> The attacks on the CPA, he made clear, left writers angry, embittered and 'disgusted'. The situation, despite some fighting words, seemed hopeless.<sup>62</sup> Nationalist poet Rex Ingamells' hymn to the Queen on the occasion of her visit in 1954 attests to the pitiful state of affairs, her visit 'the most popular civil religious event in Australian history'.<sup>63</sup> Any nationalist fervour triggered by the war appeared to have withered.

The fifties, in part because of the conservatism and Anglophilia of Menzies' government and its failure to support the arts, has been viewed as a particularly sterile, parochial period in Australian history, one obsessed with the pursuit of material security at the expense of the life of the mind.<sup>64</sup> 'The Fifties', it has been argued, is now a clichéd term, 'emblematic' of a 'static, complacent and monocultural' nation, prosperous and 'satisfyingly middle class' to many, but 'the steel against which radicals have sharpened their views'.<sup>65</sup> Nicholas Brown says that intellectuals of the era, having grown up in the cataclysmic decades of the thirties and forties, were 'uncomfortable with the changes they associated with post-war affluence'.<sup>66</sup> The middle class, argues John Rickard, 'felt a profound need for order and, in a psychological sense, security'<sup>67</sup> – the search for respectability was the driving force behind society's development. Historians have tended to focus on these social issues, *Australian Historical Studies*' 'Fifties Special' concentrating on popular culture, the life of individual cities, homophobia, sexuality, domesticity and the role of women.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> See Chapter 2.

<sup>62</sup> C.B. Christesen, 'The Uneasy Chair: The Wound as the Bow', *Meanjin*, vol. 10, no. 1, Autumn 1951, p. 91.

<sup>63</sup> Neville Meaney, 'Sidere mens eadem mutato?', p. 9. Rex Ingamells' gushing praise of the Queen is cited in Jane Connors, 'Royal Tours', in Graeme Davison, John Hirst and Stuart Macintyre (eds), *Oxford Companion to Australian History*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 565. Ingamells was the founder and stalwart of the Jindyworobak group of nationalist poets, further discussed in Chapter 10.

<sup>64</sup> For articulation of this sense of 1950s Australia see Clive James, *Unreliable Memoirs*, London: Picador, 1981 (first published 1980) and Robin Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness*, Melbourne: Text Publishing Company, 2010 (first published 1960).

<sup>65</sup> John Murphy and Judith Smart, 'The forgotten fifties', p. 1.

<sup>66</sup> Nicholas Brown, *Governing Prosperity: Social Change and Social Analysis in Australia in the 1950s*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 4.

<sup>67</sup> John Rickard, 'Sydney: the class of '51', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 28, no. 109, October 1997, p. 171.

<sup>68</sup> *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 28, no. 109, October 1997.

Against such a background the struggles for meaningful intellectual culture, seemingly of such minor importance at the time, can be forgotten, even if some do declare that it was a more ‘dynamic and contradictory’ period than the historiography’s ‘broad-brush sketches’ might have shown.<sup>69</sup> John McLaren, meanwhile, has shown how this was the context to the development and activism of the ‘free radicals’ of the left – Stephen Murray-Smith, Ian Turner and Ken Gott. Menzies’ election ensured ‘middle-class dominance’ of the state and ‘protected’ it from challenge from a working class that was ‘kept content’: ‘difference was denied and dissidence suppressed’.<sup>70</sup> Despite this, the fifties was the decade, Graeme Davidson says, when Australians felt ‘trepidation and uncertainty’ as they ‘prepared to present themselves to the world’ in the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games.<sup>71</sup> The image of Australia, the seriousness with which the nation was taken on the world stage, still gnawed at the collective consciousness. This was the environment that could spawn an intellectual movement that seemed almost childishly eager for approval. Angry at the prevailing climate – Christesen furiously exhorting writers to use ‘the wound as the bow’<sup>72</sup> – there was also a desperation for others to take notice of Australia. Cringers were vilified for their craven deference at the merest hint of donnish vowels; but the desire for the don’s approval, for Australian literature to be noticed, studied and praised, was quite real for those who purported to despise the cringe.

At what stage did this constraining tension begin to dissipate? McKenna argues that as Menzies farewelled the Queen in 1963 after a far less rapturously received tour, with his infamously fawning, verse-quoting address, the republican movement had turned into a ‘campaign for a unique national

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<sup>69</sup> John Murphy and Judith Smart, ‘The forgotten fifties’, p. 1.

<sup>70</sup> John McLaren, *Free Radicals: On the Left in Postwar Melbourne*, Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2003, pp. 3–4.

<sup>71</sup> Graeme Davison, ‘Welcoming the world: the 1956 Olympic Games and the re presentation of Melbourne’, *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 28, no. 109, October 1997, pp. 64–76. Bernard Smith wrote the blurb for an exhibition timed to coincide with the Olympics, presenting Australian art to the world – ‘Introduction to exhibition of painting and drawing’, Olympic Games Fine Arts Exhibition, manuscript, published in *The Arts Festival of the Olympic Games*, August 1956, Bernard Smith Papers, NLA, Box 3, Folder 19.

<sup>72</sup> C.B. Christesen, ‘The Uneasy Chair: The Wound as the Bow’, p. 91.

identity'.<sup>73</sup> Australia was detaching itself from Britain as, in the early sixties, the mother country made noises about joining the European Economic Community (EEC),<sup>74</sup> and the process of military withdrawal from east of the Suez Canal began in 1967.<sup>75</sup> Menzies had been proud to trumpet Australia's status as 'British to the boot heels',<sup>76</sup> but now a Liberal government was forced to confront questions of national identity in a post-imperial era.<sup>77</sup> Part of that process involved finally investing public funds on developing the arts, something the 'Meanjin School' had been advocating for a long time.<sup>78</sup> The Australian Council for the Arts was finally formed in the late-sixties, as the Holt and Gorton governments significantly increased spending on the arts, an illustration that the need for a more vibrant cultural and artistic life was part of the period's 'scramble for a national culture'.<sup>79</sup> By the seventies Barry McKenzie could confidently assert that 'back in Oz now we've got culture up to our arseholes'.<sup>80</sup> Gough Whitlam soon became Prime Minister, and the splurge on the arts continued against the backdrop of an increasingly assertive international presence for a more independently-minded Australia. The radical nationalists claimed victory as histories and historical exhibitions loudly proclaimed 'A Nation At Last'.<sup>81</sup>

Maybe, but the yearning for foreign shores had not really diminished. Poets had always looked longingly to the Old Dart, extemporising on this topic almost as a matter of course. Australia, said poet

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<sup>73</sup> Mark McKenna, *The Captive Republic*, pp. 221/9; cited in Deborah Gare., 'Britishness in recent Australian historiography', p. 1154. Menzies quoted little-known seventeenth century poet and composer Thomas Ford: 'I did but see her passing by and yet I love her till I die'.

<sup>74</sup> See: Norman Shrapnel, 'Britain will ask to join EEC – archive', *The Guardian*, first published 1/8/1961; re-published online 1/8/2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/01/eec-britain-membership-european-economic-community-1961-archive>; accessed 29/8/2018. Britain eventually joined the EEC in 1973.

<sup>75</sup> See: Edward Longinotti, 'Britain's Withdrawal from East of Suez: From Economic Determinism to Political Choice', *Contemporary British History*, vol. 29, issue 3, 2015, pp. 318–40.

<sup>76</sup> Robert Menzies, quoted in James Curran and Stuart Ward, *The Unknown Nation*, p. 36.

<sup>77</sup> For an example of the new debates about national identity emerging in the sixties, see: James Curran, 'Australia should be there: Expo '67 and the search for a new national image', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 39, no. 1, March 2008, pp. 75/6.

<sup>78</sup> For *Meanjin's* prolonged campaign to see greater government funding for the arts, see in particular Chapter 2. 'Meanjin School' – Christesen's term, see: C.B. Christesen, 'The Meanjin "School"', *Meanjin*, vol. 2, no. 2, Winter 1943, pp. 49–53.

<sup>79</sup> Stuart Ward's term, in *Australia and the British Embrace: The Demise of the Imperial Ideal*, Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2001; cited in James Curran, 'Australia should be there', p. 75. The Australia Council had various predecessors, including the Commonwealth Literature Fund from 1908 and its Art Fund from 1912. See Judith Pugh, 'Images of a Nation', University of LaTrobe, PhD Thesis, 2016, on the Commonwealth and the visual arts.

<sup>80</sup> Cited in Frank Bongiorno, 'Of Tinnies and Sheilas', *Inside Story*, 2/1/2009, <http://insidestory.org.au/of-tinnies-and-sheilas>; accessed 14/9/2016.

<sup>81</sup> Neville Meaney, 'Britishness and Australian identity', p. 77. See also: James Curran and Stuart Ward, *The Unknown Nation*, p. 137.

A.D. Hope, was the place where ‘second-hand Europeans pullulate timidly on alien shores’, forcing, as Victor Daley had noted, ‘artists, singers, all’ to quickly take flight ‘when London calls aloud,/Commanding to her festival/The gifted crowd’.<sup>82</sup> In the same year as Daley’s poem (1900) Henry Lawson wrote beseechingly to Lord Beauchamp, brazenly declaring he had heard the aristocrat (whom he did not appear to have met) was rich and wondering whether he would pay Lawson’s way to London as ‘the position of purely Australian literature is altogether hopeless in Australia’, and ‘nothing goes well here which does not come from or through England’.<sup>83</sup> Lawson subsequently made his way to London, returning humiliated two years later. Those London years are shadowy to the historian, and their main legacy appears to be the escalation of Lawson’s alcoholism and the diminishment of his poetic gift, as his ‘personal and creative life entered upon a ghastly decline’.<sup>84</sup>

More than half a century later Australian émigrés had much more success: the Big Four of Germaine Greer, Robert Hughes, Barry Humphries and Clive James coming to symbolise the seeming inability of Australia to foster or keep its own creative talent as they fled Australia to seek cultural succour and brilliant success in more rarefied climes. Bruce Bennett and Anne Pender challenge the ‘superficial assumptions of an organic, homegrown culture versus an inauthentic “foreign” culture developed overseas’ – such a simplistic analysis, they argue, only serves to reinforce both the cringe and Australian writing’s immaturity.<sup>85</sup> Perhaps, but Phillips was not alone in seeing the expatriation of

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<sup>82</sup> A.D. Hope, ‘Australia’, in John Kinsella (ed.), *Penguin Anthology of Australian Poetry*, Camberwell, Vic.: Penguin, 2009, p. 160; Victor Daley, ‘When London calls’, *The Bulletin*, 8/12/1900, p. 15.

<sup>83</sup> Henry Lawson, ‘Letter to Lord Beauchamp’, 19/1/1900, in Ken Goodwin and Alan Lawson (eds), *The Macmillan Anthology of Australian Literature*, South Melbourne: Macmillan, 1990, p. 372.

<sup>84</sup> Brian Matthews, ‘Lawson, Henry (1867–1922)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/lawson-henry-7118/text12279>, published first in hardcopy 1986, accessed 28/2/2018.

<sup>85</sup> Bruce Bennett and Anne Pender, *From a Distant Shore: Australian Writers in Britain 1820–2012*, Clayton, Vic.: Monash University Publishing, 2013, p. 1. For more on expatriate writers and artists, see Stephen Alomes, *When London Calls: The Expatriation of Australian Creative Artists to Britain*, Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1999; Ian Britain, *Once an Australian: Journeys with Barry Humphries, Clive James, Germaine Greer and Robert Hughes*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1997; Carl Bridge, Robert Crawford and David Dunstan (eds), *Australians in Britain: The Twentieth-Century Experience*, Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2009; Angela Woollacott, *To Try her Fortune in London: Australian Women, Colonialism, and Modernity*, Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001; and Peter Morton, *Lusting for London: Australian Expatriate Writers at the Hub of Empire, 1870–1950*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Australia's brightest and best writers as a terrible drain on the nation's literary resources.<sup>86</sup> It had been an especial bugbear in the inter-war period – the leanest of years for Australian letters. P.R. 'Inky' Stephensen, author of the tub-thumping essay 'The Foundations of Culture in Australia' (1936) which called for the creation of 'our own indigenous culture', had railed against the 'shirkers' who had 'cleared out' and 'funked' the job of dealing 'with the realities of Australia'.<sup>87</sup> Robert Dixon compares Stephensen to Nettie Palmer, and argues that his drive for a national culture 'sufficiently strong to survive the rigors of the international economy, in which strong national cultures "bastardise" weaker ones', was part of an international trend in the thirties 'toward reactive cultural nationalisms in the 'literary provinces''.<sup>88</sup> The war years dampened this reaction, because it was impossible for writers to escape. Perhaps this was one reason why Christesen was so optimistic at that time. There was still a pervading anti-intellectualism, though, which bordered on the paranoid, with one politician in 1940 arguing that intellectuals, during peacetime tolerated as 'harmless cranks', were all potential wartime fifth columnists, nothing but 'pathetic creatures with childlike minds ever looking for truth and never finding it'.<sup>89</sup> This, it appeared, was a mainstream view. Stephensen, meanwhile, spent much of the war interned, having formed the 'Australia First' movement in 1941 and become a figure of suspicion.<sup>90</sup> Normal service was resumed, however, in 1945, writers once more fleeing Australian shores;<sup>91</sup> at home, Phillips and Christesen continued to preach their 'reactionary' cultural nationalist agenda.

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<sup>86</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'The state of the arts in Australia', introduction to *Report of the Arts and Letters Enquiry Committee for Victoria*, 1961, pp. 1–3, C.B. Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne, 2005.0004, Box 16.

<sup>87</sup> P.R. Stephensen, *The Foundations of Culture: An Essay towards National Self-Respect*, Gordon, NSW: W.J. Miles, 1936, pp. 11/121–3. Many of the subjects of this thesis deplored the expatriate writer, as we shall see.

<sup>88</sup> Robert Dixon, 'Australian fiction and the world republic of letters, 1890–1950', in Peter Pierce (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature*, Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 240.

<sup>89</sup> C.G. Latham, Leader of the Western Australian Opposition, 1940, cited in Robert Loeffel, *The Fifth Column in World War II: Suspected Subversives in the Pacific War and Australia*, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp. 49/50.

<sup>90</sup> For details of Stephensen's life, see: Craig Munro, 'Stephensen, Percy Reginald (1901–1965)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/stephensen-percy-reginald-8645/text15115>, published first in hardcopy 1990; accessed online 18/3/2018. See Chapter 4 for his friendship with Manning Clark and his wife Dymphna, and the extremity of his political ideas (still in evidence in the post-war years).

<sup>91</sup> 'To write novels it was essential to be 'overseas''; Donald Horne, *Confessions of a New Boy*, Ringwood, Vic.: Viking, 1985, p. 289.

It is striking to see how many of the expatriates, leaving behind their egalitarian homeland, were so eager to embrace the world of the British intellectual establishment when they made their escape. Sailing away from Sydney, James tells us retrospectively and ‘unreliably’, had a religious quality: ‘the lake of white light between the ship and the wharf grew wider... From the stern I watched as (it) divided into two pools, one of them going with me and the other staying. Passing between the Heads was like being born again’.<sup>92</sup> Hughes, meanwhile, commences his autobiography with a description of the 1999 car accident which nearly killed him, and his subsequent trial for Grievous Bodily Harm. Grisly are the descriptions of Hughes’ injuries; grislier still, the details of the traumas and privations of his trial, and the shellacking he received at the hands of the Australian press. The costs incurred, he tells us, were in the region of \$250,000 – ‘a fitting knock on the knuckles for a fucking elitist cunt like me’. That Hughes is happy to be an elitist is the basis of his critique of Australia. As far as he is concerned, elitism is fundamental to the creation and appreciation of great art: ‘I am completely an elitist, in the cultural but emphatically not the social sense’.<sup>93</sup> For what other reason had he fled his native land to become one of the world’s most famous art critics, but to escape the stultifying atmosphere of a country which, in preaching egalitarianism, squashed cultural aspiration and shunned artistic or intellectual endeavour? But in doing so, he feels bitterly, Hughes only opened himself to vilification, accusations of betrayal and – worst sin – charges of elitism. In Western Australia, scene of his horrible head-on car crash, he is doubly damned as being both a ‘rich prick’ from the east coast *and* a New York art critic. Hughes found himself humiliated in the provincial wilds of a remote Broome courthouse, far from his natural, cosmopolitan stomping grounds.

There is a certain irony, possibly appreciated by Hughes himself, in his receiving his comeuppance in such a milieu: the elitist cut to size amidst cattlemen, miners and pearl divers. And others, too, could savour it: not just his most obvious ‘enemies’, the journalists who seemingly laid into

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<sup>92</sup> Clive James, *Unreliable Memoirs*, p. 168.

<sup>93</sup> Robert Hughes, *Things I Didn't Know*, New York: Knopf, 2006, pp. 39–40.

this turncoat expatriate and ‘tall poppy’ with such relish, but also the intellectuals, artists and writers who, unlike him, chose to stay in the arid cultural backwater of Australia, and who, in doing so, tried to shape its culture into that of a mature and cultivated nation, all the while battling against the anti-intellectual atmosphere so despised by Hughes. How were they to do this? By creating an elite, of course. As Don Watson says of Brian Fitzpatrick, his ‘one persistent ideal’ was ‘his wish for an enlightened community’. Sydney intellectuals might find this in an ‘acceptance of pluralism’ or ‘a bohemian elitism’, but the cultural nationalists, Melburnians virtually all, could not tolerate such an isolated and isolating stance. Such ideas were a reason Melburnian Phillips could not stomach Sydneysider White: the isolated intellectual, remote from society – in fact positively antipathetic to it – was not going to improve it.<sup>94</sup> Fitzpatrick’s hopes, says Watson, ‘existed in the – largely Melbourne – milieu of humanism, rationalism, meliorism, and Protestant non-conformism. In this Fitzpatrick was ‘like’ countless others – he was part of the ‘tradition’.<sup>95</sup>

Such a tradition was personified by the Palmers, Christesen and Phillips, or in some of the other figures whom historian Geoffrey Serle, one of their allies, listed in what his biographer John Thompson calls his ‘personal pantheon’ of ‘national critics’, including Patrick White, Manning Clark, Robin Boyd, Stephen Murray-Smith and, indeed, Brian Fitzpatrick: all figures discussed in the pages of this thesis.<sup>96</sup> Mirroring the historiographical ‘teleology of nationalism’, these ‘stirrers and shakers’, as Serle himself called them, delineated a similar development in the nation’s literature and culture: the culture develops in ‘stages’ – ‘from the pre-1890s colonial émigré culture, to the 1890s nationalist stage, and on to the post-1890s state of cultural maturity’, as John Docker outlines it. However, says Docker, this

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<sup>94</sup> For Phillips’ low opinion of White, discussed in more depth in Chapters 1 and 9, see ‘Patrick White and the Algebraic Symbol’, first published in *Meanjin*, 1965, in *Responses: Selected Writings*, Melbourne: Australia International Press and Publications, 1979, pp. 124–30. The differing intellectual traditions of ‘meliorist’ Melbourne and ‘pluralist’ Sydney are discussed at length in John Docker, *Australian Cultural Elites: Intellectual Traditions in Sydney and Melbourne*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1974. Further reference is made to these seeming intellectual poles throughout this thesis. For a critique of Docker’s stereotypes, see Vincent Buckley, ‘Unequal twins: a discontinuous analysis’, in Jim Davidson (ed.), *The Sydney-Melbourne Book*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1986, pp. 148–58.

<sup>95</sup> Don Watson, *Brian Fitzpatrick: A Radical Life*, Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1979, p. 284.

<sup>96</sup> John Thompson, *The Patrician and the Bloke: Geoffrey Serle and the Making of Australian History*, Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2006, p. 11.



evolutionary model is ‘crippling’: ‘literature is seen as evolving towards a goal, that of a mature, confident expression of Australian values’. But what of those who may not identify with this rigid set of values, or those writers of the time dismissed as ‘irrelevant or marginal’ because of their seeming failure to ‘contribute to an eventual goal they don’t or cannot know about?’<sup>97</sup>

And there were other problems, too. Serle, says Thompson, believed in the ‘responsibilities devolving to intellectuals as the natural leaders of their society’, overlaid by a ‘powerful democratic instinct’ – quintessential views of cultural nationalists and those associated with *Meanjin*.<sup>98</sup> In his history of ‘the Creative Spirit in Australia’, he, like Phillips and others, defined the Tradition by its popular stamp – its democratic and egalitarian nature.<sup>99</sup> However, in so doing he pinpointed a paradox, because how could an ‘enlightened community’ be anything *but* elitist, and therefore anti-democratic, anti-egalitarian? Sylvia Lawson, in the context of *The Bulletin* and its famous editor, has called this the ‘Archibald paradox’: ‘the paradox of being colonial’. ‘Metropolis, the centre of language, of the dominant culture and its judgments’, she says, ‘lies away in the great Elsewhere; but the tasks of living, communicating, teaching, acting-out and changing the culture must happen not Elsewhere but Here’.<sup>100</sup> Writers and artists have struggled to deal with this, too many of them lacking the courage to be themselves and submitting to the ‘provincialism problem’: desperate to seem up-to-date and cosmopolitan, they ape trends from the big cultural centres, losing, as a result, that which will make them different and interesting.<sup>101</sup> The cultural nationalist paradigm asserted that ‘intellectuals and cultural claimants’<sup>102</sup> needed to have knowledge of the world, to be *international*; but they also needed to be nationalists – to ‘resist’ the pull of the metropolis enough ‘for the colony to cease to be colonial and

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<sup>97</sup> John Docker, *In a Critical Condition: Reading Australian Literature*, Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1984, pp. 34/8.

<sup>98</sup> John Thompson, *The Patrician and the Bloke*, p. 23.

<sup>99</sup> Geoffrey Serle, *From Deserts the Prophets Come: The Creative Spirit in Australia 1788–1972*, Melbourne: William Heinemann, 1973.

<sup>100</sup> Sylvia Lawson, *The Archibald Paradox: A Strange Case of Authorship*, Ringwood, Vic.: Allen Lane, 1983, p. ix.

<sup>101</sup> Terry Smith, ‘The Provincialism Problem’, in Paul Taylor (ed.), *Anything Goes: Art in Australia 1970–1980*, South Yarra, Vic.: Art and Text, 1984, pp. 46–53.

<sup>102</sup> Phillips’ term, abbreviated to ‘i.c.s’, in ‘Through a glass absurdly – Docker on *Meanjin*: a personal view’, draft manuscript, undated (circa 1974/5), Phillips Family Papers, Box 3386, Folder 3a.

become its own place'.<sup>103</sup> Either you could abandon this aim and, like Hughes, flee to London and New York; or, like Phillips or Christesen, you could stay, working as a teacher, or editing a barely-read little journal, feeling yourself patronised by those who had followed London's call, but also that you were serving some higher purpose by helping (you hoped) transform the situation – 'the situation of the Australian writer', as Fitzpatrick termed it.<sup>104</sup> Serle expressed such a hope when he professed himself appalled at 'the attitude of nearly all teachers in Arts faculties at universities' who 'happily' allowed students to depart with barely even a rudimentary knowledge of their own art and literature. This was what motivated him to write his survey of Australia's creative history.<sup>105</sup> Similarly, novelist Dymphna Cusack argued that university professors were either educated overseas or taught by those who had been – as a result, they were 'spiritually expatriate', a fact underlined by their failure to teach Australian literature properly, and their continued cringing.<sup>106</sup> It was an intolerable situation, which could only be transformed when to be both an Australian and an intellectual was not seen as a joke (by cringers) or a disgrace (by philistines). The problem was the two states of existence just did not seem to go together.

It was John Docker who branded the 'Meanjin School' elitist, a 'clerisy': *Meanjin's* writers constituted 'a central educated group', standing 'as an ideal for the rest of society'.<sup>107</sup> Christesen said that 'it is the task of the writer to cast light on the eternal values which are involved in present political and social issues'. As he saw it, it was an inescapably political role – the writer must be *committed*: 'the writer is situated in his time: each word has its reverberations; each silence, too. *He is responsible*'.<sup>108</sup> As McKernan makes clear, a 'thread of argument about commitment runs through the literary work and essays of most Australian writers of the fifties'.<sup>109</sup> It may well have been that not many people actually

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<sup>103</sup> Sylvia Lawson, *The Archibald Paradox*, p. ix.

<sup>104</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick, notes for lecture entitled 'The situation of the writer', undated, Brian Fitzpatrick Papers, National Library of Australia, Canberra, MS 4965, Box 53, Folder 64. See Chapter 5.

<sup>105</sup> Geoffrey Serle, *From Deserts the Prophets Come*, p. xi.

<sup>106</sup> Dymphna Cusack, 'The 'cultural cringe' in Australian universities' study of Australian literature', *Social Alternatives*, vol. 1, no. 5, 1979, p. 80.

<sup>107</sup> John Docker, *Australian Cultural Elites*, pp. ix–x.

<sup>108</sup> C.B. Christesen, 'A quarterly of literature', *Meanjin*, vol. 4, no. 3, Spring 1945, p. 150; emphasis Christesen's.

<sup>109</sup> Susan McKernan, *A Question of Commitment*, p. 4.

read *Meanjin* in the forties or fifties, but, says Docker, Christesen harboured the ‘same hope and activating ideal’ as influential critic F.R Leavis or arch-modernist T.S Eliot, with *Meanjin* an Australian version of Leavis’ *Scrutiny*: ‘literature and literary criticism universalising the community’s values’, making ‘the individual nation itself great, a self-sufficient culture ranking with other civilised nations in Western history’.<sup>110</sup> *Meanjin* saw itself as a catalyst for a more civilised ‘New Australia’,<sup>111</sup> but Docker and others attacked the cultural nationalist support for the ‘exclusivist’ and racist ‘legend of the Nineties’. Phillips was forced to defend his ideas: without the cultural nationalists, he said, ‘no young academic today would be writing a book called *Australian Cultural Elites*’. The idea would have been laughable: ‘at the sight of such a title in the 30s, intellectuals’ and cultural claimants’ eyebrows would have arched to Gothic heights’.<sup>112</sup>

McKernan says that ‘the tendency to view the elderly writers of the fifties as an establishment should not obscure the fact that in the mid-fifties they were not established and that they faced considerable argument about their achievement and their role in Australian society’.<sup>113</sup> To Phillips and many others this questioning of the writer’s role in society was unbearable, and had to be challenged. Ultimately, he could not really argue with the accusation of elitism, because, as Watson points out, if one was to take Docker’s argument to its logical conclusion, ‘to cease being elitists, intellectuals would have to cease being intellectuals’. *Meanjin*’s intellectuals felt they had to take a position and assert the belief that ‘they understood the Australian tradition and were appalled by the philistine assault on it’.<sup>114</sup> While the historiography has tended to focus on opposition to Britishness, as well as the symbolism of nationhood, it is worth remembering that Phillips specifically condemned the ‘Blatant Blatherskite, the

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<sup>110</sup> John Docker, *Australian Cultural Elites*, pp. 87/8.

<sup>111</sup> Christesen talks about the creation of a ‘New Australia’ in post-war reconstruction in ‘The *Meanjin* ‘School’’, p. 52.

<sup>112</sup> A.A. Phillips, ‘Through a glass absurdly’; Ward had to defend himself from similar attacks from Humphrey McQueen, his feud with the young turk played out in the pages of *Overland*, nos 50–51, Autumn 1972. See Chapter 6.

<sup>113</sup> Susan McKernan, *A Question of Commitment*, p. 2.

<sup>114</sup> Don Watson, *Brian Fitzpatrick: A Radical Life*, p. 198; emphasis Watson’s.

God's-own-country-and-I'm-a-better-man-than-you Australian Bore'.<sup>115</sup> *Meanjin* spent years ironizing such a figure in the 'Godzone' series, which began in the sixties.<sup>116</sup>

The cultural nationalists were not xenophobes or braggarts; they esteemed the canon, and despised the ignorance of a society that cared little for it. Above all, however, they craved their own voice and sensibility, together with an easy self-confidence and maturity: 'the opposite of the Cringe is not the Strut', said Phillips, 'but a relaxed erectness of carriage'.<sup>117</sup> L.J. Hume describes the cultural cringe as a 'mere assumption', uncritically accepted, but this critique fails to take into account the degree to which it was *felt* by Phillips and his ilk.<sup>118</sup> The creation of an Australian identity has been compared to E.P. Thompson's depiction of the creation of the English working class, which came about 'through the purposeful activities of thousands of individuals and groups responding to the pressures of displacement and industrialisation'. Likewise, national identity is not 'created through government initiatives', although the cultural nationalists were nothing short of desperate in their quest for government patronage of literature and the arts, and nor do 'national characteristics magically arise from "the land"'. Rather, 'groups and individuals act to create "Australia"; home-grown creativity and originality central in the formation of 'greater and more self-confident national self-awareness'.<sup>119</sup>

Such an understanding of national identity is a pluralist one: there are multiple ways of looking at how Australian self-knowledge has been made.<sup>120</sup> This was one of the greatest of cultural nationalist failings: because their view was so narrow, with such a limited focus on the egalitarian Tradition or Legend, it failed to grow and develop as the nation itself grew and developed through the sixties and seventies. The achievement of Ward, for example, was great, but he was still an easy target for the next

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<sup>115</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'The Cultural Cringe', *The Australian Tradition*, p. 90.

<sup>116</sup> The first 'Godzone' essay was by Ian Turner, 'The retreat from reason', *Meanjin*, vol. 25, no. 2, Winter 1966, pp. 133–43.

<sup>117</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'The Cultural Cringe', *The Australian Tradition*, p. 95.

<sup>118</sup> L.J. Hume, *Another Look at the Cultural Cringe*, p. 4.

<sup>119</sup> Geoffrey Bolton and Wayne Hudson, 'Creating Australia', in Geoffrey Bolton and Wayne Hudson (eds), *Creating Australia*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1997, p. 6. For more on E.P. Thompson, and his similarities to Ward in particular, see Chapter 6.

<sup>120</sup> Bolton and Hudson cite the feminist perspective; seen, for example, in Patricia Grimshaw, Marilyn Lake, Ann McGrath and Marian Quartly, *Creating a Nation*, Ringwood, Vic: McPhee Gribble, 1994.

generation of intellectuals, who found the reliance on the xenophobic 1890s too much to stomach. Geoffrey Blainey, in a letter to Phillips, questioned Ward's 'assumption' that 'there was a distinctive and dominant social mythology in Australia by the close of the nineteenth century, and that the great majority of Australians in the bush or cities believed in it'. Was the 'underdog-mateship cult' as strong in the cities as it was in the bush? The myths of the 1890s were 'distinctive and articulate and competent and influential', and thus very attractive to writers and historians, but Blainey argued that Ward failed to take into account the growth of competing Australian ideals, be they bourgeois or sporting. The 'biggest task', he said, was 'to look at the mythology of other sections of society and see how it differs from the pastoral proletariat or what it has in common'.<sup>121</sup> John Hirst was another to challenge Ward's focus on one 'tribe', the 'nomad tribe': it was merely one of a number of competing mythologies striving to define 'Australianness' in some way.<sup>122</sup> Les Murray, lambasting 'image-mongers', argues that only art and poetry (naturally) can solve the issue of one image holding sway: art 'arrives, without having to find its way there through tyrannies, at the true ambiguity of things, and can let all things, even opposites, be true at once'.<sup>123</sup> Alan Atkinson, meanwhile, critiques the idea of 'singularity' as an essential part of 'modern nationhood': although the creation of 'one Australia, with one story, one foundation, one destiny and one face to the world at large' has been pervasive and powerful, nevertheless 'singularity limits good history', and its impact obscures our understanding of how ideas of nationhood were shaped

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<sup>121</sup> Geoffrey Blainey to A.A. Phillips, 5/4/1965, Arthur Angell Phillips, Papers and Correspondence, 1940–71, Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library of Victoria, MS 9160, Box 222, Folder 3. Blainey explored many of these competing mythologies in his career: for example, mining and commerce in *The Rush That Never Ended: A History of Australian Mining*, Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1963 and sport in *A Game of Our Own: The Origins of Australian Football*, Carlton, Vic.: Black Inc., 2010 (first published 1990).

<sup>122</sup> John Hirst, 'The Pioneer Legend', *Historical Studies*, vol. 18, no. 71, October 1978, pp. 316–37. See Chapter 6 for more on 'the nomad tribe'; Ward took the term from nineteenth century English novelist Anthony Trollope, who visited the Australian colonies in 1871. See: R. B. Joyce, 'Trollope, Anthony (1815–1882)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/trollope-anthony-4750/text7891>, published first in hardcopy 1976; accessed online 17/3/2018.

<sup>123</sup> Les Murray, 'The trade in images', in *The Quality of Sprawl*, pp. 164/73.

in Australia at the time of Federation and the First World War.<sup>124</sup> Identity in such circumstances, as has been argued, loses its ‘analytical purchase’.<sup>125</sup>

Therefore, during a period when the nature of Australian society was changing with immigration, feminism and the counter-culture, not to mention widespread prosperity and the rapid growth of the middle class, the intensely male, pastoral, Anglo-Celtic vision espoused by the cultural nationalists was an anachronism at best and an embarrassment at worst. As the White Australia Policy was dismantled, the ‘cultural anxiety’ of Asian influence, says David Walker, was another factor driving debate ‘about the proper shape of Australian history’.<sup>126</sup> Donald Horne was at the forefront of this debate; Manning Clark certainly interested in it.<sup>127</sup> Clark, in fact, created a history of Australia that, in the audacity of its grand ideas owing more to Dostoevsky than any Australian precursor, took the nation seriously in ways previously unimaginable. His was a literary idea of Australia, but his fixation on Western philosophy and Catholicism, in particular, only served to show how Australians still relied on the ideas of the Old World. Horne praised Clark, believing the historian was attuned to international ideas in a manner lacking in most Australian ‘intellectuals’ whom he affected to despise (as indicated by his habit of putting the term in inverted commas)<sup>128</sup> – that is, until he decided he was one himself, whereupon his ironic voice, whilst scabrous and incisive, proved limited as a means toward the construction of a sophisticated literary national identity, which was (as shall be argued) his aim. Patrick White, meanwhile, declared he never had been and never would be an intellectual – his hatred of the breed second only to his hatred of Australians. The patrician White’s misanthropic vision, coruscating in its portrayal of the Australian

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<sup>124</sup> Alan Atkinson, ‘Federation, democracy and the struggle against a single Australia’, *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2013, p. 262.

<sup>125</sup> Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, ‘Beyond “identity”’, *Theory and Society*, vol. 29, no. 1, February 2000, p. 1.

<sup>126</sup> David Walker, ‘Australia, Asia, and cultural anxiety’, (inaugural AHA Anniversary Public Lecture, given at the Grand Hotel, Mildura, 29/9/2003), *History Australia*, vol. 1, no. 1, December 2003, p. 2; see also: David Walker, *Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia, 1850–1939*, Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1999.

<sup>127</sup> See: Mads Clausen, ‘Donald Horne finds Asia’, in David Walker and Agnieszka Sobocinska (eds), *Australia’s Asia: From Yellow Peril to Asian Century*, Crawley, WA: University of Western Australia Publishing, 2012. See Chapter 8 for more on Horne’s ideas about ‘New Nationalism’ and Australia’s Asian future. For Clark’s interest in Asia, see Mark McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity: The Life of Manning Clark*, Carlton, Vic.: Miegunyah Press, 2011, pp. 349–63.

<sup>128</sup> Donald Horne, *Into the Open*, pp. 34–5.

people, was far from the celebration of democratic irreverence envisaged by Phillips. And yet he used his considerable creative powers to try to make meaning from the ‘bags and iron’ of Australian life,<sup>129</sup> his ‘creation’ of a new continent (as his Nobel citation had it) giving the cultural nationalists just what they wanted: international recognition for a national idea.<sup>130</sup> White had broken free of the shackles of the cringe to make something new, something wholly Australian, and the writers discussed in this thesis all hoped to do just that: create a continent and a nation to stand on its own two feet, free from the anxiety of influence.<sup>131</sup>

In those post-war years there were of course other anxious intellectuals (was there another type?) apart from the primary eleven examined in this thesis. But it is not possible to write about all of them in such depth. Many are mentioned and discussed at various stages, but the key figures included all had particular influence (in their own time and beyond) as they struggled with the idea of Australia, serving as a representation of the differing intellectual currents, debates and perspectives of the era. From the earnest ‘Meanjineers’<sup>132</sup> to the ironizing Horne, the ultimate aim was the same – meaningful culture in a meaningful nation. This thesis will seek to illuminate the dialogues, connections and echoes reverberating between these often careworn, under-appreciated and isolated figures. The first three chapters will explore the basis for Phillips’ cultural cringe, the cultural nationalism that motivated him, and the strong influence of Christesen, *Meanjin* and the Palmers. This vision owed a great deal to the perpetuation of a myth of Australianness, engrained in the national consciousness that first flourished in the 1890s, and the literature (Lawson, Furphy) that sprang from that decade. These figures had great

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<sup>129</sup> Patrick White, ‘The Prodigal Son’, 1958, in *Patrick White Speaks*, Sydney: Primavera Press, 1989, p. 17.

<sup>130</sup> White’s Nobel citation eulogised his creation of ‘an epic and psychological narrative art which has introduced a new continent into literature’; nobelprize.org, [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1973/press.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1973/press.html); accessed 10/9/2013. See Chapter 9.

<sup>131</sup> Harold Bloom’s term: *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1973. The context here is different, but it still seems to fit.

<sup>132</sup> ‘Meanjineers’ – John Docker’s term, in ‘Sydney versus Melbourne revisited’, Jim Davidson (ed.), *The Sydney-Melbourne Book*, p. 159.

hopes for Australian culture, but the terminus of their hopes was largely disillusion, exemplified by the dispiriting picture of Phillips, by the mid-sixties, writing essays in praise of provincialism.<sup>133</sup>

The next three chapters explore the differing Australian narratives created by historians Clark, Fitzpatrick and Ward, all of which, while often striking and original, struggled for meaningfulness as, by the late-sixties, a rapidly changing, urban Australia stood on the cusp of modernity. Art historian Smith, considered in Chapter 7, was, despite his communism, the most conservative in his articulation of an Australian idea, and although there has been a revival of interest in his theories in recent years, at the time he found to his chagrin that they did not fit in with the ‘exotic’ narrative others, especially in London, wished to construct.

In the final chapters the thesis moves away from the Melbourne bubble, looking first at an archetype of Sydney ‘pluralism’, Horne, and then Sydney ‘isolation’, White. If White did not in fact achieve the unique Australian voice the world (in the shape of the Nobel committee) decided he had, perhaps it was because he was one more example of the fixation with a ‘strong and virile national literature’ – Christesen’s term, and ardent desire<sup>134</sup> – and the largely male roll call of this thesis emphasises a fundamentally limited perspective. The intellectual world of fifties Australia was small in scale and narrow in scope: the cultural nationalists, for example, a small club of men; Nettie Palmer the exception, and she, as we shall see, never receiving the credit accorded her husband, although she certainly deserved it.<sup>135</sup> But it was poet Judith Wright, subject of the last chapter, who located, in ways more lasting and profound than any of her contemporaries, an original expression of an idea of Australia. By 1965 she was able to state that ‘we are beginning to write, no longer as transplanted Europeans, nor as rootless men who reject the past and put their hopes only in the future, but as men with a present to be lived in and a past to nourish us’.<sup>136</sup> The modern historian would avoid the male pronoun, and may

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<sup>133</sup> A.A. Phillips, ‘Provincialism and Australian culture’, *Meanjin*, vol. 25, no. 3, 1966, pp. 265–74.

<sup>134</sup> C.B. Christesen, ‘The Wound as the Bow’, p. 87.

<sup>135</sup> See Chapter 3.

<sup>136</sup> Judith Wright, ‘Australia’s Double Aspect’, p xxi.



well give her woman's voice some share of the credit. Empathising with her fellow Australians, as White never did, she developed an understanding of the ancient Aboriginal continent in ways neither White nor the cultural nationalists could manage. An old colleague and sparring partner of Christesen's, scion of the pastoralist squattocracy, a woman who as she grew older developed a deepening commitment to environmentalism and Aboriginal rights: Wright showed the way for the writers and intellectuals of the next generation, less eager to allow themselves to be so constrained either by nationalist considerations or feelings of insecurity; in fact wanting to escape, in Ann Curthoys' words, 'the prison house of national history' – 'the world, not the former British and other empires, is our context'.<sup>137</sup> In the end, this would prove the best way to defeat the cultural cringe.

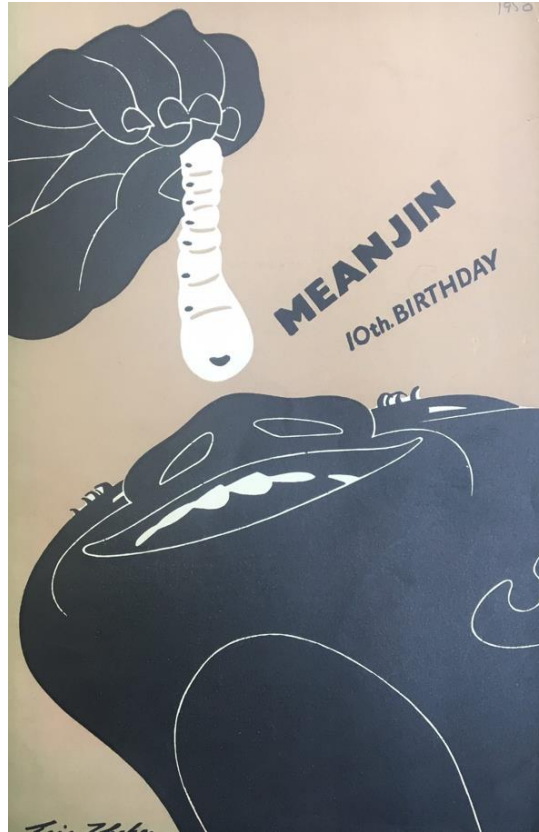
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<sup>137</sup> Ann Curthoys, 'Cultural history and the nation', in Hsu-Ming Teo and Richard White (eds), *Cultural History in Australia*, Sydney: UNSW Press, 2003, pp. 28/31.



## CHAPTER 1

### A.A. Phillips and the 'Cultural Cringe': Creating an 'Australian Tradition'



The cover of the Summer 1950 number of *Meanjin*, marking the tenth anniversary of the magazine's first publication, and containing A.A. Phillips' famous essay, 'The Cultural Cringe'. The image illustrates cultural nationalism's blind spot: Aboriginal people.

i) 'Cultural nationalism': Striving for 'Australian arts of vigour, confidence and maturity'

Arthur Angell "A.A." Phillips was fifty years old when he published his most celebrated essay. By no means a famous critic, if indeed there was such a thing in 1940s and 50s Australia, he had been a schoolmaster at Wesley College, the Melbourne private school, since 1927, and was to remain so until his retirement in 1971. Chris Wallace-Crabbe, the poet, recalls the story told of Phillips towards the end of his teaching career: meeting new pupils at the school and fondly recollecting teaching not just their

fathers but also their grandfathers.<sup>1</sup> Teaching was his primary vocation, and that of his wife Mary, too, whom he married in 1935. Amongst the Phillips Family Papers in the State Library of Victoria can be found a cache of love letters written between the couple in the year before they married.<sup>2</sup> At this stage, Phillips was primarily preoccupied with his career, but in 1937 he joined Latvian immigrant Dolia Ribush's theatre company as business manager, later acting in the first production of Douglas Stewart's *Ned Kelly* (1944). According to Jim Davidson, this period of his life was singled out by Phillips himself as the most rewarding;<sup>3</sup> his lifelong correspondence with the Sydney-based New Zealander Stewart – convivial, irreverent, literary – is testament to the friendships he formed in these years. ‘Thank you for your kind remarks’, said Stewart to Phillips: ‘I have always maintained that, particularly when you are rapt in admiration for my own writing, you have very sound critical judgment’.<sup>4</sup>

Editor Clem Christesen took *Meanjin* from Brisbane to Melbourne in 1945, the same year Phillips' first article in the magazine, an attack on the obscurantism and jargon of modern literary criticism, appeared.<sup>5</sup> Phillips, in a tribute to *Meanjin* published in 1956, recounted how the idea first came to him to become a critic. He was attending a literary gathering in the early 1930s, discussing his passion for Australian writing, when the publisher and bookseller Frank Wilmot told him ‘you oughtn't to be *talking* this stuff, you ought to be *writing* it’.<sup>6</sup> But, as Phillips pointed out, there was very little in the way of publications in which a critic might publish in thirties Australia, and the lack of quality contemporary work was also a hindrance. However, 1938 saw the publication of Kenneth Slessor's *One Hundred Poems*

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Wallace-Crabbe, interview with the author, University of Melbourne, 1/7/2011.

<sup>2</sup> Letters to A.A. Phillips from his wife Mary before and after marriage, 1934–38, Phillips Family Papers, Box 3386, Folder 1.

<sup>3</sup> Jim Davidson, ‘Phillips, Arthur Angell (1900–1985)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/phillips-angell-arthur-15438/text26653>, published first in hardcopy 2012; accessed online 25/2/2013. For more on Ribush's Pioneer Players, see Chapter 3.

<sup>4</sup> For Phillips' correspondence with Stewart, see two collections: 1. Eighteen Letters from Arthur Angell Phillips to Douglas Stewart, 1943–c. 1977, Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library of Victoria, MS 10533, Box 228; 2. Forty-four letters from Douglas Stewart to A.A. Phillips, 1944–71, National Library of Australia, Canberra, MS 5944. Quoted letter from latter collection, 14/9/1956.

<sup>5</sup> A.A. Phillips, ‘Their sweet jargoning’, *Meanjin*, vol. 4, no. 1, Autumn 1945, pp. 55–7.

<sup>6</sup> A.A. Phillips, ‘Tribute to *Meanjin*’, draft manuscript for article published in *Overland*, 1956, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 264; emphasis Phillips'.

and R.D. FitzGerald's *Moonlight Acre* and, said Phillips, 'now it looked as if the drought was breaking'<sup>7</sup> – 'one of those rare and exciting moments when one is aware that history is being made'.<sup>8</sup>

*Southerly* started soon after, but it was when *Meanjin* 'bounced into the fray', according to Phillips, that the required forum truly arrived. He argued that as *Southerly* was smaller than *Meanjin* and its editors part-time, it was not as effective, lacking *Meanjin's* 'vigour and enterprise, keeping its maidenly skirts unstained by political defilement or by open espousal of cultural nationalism'. Not only did *Meanjin* provide Phillips with the medium in which to practise his craft, but the beliefs, ideas and aspirations of its editor matched his own. Christesen's 'absorption, his earnest sense of what needed to be done, gave the paper bite and vitality'. The two, said Phillips, shared a common goal: 'an almost obsessive hope to see in (our) life-time(s) the emergence of Australian arts of vigour, confidence and increasing maturity'.<sup>9</sup> This is what he meant by 'cultural nationalism'. Phillips was a key figure in the development of *Meanjin* in the forties and fifties, serving on the editorial board and as an associate editor at various stages, and contributing many essays. Christesen, with great generosity, said in a 1980 letter that 'whatever reputation the journal achieved was due largely to your contributions and to your pervasive influence'.<sup>10</sup>

The two men were thus united in their desire to see the creation of an Australian Tradition in literature and the arts, and the '*Meanjin* School' was the vanguard of the cultural community Phillips viewed as being so important if something of lasting worth was to be achieved. 'Politically and socially', said C.R. Badger as he proclaimed the 'search for a national idea', 'we still lack boldness and initiative, still cling to a safe security, still repeat the shibboleths and slogans of the past, taking our faltering steps forward only when others lead'.<sup>11</sup> The stated aim of *Meanjin* at its inception in 1940 was 'the promotion

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<sup>7</sup>A.A. Phillips, 'Cultural nationalism in the 40s and 50s: a personal account'.

<sup>8</sup> A.A. Phillips, manuscript of review of R.D. Fitzgerald's *Forty Years' Poems* (1965), publication unknown, Phillips Family Papers, Box 3386, Folder 2a.

<sup>9</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'Cultural nationalism in the 40s and 50s'.

<sup>10</sup> C.B. Christesen to A.A. Phillips, 3/3/1980, Phillips Family Papers, Box 3385, Folder 1.

<sup>11</sup> C.R. Badger, 'In search of a national idea', p. 161.

of a distinctively national culture'.<sup>12</sup> W.A. Amiet, in the 'Nationality Number' of 1941, laid out the rules in peremptory fashion:

Rule 1. Get rid of the inferiority complex... Rule 2. Get it clear that ours is a literature, not a branch literature... Rule 3. To obtain 'national' results, don't harp on the 'national'.<sup>13</sup>

The third rule summed up a recurring problem for the cultural nationalists: the spectre of parochialism. Badger had wondered 'how to find a reconciliation of a real national tradition with the needs of a new world society'<sup>14</sup> – Australia had to be part of the world; not cut adrift, isolationist. Christesen focussed on the need for Australian culture to engage with international ideas – to take the world seriously, and to be taken seriously by the world, was the mark of maturity. As such, he was inclined to promote interesting new international writers and enthuse about new trends in world literature.<sup>15</sup> But Phillips' tastes were more conservative, and his gaze more local. Poet James Picot sympathised with the aims of the Jindyworobaks, the group of nationalist poets founded in 1938 by Rex Ingamells – they were attempting to create an Australian poetry wholly divorced from outside influence. In the Australian context, he said, 'it is just no good talking Keats, however much we may like Keats'. This was close to Phillips' position. Picot did acknowledge Australian poets' need to belong to the 'wider cultural world': 'after all, we live in the world of Lenin and Hitler and Einstein and Freud and Whitehead,

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted in a covering note sent out with early editions of *Meanjin* to potentially interested parties, for example libraries, university English departments and bookstores.

<sup>13</sup> W.A. Amiet, 'Australian Literary History', *Meanjin*, vol. 1, no. 6, Summer 1941, pp. 5/6. Amiet's rules were capitalised for added effect in his essay.

<sup>14</sup> C.R. Badger, 'In search of a national idea', p. 163.

<sup>15</sup> A selection of the essays and stories published in *Meanjin* in 1946 illustrate the point: English poet Stephen Spender's 'Three English poets and the war', vol. 5, no. 1, Autumn 1946, pp. 19–24; A.L. Patkin, 'The Russian Intelligentsia and the Western Intellectuals', vol. 5, no. 1, Autumn 1946, pp. 76–8; young English academic Frank Kermode's 'The artist in war and peace', vol. 5, no. 2, Winter 1946, pp. 123–8; Anaïs Nin's story 'Rag-time', vol. 5, no. 3, Spring 1946, pp. 184–8 (her name is unfortunately misspelt as 'Anias' in the journal, though); and Louis Aragon's tribute to Maxim Gorky, translated by John Manifold, 'A man standing up', vol. 5, no. 4, Summer 1946, pp. 281–4.

and the Australian is as intelligent as anybody else!<sup>16</sup> But the best way for Australians to attain cultural maturity was by the simple method of just being Australians. It was the only valid recourse.

*Meanjin* published the Jindyworobaks, mentored by ‘Inky’ Stephensen, but rejected their jingoistic view.<sup>17</sup> Phillips said he had ‘no sympathy’ with political nationalism (an unsurprising statement, given his Jewishness) while Christesen described himself as ‘socialist, democratic left of centre’.<sup>18</sup> Phillips said he did not necessarily agree with the ‘politico-social line’ developed by *Meanjin*’s editor, but thought it a good idea for a journal to take a stance. The ‘leading factor’ in Phillips’s cultural nationalism, he said, was his ‘dismay at the stagnation of Australian life in the 20s and 30s’. He refused to accept Australian inferiority ‘as almost an expression of natural law’, and was opposed to ‘imitativeness which stifled initiatives’. Writing in the seventies, he said that ‘the impulse behind my engagement in cultural activities was that pipe-dream of an invigorated Australian art and a wider cultural movement’.<sup>19</sup> He wanted, he declared, ‘something not unlike the cultural efflorescences in Periclean Athens or Elizabethan England’. Looking back, these words seem almost ridiculous. How was 1950s Australia, with its ‘atmosphere of almost dismaying crudity’ (his own words), in any sort of position to emulate Periclean Athens?<sup>20</sup> But to Phillips, the idea that Australia had no chance in such high cultural stakes was simply the dreaded cringe at work once again. Why could not this young country fashion its own culture, even become an ideal community like those of previous eras? The barriers existed only in Australians’ minds. ‘It was obvious’, he asserted, ‘how much these flowerings had been fertilised by the community’s sense of a common identity and of a pride in it’.<sup>21</sup> Australia had to be comfortable in its own skin; Australians unafraid to tell

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<sup>16</sup> James Picot, ‘Australian poetry in 1940 – and after? Nature of Trends – Does the critic see?’, *Meanjin*, vol. 1, no. 2, February 1941, pp. 1–3. Picot was a regular contributor to *Meanjin*’s early numbers; he died in 1944 in Japanese internment.

<sup>17</sup> For more on the Jindyworobaks, see Chapter 10.

<sup>18</sup> A.A. Phillips, ‘Through a glass absurdly – Docker on *Meanjin*: a personal view’, draft manuscript for an essay, circa 1975, p. 18, Phillips Family Papers, Box 3386, Folder 3a; C.B. Christesen to A.A. Phillips, 29/10/1956, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 263.

<sup>19</sup> A.A. Phillips, ‘Through a glass absurdly’.

<sup>20</sup> A.A. Phillips, ‘The Cultural Cringe’, *The Australian Tradition*, p. 90.

<sup>21</sup> A.A. Phillips, ‘Through a glass absurdly’.

their own stories. The cringe had to be abolished in order for communal pride to take root, and cultural success to follow.



ii) Finding 'the intellectual courage to be ourselves'

'Progress in the art of being unself-consciously ourselves'<sup>22</sup> – the thing most needful. And it *was* an art; not a birthright. Such progress must be nurtured, developed – the conditions to allow it to happen had to be made. But the miserable lack of interest in Australian ideas and Australian writing was killing any hope in this regard: 'most intellectuals and culture claimants,' said Phillips of the thirties, 'dismissed Australian writing without even bothering to read it'. There was a 'continuing cultural colonialism' affecting Australia, and it 'tended to destroy initiative. It bred an automatic depreciation of almost everything Australian'.<sup>23</sup> Alluding to the lack of Australian literature courses in universities, he said that the only important contribution by a Melbourne academic in the field of Australian Literature in the thirties was an infamous article in *The Age* by G.S. Cowling (the imported Professor of English at the University of Melbourne) in which he made the 'lordly assumption that literature of worth could not be produced in Australia'.<sup>24</sup> It was this article which stung 'Inky' Stephensen into penning his manifesto; the precursor, as Phillips recognised, to his own definition of, and attack on, the cultural cringe.

The role of the critic was key. Phillips said that in the thirties and forties he frequently heard writers complain that they had to work 'without critical discussion' of their writing; that it was 'like trying to breathe in a vacuum'. He saw how he could be of use, and his criticism would not just be about commenting on contemporary work, but would also include 'a re-assessment of earlier work' and an 'attempt to help develop a sense of Australian literature as a continuing entity worth considerable attention'. Universities needed to be persuaded to take Australian literature seriously and to 'accept it as a legitimate subject of undergraduate study'.<sup>25</sup> There needed to be what Ian Henderson calls a 'tightened

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<sup>22</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'The Cultural Cringe', *The Australian Tradition*, p. 95.

<sup>23</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'Through a glass absurdly'.

<sup>24</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'Cultural nationalism in the 40s and 50s'.

<sup>25</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'Cultural nationalism in the 40s and 50s'.

focus on readers'.<sup>26</sup> For the scene to flourish, the public must be educated – the 'cultural crust' given substance.

Phillips' first campaigns for an independent Australian culture focussed on the theatre. An early *Meanjin* article outlined his ideas for 'a policy for Australian theatre', the key being 'the creation of a standard of quality'. Australian audiences, he believed, 'demand quality of performance', a point proved by the numbers who flocked to ballet and classical concerts once professionals were employed and investment ventured.<sup>27</sup> He did not hold much regard for the government's proposals for the development of an Australian national theatre, but said that 'the simple but revolutionary admission that the serious theatre has a legitimate claim to the public purse' in itself gave 'cause for deep satisfaction'.<sup>28</sup> Developing a national theatre was almost a matter of national pride: 'no nation can call itself civilized until it has its own plays running in its own theatres', a 1951 newspaper article declared, very much reflecting Phillips' position.<sup>29</sup> Tyrone Guthrie, the British actor, visited Australia in 1949 under the auspices of the British Council, but, according to disappointed commentary of the time, discussed Australian theatre 'in rather patronising and disparaging terms'.<sup>30</sup> He wrote a report suggesting an Australian company should first be based in England until such a time as (in the words of Phillips) 'it is sufficiently developed to be let loose on its own territory'. Guthrie believed that an Australian company had no chance of success without a record of English achievement behind it, and, said Phillips, 'no doubt our snobbery is as deep seated as this view implies, but has Mr Guthrie reflected that English intellectual snobbery is scarcely less profound, and materially reduces the chance of the assumed

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<sup>26</sup> Ian Henderson, "Freud has a name for it": A.A. Phillips' "The Cultural Cringe", *Southerly*, vol. 62, issue 9, 2009, p. 128.

<sup>27</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'A policy for Australian theatre', originally published in *Meanjin* as 'A principle and a policy', 1945, in *Responses*, pp. 35–9.

<sup>28</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'The Ham Subsidy', *Meanjin*, vol. 9, no. 1, Autumn 1950, p. 27.

<sup>29</sup> Author unknown, 'A bun for the playwrights', publication unknown, 14/11/1951, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 15, Folder B.

<sup>30</sup> Author unknown, 'Australian National Theatre plan outlined by Mr Chifley', newspaper unknown, 19/8/1949, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 15, Folder B.

London success?' Phillips was adamant that a national theatre 'can only grow from the national soil'. He used the term 'cultural cringe' for the first time:

Australian culture buds from the English tradition; but in a sense that makes the situation worse. One of the problems in the development of any Australian cultural vigour is the difficulty of overcoming our intimidation before English achievement. Its more massive nature and its deeper foundation in tradition induce the characteristically Australian cultural cringe. A cringing culture cannot be a healthy culture. Beneath the immediate problem of establishing an Australian theatre lies the deeper problem of achieving the intellectual courage to be ourselves.<sup>31</sup>

Phillips identified the paradox of this situation: outsiders like Guthrie came to Australia with the brief to help create something Australian. When faced with criticism, Guthrie 'might not unreasonably retort' that Australians themselves 'confess their own ignorance and lack of standards', but when assistance is offered, 'our confounded hypersensitiveness promptly rejects it'. Phillips called this situation the 'dilemma of colonial culture'. The clear aim was to avoid insularity and be attuned to the outside world; but it was also to achieve self-confidence, which meant that over-reliance on imported help had to be avoided. Phillips understood this, and whilst he yearned for international acceptance, which could only come when the likes of Guthrie ceased looking down their noses at Australian culture, it was more important Australia do its own thing. He bristled at those who would carp at Australians' ambition in this regard: 'is it just hypersensitiveness and insularity to believe that you cannot learn to sing your own songs in a strange land?'<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'The Ham Subsidy', pp. 28/9. This was three *Meanjin* issues before 'The Cultural Cringe' was published.

<sup>32</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'The Ham Subsidy', pp. 29/30. It was not until 1954 that the federally funded Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust (AETT) was set up, under the direction of H. C. 'Nugget' Coombs, the civil servant whose pre-eminence in cultural affairs came to irritate some of the cultural nationalists (see Chapter 2).

The problem was that whilst Phillips and his friends might chafe at the denigration of Australian culture from without and within, nevertheless the negative sentiment was real, its effect chilling. Talented Australians were sucked out of the country, plying their trade overseas and failing to nourish the cultural roots of the nation: ‘when the more gifted Australians drift away’, he moaned, ‘local standards drop’ and the public, being ‘more and more inclined towards the polished imported article’, has little interest ‘in the second-rate Australian material that remains’. The market for local literature is thus further narrowed, and the ‘the opportunities for improvement’ limited. It was a vicious cycle precluding Australian maturity, creating only cringers at home and snobs overseas: ‘and thus we are regarded abroad as a country without achievements worth mentioning in the arts, the sciences or scholarship’.<sup>33</sup> A.D. Hope, writing in 1956, identified the need for a proper *literary* assessment of standards in Australian literature.<sup>34</sup> Until this had been achieved, he questioned its inclusion in university courses. In 1938 he had wondered whether there was any hope for Australian culture:

Without songs, architecture, history:

The emotions and superstitions of younger lands,

Her rivers of water drown among inland sands,

The river of her immense stupidity

Floods her monotonous tribes from Cairns to Perth.<sup>35</sup>

Phillips was not as negative as Hope.<sup>36</sup> His was not an aloof creed and he did not hate the so-called ‘monotonous tribes’; but he saw that Australia was stuck in a cultural rut, and to gain

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<sup>33</sup> A.A. Phillips, ‘The state of the arts in Australia’, introduction to *Report of the Arts and Letters Enquiry Committee for Victoria*, 1961, pp. 1–3, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 16. This report and others like it are discussed in Chapter 2.

<sup>34</sup> A.D. Hope, ‘Standards in Australian Literature’, *Australian Literary Criticism*, 1956; cited by David Carter, ‘Publishing patronage and cultural politics: Institutional changes in the field of Australian literature from 1950’, in Peter Pierce (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature*, p. 375.

<sup>35</sup> A.D. Hope, ‘Australia’, in John Kinsella (ed.), *Penguin Anthology of Australian Poetry*, Camberwell, Vic.: Penguin, 2009, p. 160.

<sup>36</sup> It should be noted that Hope’s poem ends on a more hopeful note about Australia, contrasting it with the ‘the chatter of cultured apes/Which is called civilisation over there’.

national maturity and recast Australia as something more interesting, distinctive and profound could, as Phillips saw it, only be achieved through meaningful articulation of national identity: the preserve of the writer.

Phillips extolled the ‘frontier character’ of Australia some years before Russel Ward took up the cause: ‘if we lost that character’, he wrote, ‘we forfeit our individuality and all the staying tradition we possess’. He admitted that ‘the frontier-values do not easily mature’, and ‘they are difficult to carry into a predominantly urban society’; however, the slow march of maturity had a corollary, which was the loss of ‘two of our hitherto most valuable assets’: ‘our originality and our confidence’. The situation, he said, called for ‘the development of subtler perceptions and the renewal of our once confident national pride’ (a reference to the 1890s, the influence of which we will discuss later).<sup>37</sup> In the drive to reinstate this national pride, he later praised Ward’s challenging of long-held assumptions and his repudiation of ‘the condescensions of our sillier sophisticates’.<sup>38</sup> For Phillips, confidence was the essential thing lacking: this was not the confidence of the ‘Blatant Blatherskite, the God’s-own-country-and-I’m-a-better-man-than-you Australian Bore’; it was the confidence of the intellectual comfortable in his or her own culture. ‘We need creative intellectual achievement’, he said, ‘and we need even more *to care* about that achievement, to buttress with it our pride and our lagging prestige’.<sup>39</sup> The lack of pride in such achievements was the chief cause of ‘the estrangement of the Australian intellectual’. Faced with cultureless, crude Australian life, the intellectual felt exposed, a situation ‘made worse by the deadly habit of English comparison’.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> A.A. Phillips, ‘The Uneasy Chair: The Writer in Isolation’, *Meanjin*, vol. 11, no. 3, Spring 1952, p. 196. Horne was the loudest and most strident critic of the ‘demographically unbearable’ bush myth – see Chapter 8. See later in this chapter for more on Horne’s attacks on Phillips and cultural nationalism. Ward was going to title his famous book ‘The Australian Tradition’, but was beaten to it by Phillips – see Chapter 6.

<sup>38</sup> A.A. Phillips, manuscript of review of *The Penguin Book of Australian Ballads* (edited by Russel Ward, 1964), publication unknown, Phillips Family Papers, Box 3386, Folder 2a.

<sup>39</sup> A.A. Phillips, ‘The Uneasy Chair: The Writer in Isolation’, p. 196; emphasis Phillips’.

<sup>40</sup> A.A. Phillips, ‘The Cultural Cringe’, *The Australian Tradition*, pp. 90/1.

The writer's 'sense of isolation, the numbing indifference of the atmosphere around him' was the thing most harmful to the life of the Australian mind.<sup>41</sup>

And yet, Phillips complained that 'two conditions in particular fetter our artistic development – our *lack* of isolation and our smallness of population'.<sup>42</sup> Despite the way writers felt rejected by and quarantined from the society around them, and despite their geographical remoteness and the 'tyranny of distance' shaping so much of Australian life,<sup>43</sup> those writers always kept the company of Home. Home was ever at their shoulder, reminding them of what they were not; Home provided a permanent index against which to be measured – 'the intimidating shadow of the giant Anglo-Saxon communities', as Phillips called it. Home filled up all the cultural space, blocking out local colour and initiative and depriving the writer of two 'essentials': 'a wide critical response to his work and bread-and-butter'.<sup>44</sup> As if being intimidated by the monolith of British culture was not enough, the Australian writer also had to contend with a cultural landscape devoid of the required criticism, a paltry audience for his or her work, and the consequent lack of the means to earn a living.

It was a situation – the 'situation of the Australian writer'<sup>45</sup> – bemoaned by so many of the subjects of this thesis. Patrick White, for example, deigned to remark to Christesen that 'one of the chief difficulties in running a magazine like *Meanjin*' was 'the absence in Australia of a race of professional intellectuals'.<sup>46</sup> No doubt Christesen was glad to receive such comment from a man who never had to work for a living. For most writers, the situation was perilous. Phillips pointed out that a 'serious' Australian novel would be doing well if it could sell 5,000 copies; he showed that stories, essays and

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<sup>41</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'The Uneasy Chair: The Writer in Isolation', p. 301.

<sup>42</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'Culture and Canberra', *The Australian Tradition*, Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1958, p. 134; essay originally appeared in *Meanjin*, vol. 5, no. 2, Winter 1946, pp. 99–103; emphasis mine.

<sup>43</sup> Geoffrey Blainey, *The Tyranny of Distance*, Sydney: Macmillan, 2001 (first published 1966). Blainey was a pupil of Phillips' at Wesley College and delivered the address at his funeral in 1985. In a letter to his former teacher he said he still minded the advice in the margin of his homework 'when we used to imitate the spacious and ornate style of writing': 'flabby,' Phillips would scribble – 'since then', said Blainey, 'I've mostly tried to write tersely'; to A.A. Phillips, 8/5/1955, Arthur Angell Phillips, Papers and Correspondence, 1940–71, Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library of Victoria, MS 9160, Box 222, Folder 3.

<sup>44</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'Culture and Canberra', p. 134.

<sup>45</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick's phrase, as we saw in Introduction. See also Chapter 5.

<sup>46</sup> Patrick White to C.B. Christesen, 19/11/1960, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 350.

poems submitted to Australian journals commanded a fraction of the fee obtainable by their American or British equivalents; ‘a serious Australian writer’, he affirmed, ‘cannot hope to earn a living by his work’. The result was the need to take other work, meaning writers could not spend the time developing their craft, thus spreading their energies too thinly, and as a result ‘the volume and standard of Australian writing’ suffered. He compared the Australian scene to that in the Soviet Union, where he said a translation of a Vance Palmer short story collection had been published in an edition of 150,000 copies and had sold out. The most recent Australian edition of Palmer’s short stories, the career-spanning collection *Let the Birds Fly* (1955), had, by contrast, stretched to 2,000 copies, ‘and has not been re-published’.<sup>47</sup> Phillips did not say whether the edition sold out. His dismay at the commercial realities of Australian publishing is also readily visible, and writers, as we have seen, felt themselves forced into expatriation.<sup>48</sup> If the Australian figures he quoted seem typical, the Russian ones are incredible – one wonders who was reading Vance Palmer in Russia in 1959. If only Australia could boast such a reading public!

Phillips himself was proof of White’s point: he was a high school teacher, writing his criticism on the side. A professional literati simply did not exist in fifties Australia, and neither did a wide readership. The issue was one of standards. Horne, as we shall see, was scathing in his attack on Australian intellectuals and their shortcomings.<sup>49</sup> John Douglas Pringle, the Scottish newspaper editor who moved to Australia in 1952, had little time for them either: ‘with a few honourable exceptions, Australian intellectuals are extraordinarily bad at expressing their thoughts in simple and vigorous English. They simply have not bothered to acquire the skill necessary’. He derided their writing as ‘dull’, declaring that ‘they can hardly complain if they are ignored’.<sup>50</sup> Through his criticism Phillips tried to rectify this situation and create the ‘wide critical response’ he and so many others yearned for. The goal

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<sup>47</sup> A.A. Phillips, ‘Arts Inquiry Organisation – Literature Section Report’, dated ‘1959’, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 264.

<sup>48</sup> See the extensive literature on Australian writers abroad; cited in Introduction.

<sup>49</sup> See Chapter 8.

<sup>50</sup> John Douglas Pringle, ‘Intellectuals and the press’, *Meanjin*, vol. 16, no. 3, Spring 1957, p. 299.

was something akin to what he termed the ‘great Irish conquest of the English’. He was not referring to the achievement of Home Rule:

No: the true Irish conquest of the English is in the supremacy over the language of the bloody oppressors. Their overlords forced upon the Irish an alien tongue; and they promptly used it with a vigour, a sparkle, and a charm which its native users could not rival.<sup>51</sup>

One gets a sense of revelling in underdog status. The British are seen as cultural oppressors; like gormless bad guys in a movie, they lack intelligence or initiative, and they can be not so much out-fought as out-thought. The plucky colonials will rise up and snatch what is rightfully theirs, as the Irish had seemingly done. To replicate this conquest was the aim. Hatred of the subordinate rank of the colonial is also clear to see. Ivor Indyk, writing of Phillips, has commented on the ‘intensity with which he conveys the experience of cringing’; an atavistic ‘sense of what it was like to be made to feel inferior’, which, Indyk argues, originated in his experience as a Jew.<sup>52</sup> Phillips described himself as ‘more assimilated than most’, yet ‘deeply aware that aspects of my temperament, mental processes and values spring from my Jewish social heredity’.<sup>53</sup> He explicitly equated ‘the status of a colonial’ with ‘that of a Jew’ – ‘necessarily inferior’, as he put it – and this was a central part of the motivation behind his cultural nationalism.<sup>54</sup> He was nothing if not Australian, but he lacked the attachment to England which seemed to stifle so many of his contemporaries. Rather than yearn for Home, he flinched from it. He loathed to be thought of as inferior, and his Jewishness only accentuated this. His attack on the cringe was emotional, and the prominent emotions were anger and resentment. Changing the situation was the imperative governing

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<sup>51</sup> A.A. Phillips, manuscript for ‘The Irish Conquest’, publication unknown, 1965, Phillips Family Papers, Box 3385, Folder 5.

<sup>52</sup> Ivor Indyk, ‘Cultural Cringe – the status of a colonial: like that of Jew’, *Meanjin*, vol. 59, no. 3, 2000, pp. 28/9.

<sup>53</sup> A.A. Phillips, manuscript of review of Arthur Koestler’s *The Thirteenth Tribe*, undated, Phillips Family Papers, Box 3385, Folder 5.

<sup>54</sup> A.A. Phillips, ‘Cultural nationalism in the 40s and 50s’.



his criticism and his ideas. He smarted under the yoke of Britishness, and the routing of the fawners and cringers was his overwhelming ambition.

iii) 'The levelling tendency' and 'the challenge of the actual': The Australian Tradition

The 1890s provided the paradigm. Before then, said Phillips, 'there was no such thing as Australian writing, no continuous stream of creative work; there were only occasional books, standing like waterholes in a sandy bed of apathy'.<sup>55</sup> If Australians were to regain 'a confidence in ourselves as a community and a sense of pride in it', something like the 'communal identity' of that halcyon decade of Australian nationalism's first blooming needed to be recreated.<sup>56</sup> This was the period that had produced an organised workforce, the stirrings of a national consciousness, the utopian William Lane, and writers of a distinctive voice, like Henry Lawson and Joseph Furphy. In these elements lay the Australian 'marks of difference'.<sup>57</sup> 'The modern Australian feels behind him the force of a tradition', Phillips said, and 'the wind that blows from the far country through the mind of the Australian democrat is the spirit of the nineties'.<sup>58</sup> He cited contemporary novelist Alan Marshall as an example: a radical whose lack of 'intellectual scorn' or 'pessimism' reflected the openness and fraternalism of Lawson and Furphy, he wrote with 'generous anger against injustice' and 'optimistic belief in the worth of ordinary human beings' (seldom otherwise found in mid-twentieth century writing, according to Phillips). This 'pugnacious independence', far from being one-dimensional or crude, was tempered with an 'undercurrent of melancholy'.<sup>59</sup> Such was the nature of the Australian Tradition. Reviewing Vance Palmer's play *Hail Tomorrow*, which was about William Lane's disastrous utopian colony in Paraguay, Phillips talked about the 'faith' displayed by its hero – 'not a jingoistic faith', and one 'only distantly related to the sentimental doctrine of mateship':

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<sup>55</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'The Democratic Theme', *The Australian Tradition*, pp. 37/8.

<sup>56</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'Through a glass absurdly'. See: Vance Palmer, *The Legend of the Nineties*, 1956.

<sup>57</sup> Christesen's term as he called for significant contributions from Australian writers: 'Note to contributors', *Meanjin*, vol. 2, no. 3, Spring 1943. It is worth noting that Phillips' 1890s was very selective: where, for example, was A.B. 'Banjo' Paterson, or, from earlier, Henry Kendall, Adam Lindsay Gordon, Marcus Clarke, or later, C.J. Dennis? It was a restricted canon.

<sup>58</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'The Democratic Theme', pp. 55/6.

<sup>59</sup> A.A. Phillips, manuscript of review of Harry Mark's *I Can Jump Oceans: The World of Alan Marshall* (1976), publication unknown, Phillips Family Papers, Box 3385, Folder 6.

It matters little whether the individual feels pride or shame in the achievements and attitudes of his countrymen, provided he feels a living identity with them, and does not retreat into a detached disdain. Since that disdain is a common disease among Australian intellectuals, the re-assertion of the vigorous faith of the men of the nineties (is) worth making.<sup>60</sup>

Phillips' contention that the cult of the nineties was not jingoistic is controversial – he tried to downplay the insular and bigoted nature of that era in order to focus on the democratic spirit he saw as its chief characteristic (in this, he was like Russel Ward).<sup>61</sup> In a discussion of Furphy's *Such is Life* (1903) he pinpointed one of the unifying elements of the novel as its 'democratic faith': 'a faith expressed not only in the radical social theories which Furphy preaches but in the sturdy individualism of his outback characters'.<sup>62</sup> Furphy, a writer of 'robustly democratic convictions' who 'valued Truth', reacted against the romantic, unrealistic novels of early Australia: his egalitarian bullockies and drovers are celebrated, whilst opprobrium is reserved for the squatters who, in what appears to be their main crime, deny the bullock-drivers the fresh grass they need to keep their teams going (Furphy had had his own career as a bullock-driver curtailed when he lost his team in the harsh drought of 1883).<sup>63</sup> Furphy made the connection between the democratic and the Australian very explicit, and Phillips said that 'the student of the next century who wants to understand democratic pioneering' would first of all look at the works of Mark Twain or Walt Whitman, but then would turn to Furphy's novels, finding them of similar quality to Twain's.<sup>64</sup>

It was important to differentiate this 'Australian Dream' from its American counterpart. Phillips compared the twin ideals of the frontier and the outback, declaring that 'Australian writers have perhaps

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<sup>60</sup> A.A. Phillips, review of Vance Palmer's *Hail Tomorrow, Meanjin*, vol. 7, no. 1, Autumn 1948, p. 59. See Chapter 5 for Brian Fitzpatrick's contrasting view of Lane, and his more critical review of Palmer's play.

<sup>61</sup> See Chapter 6 for further discussion of the racism inherent in the 'Australian Legend' and Ward's response to it.

<sup>62</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'Some Australian novels', draft manuscript for essay, undated (probably 1950s), Phillips Family Papers, Box 3385, Folder 6.

<sup>63</sup> See: Manning Clark, 'Furphy, Joseph (1843–1912)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.

<sup>64</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'Some Australian novels'.

expressed that spirit more truthfully and more individually than the artists of any other of the New Countries'.<sup>65</sup> In an essay on Rolf Boldrewood, the squatter-cum-gold mine manager who wrote adventure novels in the 1870s and 80s, he identified how the idea of Australia as a 'land of opportunity', which Boldrewood presented in his novels (most famously 1883's *Robbery Under Arms*) had, by the 1890s, 'almost disappeared from the mythology': 'the men represented by Lawson and Furphy will have none of it. To them it is no justification of the social order that the under-dog could rise to the top because that implies that there was still to be a bottom'. Thus, according to Phillips, 'the Australian mythology, somewhere between the generations of Boldrewood and of Furphy, parted company with the American Dream'.<sup>66</sup> To Phillips, the idea of Australianness encapsulated by Furphy and Lawson was a recognition of the reality of existence. The typical Australian had a 'pragmatic stance' and was 'suspicious of the speculative forms of thought' – this was not a land of dreamers. Australia was the home of 'socialism without doctrines': such undogmatic thinking had, argued Phillips, 'strongly flavoured our literature', leading to a preference for 'naturalist forms' – the 'logical way to express a sense of the superior reality of Australian living based on the ineluctable challenge of the actual'. Boldrewood, for his part, possessed 'a pioneer's feeling for the actual',<sup>67</sup> and it was this feeling which spawned the fundamentally pragmatic myth at the centre of Phillips' Tradition and Ward's Legend, the heart of Australia's 'marks of difference' and the basis for a national culture.

Comparing Patrick White unfavourably to Boldrewood (not a mainstream critical stance) Phillips said that 'the inheritors of the mythology' (contemporary writers he admired such as Katharine Susannah Prichard, Alan Marshall and Frank Dalby Davison) were reluctant to 'accept' White's character Voss as 'a symbol for the pursuit of reality' because 'in their tradition Leichhardt (the German explorer upon whom Voss was modelled) represents a failure of the European unrealistic mind, in an extreme form, to

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<sup>65</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'Some Australian novels'.

<sup>66</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'The social context of Rolf Boldrewood', draft manuscript for essay, circa 1965, Phillips Family Papers, Box 3385, Folder 6, p. 11.

<sup>67</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'The social context of Rolf Boldrewood', p. 7.

meet the challenge of the actual'.<sup>68</sup> A wild, speculative dreamer had no place in the material world of Australia, a place where such aristocratic notions as discovery and adventure were wholly subsidiary to the need to survive, to meet the trials of everyday life, and to pursue social mobility. Materialism was the bugbear of so many intellectuals of the post-war era (White and Manning Clark two striking examples) but in Phillips' Tradition 'one of the exemplary qualities of Australian life was the opportunity which it provided for poor men to rise to the top'.<sup>69</sup> It was an optimistic vision: writing of the poetry of Douglas Stewart, Phillips said that his friend rejected 'the modern sense of defeat, the belief that we have entered an era in which the spiritual failure of man can no longer be denied'. Stewart's poetry, he contended, contained no 'rage of protest' or 'whine of defeat' – with an 'ironic shrug' it accepted men's foibles and failings, nevertheless holding 'that man's spiritual potentiality is no less eternal and therefore a continuing force'.<sup>70</sup> The contrast to White is clear.

Key to Australian culture, for Phillips, was a 'proud sense of difference': 'most dramatically demonstrated' in 'the real Australia' – the outback.<sup>71</sup> Lawson, Furphy and their contemporaries, he contended, represented 'a landmark in the history of Anglo-Saxon culture'. Comparing Lawson to Chekhov, he contended that the Australian's style was 'not only admirably conceived', but 'his own invention'.<sup>72</sup> This 'strikingly original' and 'revolutionary' school of writing had been wilfully ignored by English critics, who ought to have realised that 'for the first time in centuries, Anglo-Saxon writing had broken out of the cage of the middle class attitude'. Lawson and Furphy, he said, 'wrote of the people, for the people, and from the people', and to them the middle classes were 'foreigners', a key differentiation from the likes of Dickens or Hardy. Australian writers did not choose their subject matter 'in humble necessity, because they knew no other', but wrote of Australian life because 'they thought it

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<sup>68</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'The social context of Rolf Boldrewood', p. 7.

<sup>69</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'The social context of Rolf Boldrewood', p. 10. Phillips here contradicts himself: elsewhere (as we have seen) he stated that Lawson and Furphy hated social mobility.

<sup>70</sup> A.A. Phillips, manuscript of 'The poetry of Douglas Stewart', publication unknown, 1967, Phillips Family Papers, Box 3386, Folder 2a.

<sup>71</sup> A.A. Phillips, manuscript of review of Owen Webster's biography of Frank Dalby Davison, *The Outward Journey* (1978), publication unknown, Phillips Family Papers, Box 3385, Folder 6.

<sup>72</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'Henry Lawson as craftsman', *Meanjin*, vol. 7, no. 2, Winter 1948, p. 80–6.

thoroughly well worth writing about, and they were happy with the audience which they addressed'.<sup>73</sup> In other words, they were not cringers, and they saw no reason not to celebrate Australian life and manners as their English equivalents were.

By the seventies Phillips was bemoaning the tertiary-educated 'intellectualist scribes and pharisees', who, 'over-represented in the audience' of such 'New Drama' institutions as Melbourne's Pram Factory, allowed Australian theatre, he contended, to retain its 'smugness' as one play after another 'monotonously repeated the refrain, "aren't Australians a lot of bastards?"'<sup>74</sup> We might assert that Phillips seemed to be baulking at the very thing he most wanted – independent, challenging and original Australian theatre. The Australian Performing Group, which performed at the Pram Factory from 1967 to 1981, was central to Melbourne's 'New Wave' theatre scene, with the majority of its plays, often innovative and knowingly modernist, written by Australians.<sup>75</sup> Phillips, though, disliked modernism, and he was a nationalist by inclination. His ideal, as we have seen, was a traditional one, and he saw modernism as a representation of elitist attitudes. His gut instinct seemed to be to repudiate the educated classes, even as he knew himself to be of their number (a contradiction we will return to shortly).

On the other hand, he believed the earlier success of a play such as Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* (1955) came from 'the feeling in it of an intelligible communication to the Common Man, a quality which blew freshly through the over-rarefied atmosphere of the contemporary theatre'. The play was not pretentious; it did not aspire to the label of 'high' culture, even if it might in fact attain it. This common quality, he asserted, was both 'embedded in the tradition of our literature' and 'reflective of the temper of our community'. Such were his aims for the literary tradition he sought to promote: 'is

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<sup>73</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'The Democratic Theme', p. 38.

<sup>74</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'Assaying the New Drama', first published in *Meanjin*, 1973, *Responses*, p. 183.

<sup>75</sup> See: Tim Robertson, *The Pram Factory: The Australian Performing Group Recollected*, Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2001.

it an impossible ambition to hope that it may be our task to restore to the theatre breadth of appeal undivorced from honesty of purpose?<sup>76</sup>

The traits of this working-class, democratic literature were several: Phillips praised its ‘robust individualism’ and ‘sardonic humour’, its ‘humane, simple yet ironic spirit’. This could be seen in Furphy’s ‘isocratic irreverence’: his comic rendition, highly literate, of the ‘levelling tendency’ – ‘the key,’ said Phillips, ‘to much Australian writing’.<sup>77</sup> Casting his eye over Australian poetry in the early-fifties, he noted that ‘the descent into flat cliché – once almost the trademark of Australian writing – has practically disappeared’, but he did not see the situation as wholly a cause for celebration: ‘the old atmosphere of the local lad doing his durndest’ might have gone, but the correlation was ‘a certain loss of character and strength’, of the ‘gustiness which broke through the primitive conceptions and the slap-it-down-anyhow methods of the Banjo Paterson school’. The primitivism of early Australian poetry might be gauche and embarrassing, but it was markedly Australian, its raw naivety its distinctive trait.<sup>78</sup> Further characteristics of Australian literature included a leaning to the Left ‘as a matter of course’ – ‘even’ Banjo Paterson, he averred, ‘was anti-scab’ – and an obsession with ‘mateship’, for Lawson ‘a religion to be thumped home with evangelical fervour’. Most notable was ‘a warmth of feeling, a ready tolerance, a belief in the essential decency of man – these were the qualities in which they were rich’.<sup>79</sup>

Therefore Australian literature, as Phillips conceived it, was an egalitarian, democratic rendering of ordinary Australian life: a ‘pugnacious valuing of the simplicities’.<sup>80</sup> Lawson was the master, and he had not achieved ‘his original and happy ease’ through naivety. In fact, his characteristic ‘amble’ was a

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<sup>76</sup> A.A. Phillips, manuscript for ‘Phar Lap Agonistes’, publication unknown, undated, Phillips Family Papers, Box 3386, Folder 2a.

<sup>77</sup> A.A. Phillips, ‘Some Australian novels’.

<sup>78</sup> A.A. Phillips, review of Kenneth McKenzie (ed.), *Australian Poetry 1951–52*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1952, *Meanjin*, vol. 12, no. 1, Autumn 1953, p. 117.

<sup>79</sup> A.A. Phillips, ‘The Democratic Theme’, pp. 42/3/5.

<sup>80</sup> A.A. Phillips, ‘The poetry of Brian Vrepon’, p. 235.

‘deliberate choice dictated by rare artistic perception’;<sup>81</sup> a relaxed style that ‘remains the heart of the Australian attitude’.<sup>82</sup> Phillips disagreed with Manning Clark’s assertion that ‘Australia is Lawson writ large’. Clark lauded Lawson’s ‘majesty, might and dominion’, but to Phillips ‘his success partly rests on the resolution and skill with which he refuses to magnify life. His shrewdly-placed ironies warn us that life must be endured without hope of discovering grandeurs’. It was Lawson’s ‘compassion’ and his ability to ‘give voice to the inarticulate’ that set him apart, not any ‘grand vision’.<sup>83</sup> To Phillips, this was enough; but to his critics, as we shall now see, it was a restrictive vision, only serving to limit the scope and potential of Australian literature, retarding its development and leaving it stuck in a narrow colonial mindset tarred with racism.

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<sup>81</sup> A.A. Phillips, manuscript of review of Colin Roderick (ed.), *Henry Lawson Collected Prose* (1972), publication unknown, Phillips Family Papers, Box 3385, Folder 6. Phillips said that the ‘mastery’ of Lawson’s prose journalism was the proof of his artfulness in adopting the seemingly gauche ‘amble’.

<sup>82</sup> A.A. Phillips, ‘The Democratic Theme’, pp. 55/6.

<sup>83</sup> Manning Clark, *In Search of Henry Lawson*, 1978, cited in A.A. Phillips, manuscript of review of Clark’s book, 1978, publication unknown, Phillips Family Papers, Box 3385, Folder 6. Clark added in typically overwrought style: ‘the story of his life might prove to be a forewarning to all of us of ‘wretched days to be.’ See Chapter 4 for more on Phillips’ and Clark’s differing interpretations of Lawson.



iv) 'Through a glass absurdly': The problem with cultural nationalism

The symbol of an Australian literary idea was a homesick heifer. As he defined the 'directness of spirit' inherent in Australian literature, it was to Frank Dalby Davison's *Man-sby* (1931), the story of a heifer which wants to return to the wild, that Phillips turned as an example. A celebration of the 'square-jawed independence which is the core of the Australian tradition',<sup>84</sup> he equated these virile qualities with the Davison whom he first met in the mid-1940s in a city pub, 'the six o'clock swill swirling about us'. Davison told him about the four years in the twenties he had spent on a Queensland selection north of Roma, a tough life with his first wife and child: 'it was pretty disastrous, but I got a hell of a lot else that mattered out of it'. Phillips at first thought he meant material for books, but 'now I recognise that as a shallow interpretation'. He equated Davison's love of the land with the Australian nationalism 'imbibed from his father', and identified the same connection to the land in the writing of Katharine Susannah Prichard, whose *Coonardoo* (1929), he said, looked on the Australian outback with 'the affection of intimacy and the pride of possession': the hard-fought battle to subdue the land had 'graven on the Australian a new, proud and individual character'.<sup>85</sup>

Conquest and possessive pride: Phillips seemed not to question from whom the land had been taken, or whether such manly qualities served only to accentuate the clichés of philistine Australia. The limitations of a bovine hero did not trouble him, while the affection for the land he professed to see in *Coonardoo* is not obvious to the reader, who is more likely to see the story of the doomed relationship between squatter and Aboriginal woman as harsh, condemning and wholly unaffectionate. The land is more like a gaoler possessing the novel's characters than the other way around. Furthermore, that filial-inspired nationalism of Davison's was problematic: Frederick Davison had been a member of the Australian Natives' Association and edited its journal, *Advance Australia*. He was a true representative of the 1890s: 'Progressive', but possessing 'a fervent belief in the White Australia policy, the British Empire,

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<sup>84</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'Some Australian novels'.

<sup>85</sup> A.A. Phillips, review of *The Outward Journey*.

national development and private enterprise'.<sup>86</sup> These roots nourishing their ideas would haunt Phillips, Ward and others as they came under sustained criticism in the 1960s and 70s: accused of idealising the 1890s and skirting over the problematic issues of that decade's bigotry. However, Phillips argued that it was 'natural for us to look back to the Nineties when it seemed that a strong sense of communal identity and a pride in it had generated forward movement'. He admitted that 'no doubt our view of the Nineties was largely illusory', but he pleaded the mitigating factors of changed ways of historical thinking and emphases in 1970s academia.<sup>87</sup> We might consider this excuse rather weak. Even at the time his friends had doubts over the strength of Phillips' arguments: Stewart, for example, wondered whether he had any proper critique of poets George Gordon McCrae and Christopher Brennan 'apart from their lack of Australianness'; he intuited Phillips' 'Melbourne' disdain for these two quintessentially 'Sydney' poets; but that, as Stewart and many others would aver, was not enough in itself to dismiss a poet.<sup>88</sup>

The other danger of Phillips' approach was the spectre of the failure to raise Australian literature's standards, that thing most needful if it was to be taken seriously. In defending the simplicity of poet Brian Vrepon's writing and preoccupations, he said he did not wish to evade 'the proper austerity of standards',<sup>89</sup> but the folksy nature of such poetry made it a very easy target. He defensively lauded those who could withstand the 'pressure of modishness', celebrating the poet who 'does not have to compete against a clatter of competent voices, and in any case hardly expects to command much attention'. Such a poet could eschew the 'fellowship' of a 'fashionable clique', his 'greatest virtue' lying in 'an obstinacy which is not to be scared from declaring the simplicities by the deadly fear of being platitudinous'.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Robert Darby, 'Davison, Frank Dalby (1893–1970)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/davison-frank-dalby-9923/text17571>, published first in hardcopy 1993; accessed online 14/2/2018. Frederick Davison edited *Advance Australia* 1897–99.

<sup>87</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'Through a glass absurdly'. For the harsh attacks on Ward in this period, chiefly emanating from historian Humphrey McQueen, see Chapter 6.

<sup>88</sup> Douglas Stewart to A.A. Phillips, 14/9/1956, Arthur Angell Phillips, Papers and Correspondence, 1940–71, Box 222, Folder 2.

<sup>89</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'The poetry of Brian Vrepon', *Meanjin*, vol. 11, no. 3, Spring 1952, p. 239.

<sup>90</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'The poetry of Brian Vrepon', pp. 234/5.

But praising poets for merely standing out in a sea of mediocrity and lacking ambition sets the bar very low, and the conservatism of his tastes is also readily apparent. While his ally Christesen championed White, Australia's premier modernist, Phillips hardly reviewed any of his novels, and when he did, his response was caustic.<sup>91</sup> Certainly, he was no admirer of the avant-garde: 'its main preoccupation is with the pursuit of novelty; and worse – far worse – novelty for its own sake'. Novelty, he opined, was so awful because it lacked sincerity, 'the only essential virtue' in the arts, and one thing Australian literature possessed.<sup>92</sup> He viewed White's dense style as woefully lacking in this regard, and the novelist's bitter recriminations against his fellow Australians were also galling to a proud and patriotic critic, one who professed exasperation with 'that hoary worry of ours': 'should Australian writers be Australian or Universal?'<sup>93</sup> Ultimately, they were Australians, and there was nothing to be ashamed of in that.

But cultural nationalism's naïve view of the world seemed so unsophisticated as to be almost a joke. For example, Clark, in a 1949 *Meanjin* essay, said that mateship was 'the key to the messianic note which runs through Lawson's and Furphy's works. If mates can live in harmony with each other... then why should not the whole of society do the same?' He quoted Lane's definition of communism as 'just being mates'. 'Naïve?' wondered Clark. 'Possibly: still it is a measure of their faith'. For Clark this naivety was not a problem because, as he saw it, it was part of the 'vigorous, unsophisticated' literature that young societies created, as opposed to the 'more complex' literature of the Old World.<sup>94</sup> The idea of 'mateship' was simple and natural, not complicated and intellectual. Phillips agreed, seeing 'dinkum-ness' as another important trait of Australian literature. He explained it in relation to Eleanor Dark's *The Timeless Land* (1941), set in Sydney Harbour in 1788, in which, amongst other plot strands, the story is

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<sup>91</sup> See, for example, A.A. Phillips, 'The Solid Mandala: Patrick White's new novel', *Meanjin*, vol. 25, no. 1, 1966, pp. 31–3. For more on Phillips' and Christesen's response to White, see Chapter 9.

<sup>92</sup> A.A. Phillips, untitled article, probably published in *The Age* in reply to a Philip Toynbee piece, dated '21/2' (year unknown), Phillips Family Papers, Box 3385, Folder 5.

<sup>93</sup> A.A. Phillips, review of Walter Murdoch and Alan Mulligan (eds), *A Book of Australian and New Zealand Verse* (1951) and F.O. Matthiessen (ed.), *The Oxford Book of American Verse* (1951), *Meanjin*, vol. 10, no. 3, Spring 1951, p. 305.

<sup>94</sup> Manning Clark, 'Tradition in Australian Literature', *Meanjin*, vol. 8, no. 1, Autumn 1949, pp. 16–22.

told of a convict who escapes and achieves ‘first, physical independence, and then spiritual integrity through an act of sacrifice’. Phillips points out that ‘Mrs. Dark does not label him as the First of the Dinkum Aussies – for an Australian audience, that would be unnecessary’.<sup>95</sup>

Defending the mundane; repudiating modernism; celebrating the ‘Dinkum’ – on such statements could Phillips’ critics dine out: how could he make a virtue of the second-rate? Why was he so scared of the new? Why did he celebrate clichés and stereotypes? These were the issues that bedevilled Australian culture, and Phillips’ defensive criticism seemed only to illustrate the point. To his critics, his ideas were anathema. Donald Horne, in a review of *The Australian Tradition*, was brutal. Phillips’ celebration of Australian novelists’ ‘unembarrassed preference for revealing the simple verities rather than the sophistications of human nature’ was merely a ‘recipe for bad writing’: ‘a concern with the sophistication of human nature is surely exactly what ‘great’ novels are about’. Horne chafed at what he saw as an acceptance of lower standards, which had ‘bred a class of impostor novelists, whose work is read and seriously discussed as literature’. He lacerated this ‘full scale literary fraud’, perpetuated by the vested interests of ‘a protected industry’ in which ‘you can get away with murder as a literary critic if you discuss the Australian holy books’. The universities were excessively tolerant of Australian writers’ desire to go down well with the ‘non-intellectual majorities’ who want Australia to be ‘good at everything’, while the ‘fellowship’ of the literary life led to acceptance of the second-rate. The belief in the ‘inherent virtue of writing’ saw works that were woefully substandard published and even celebrated. Provincialism, according to Horne, had been passed off as literature because the majority ignored it – ‘and for that one can hardly blame them’.<sup>96</sup>

The paradox identified by Horne was the great issue for the cultural nationalists. To be ‘democratic’ and ‘Australian’ at the same time as sophisticated and mature was a contradiction they were never able to come to terms with. Commenting on *The Australian Tradition*, one correspondent, whilst

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<sup>95</sup> A.A. Phillips, ‘Some Australian novels’.

<sup>96</sup> Donald Horne, ‘The Great Australian Fraud’, *The Observer*, 31/5/58, p. 247, Phillips Family Papers, Box 3386, Folder 3b.

praising Phillips' 'good temper' and 'wary eye in stating the Australian case', thought 'the great god Dinkum a bit too sharp-edged and firmly established'.<sup>97</sup> Phillips discussed the issue in a letter to *Overland* editor Stephen Murray-Smith: 'I am with you on the point of the doubtfulness of the intellectualist dismissal of popular appeal', he said, 'and it has often worried me in my judgments'. He stated that, 'against my general feeling', he often came down on the 'anti-pop side' because 'not to do so entails a worse treachery' – i.e. it was so important not to be anti-intellectual, the worst of Australian traits. But the situation was convoluted and exasperating:

In the case of H.L.'s [Henry Lawson's] verse, if you accept it as poetry of quality, you are saying that depth music, mystery, magic, are not things that matter in poetry, and my stomach writhes into spew at this. Where the choice is between the sophisticated and the un-sophisticated I come down pro-pop. But with H.L.'s verse it is a different choice.<sup>98</sup>

Phillips, it seems, was tying himself in knots. He wanted to praise Lawson's poetry in intellectual terms, because in that way it could ascend to the canon, but in reality he loved it for its 'depth music', the thing that made it Australian but, alas, unsophisticated. It seems that Phillips's confidence in his own judgments had been undermined, that he had lost the courage of his convictions. By the mid-seventies, assailed with attacks, Phillips' defence was unsure. He found himself reduced to writing essays in support of provincialism: 'Should we try to see Australian writing in the light of "universal" standards?' he asked, or 'should we judge it by its special meaning to ourselves?' He admitted that 'a raucous nationalism' had led to excessive 'over-praise' for Australian works in the past, but he contended that subservience to 'metropolitan' standards would be 'wrong and dangerous'. Provincialism, he had decided, had a lot going for it: its 'freshness, sincerity and flavour' raised it above the 'imitativeness' of metropolitan writers;

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<sup>97</sup> Ian Maxwell to A.A. Phillips, 25/3/1958, Arthur Angell Phillips, Papers and Correspondence, 1940–71, Box 222, Folder 3.

<sup>98</sup> A.A. Phillips to Stephen Murray-Smith, 8/1/1976, Stephen Murray-Smith Papers, Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library of Victoria, MS 8272, Box 191, Folder 8.

‘provincial cultures’ could stand aside and sort the important from the merely fashionable, but ‘when we cringe to metropolises, we forfeit this chance to serve both them and ourselves’. Once more he took aim, as he had done in 1950, at ‘the chill emanating from that class of Australian intellectual... intimidated by the fear of being provincial’.<sup>99</sup> Indyk, decades later, hit on what Phillips was getting at – ‘there is a positive quality of the provincial which is embarrassing and foolish and childlike all at once: this is the capacity for wonder’. Embarrassing, maybe; but, says Indyk, wonder ‘is also one of the defining characteristics of the literary imagination’.<sup>100</sup> Such a strand, as John Docker argues, had a strong history in Australian literature, linked to the historicist and romantic ideal of the bush ‘as the only possible site of perfectible human relationships’, and pervading the work of ‘Banjo’ Paterson, C.J. Dennis (in *The Sentimental Bloke*) and also, according to Docker, K.S. Prichard, Vance Palmer and Patrick White. Their work invokes a ‘dislike of cities and suburbia’ and an ‘organic oneness with the natural world as central to individual and perhaps social fulfilment’.<sup>101</sup> Phillips expressed this in ‘The Democratic Theme’, linking it to a national identity: ‘Urban Man is everywhere much the same; it was in the cradle of the Open Spaces that the individual Australian character had been nurtured’.<sup>102</sup>

However, while we *may* allow for the literary merits of provincialism, it is harder to argue the same for nationalism. Canonical writers do become figures of national pride, symbolic of nationhood, but their work never springs from such a narrow foundation – ‘do not harp on the national’, as Amiet had advised Australia’s writers. Nationalist sentiment has never been a wellspring of creative genius, and a literary tradition could not be built on a ‘national idea’. In itself it is not enough. John Morrison said that Phillips had managed to strike a ‘nice balance between absurd worship of a few sacred cows and an instinct for placing the best of what we had into the context of world literature’,<sup>103</sup> but many would argue

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<sup>99</sup> A.A. Phillips, ‘Attitudes towards Australian writing’, summary of talk given at University of New England’s seminar ‘Australian literature in education’, January 1966, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 264; later published as ‘Provincialism and Australian culture’, *Meanjin*, vol. 25, no. 3, 1966, pp. 265–74.

<sup>100</sup> Ivor Indyk, ‘Provincialism and Encyclopaedism’, *Island Magazine*, no. 127, Summer 2011, p. 78.

<sup>101</sup> John Docker, *In a Critical Condition*, pp. 21–2.

<sup>102</sup> A.A. Phillips, ‘The Democratic Theme’, p. 54. Docker also cites this passage, in *In a Critical Condition*, p. 36.

<sup>103</sup> John Morrison to A.A. Phillips, 14/8/1972.

that this was just what he had *not* managed to do. He was as guilty as anyone of the worship of sacred cows, and while placing the likes of Lawson and Furphy in the context of world literature was his goal, it was highly debateable whether he achieved it. The tension between ‘country and calling’ was one all of the cultural nationalists were acutely aware of; between the nationality of intellectuals and writers and the ‘overseas orientation of their received culture’. Phillips’ ‘understanding of this dilemma’, said Christesen in 1980, had ‘helped us all walk with a more relaxed erectness of carriage’.<sup>104</sup> Henderson sees him as promoting the idea of ‘nationalist Australian critics as ideal readers’.<sup>105</sup> However, whether they actually could be is dubious: his focus on national considerations only meant he failed to understand the real complexities at the heart of Australian society and Australian literature, his simplistic evaluations leading to lacunae and omissions. The lack of plurality in his ideas left them shallow. The plaudits of Christesen and Morrison for the aging Phillips were effusive and no doubt genuine, but they were his contemporaries, his friends and colleagues of many decades, and they were lauding one of their own. Sadly, his and their views of what Australian culture was and could be were no longer viable, and it was the pluralism espoused, for example, by Horne, that would have greater resonance and verisimilitude in modern Australia.

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<sup>104</sup> C.B. Christesen to A.A. Phillips, 3/3/1980. Christesen in this passage was quoting from Keith Hancock’s *Country and Calling*, London: Faber & Faber, 1954. As we have already noted, to walk ‘with a relaxed erectness of carriage’ was Phillips’ hope, expressed in ‘The Cultural Cringe’, for cultured, self-confident Australians.

<sup>105</sup> Ian Henderson, ‘Freud has a word for it’, p. 128.

v) Conclusion

Phillips described the campfire busking tradition as ‘an important cultural institution’, helping to ‘create a national self-awareness, to solidify a sense of what it meant to be an Australian’. He described the experiences of a ‘child crouched in the shadows beyond the campfire’, listening to songs and stories – could there be a more ‘humane education’, he wondered?<sup>106</sup> He felt that ‘the division between the artist and Common Man has grown too deep, and too difficult to bridge’. In response to A.D. Hope’s disdain for the idolatry of ‘the yahoos’ for racehorse Phar Lap’s taxidermised remains, Phillips contended that

his admirers are drawn by a sense of his power and grace, and by the craftsmanship apparent in his loving preservation. The Yahoos are not Yahoos. They are human beings made in God’s image, moved, obscurely but sincerely, by a hunger for beauty and for art.<sup>107</sup>

West Indian intellectual C.L.R. James had made a similar argument when he extolled the truth and beauty inherent in the game of cricket.<sup>108</sup> The cringers failed to see such links. To them, the Australian obsession with sport was cast-iron proof of the nation’s philistinism and failure, but this assertion, coupled with their preoccupation with the superiority of British culture, meant they could not find the beauty or the profundity in what surrounded them. They had no idea of what made Australia, its pith and its core; or of what Australia could contribute – the ‘marks of difference’, which were the only way the nation could slough off such insecurity, replacing it with maturity. It was not easy to attain such a goal. As Australia pushed past federation, what had always made it unique seemed a long way from attaining the artistic respectability so craved by Phillips: ‘the challenge of hostile circumstance’, he averred, ‘was no longer the dominant Australian problem’. Of greater urgency was ‘the need to develop

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<sup>106</sup> A.A. Phillips, manuscript of article celebrating Henry Lawson’s centenary, publication unknown, 1967, Phillips Family Papers, Box 3385, Folder 6.

<sup>107</sup> A.A. Phillips, ‘Phar Lap Agonistes’. Hope had written in his poem ‘Dunciad Minor’: ‘And there the idol the Yahoos adore/ The Sacred Race-Horse stuffed with manger straw/ Stands in his case and winks a glassy eye.’

<sup>108</sup> C.L.R. James, *Beyond a Boundary*, London: Yellow Jersey Press, 2005 (first published 1963), pp. 197 ff.



a cultural maturity’, but ‘the writers who sensed that did not have behind them the support of a whole community’s feeling’. Instead, they felt cut adrift in a sea of philistinism, their efforts scorned, laughed at, and, worst of all, ignored. As a result, ‘many of our writers were deserting Australian patriotism for the patriotism of the artist’ – they wanted to attain membership of ‘an aristocracy of the especially sensitive’, and in order to accomplish such an ideal they had to abjure all things Australian. Such a sensibility led to the prominence of Christopher Brennan, Henry Handel Richardson, Norman Lindsay, Martin Boyd, Hope and White.<sup>109</sup> The patriotic, quintessentially Australian tradition of Lawson and Furphy fell out of fashion, patronised at best but mostly despised, while writers who only wanted to ape the European ‘classic writers’ (who of course had been lucky enough *not* to be surrounded by such cultureless wastelands) failed to connect (if only in the eyes of the Meanjineers) with the things that could furnish Australia with its own voice and ideas.

This is where Phillips’ legacy lies: he contested this situation by celebrating Australia for what it was; he embraced the ‘challenge of the actual’. He was unashamed of being Australian and he was unashamed of Australian culture. If the culture he promoted tended to the hackneyed or unsophisticated, nevertheless it was a democratic culture, an optimistic culture, a distinctive culture and an *Australian* culture. Phillips, working in difficult times for the intellectual and artist, was unafraid of promoting and celebrating it. ‘You don’t like all this stuff about gum-tips and wattle-blossoms, do you?’ asked a young intellectual acquaintance of Phillips’ in 1948, upon seeing him with an Australian anthology tucked under his arm. ‘Why not?’ replied Phillips. ‘Do you think poetry should be about daffodils and nightingales?’<sup>110</sup> And some years later, in 1961, he and his wife Mary spent nine months touring Europe. Recounting how, in Split, the two of them paused to listen to a nightingale, a reverent moment for both of them, here being the bird so lauded by the poets of the English tradition, he was forced to ask: ‘Is that it?’ The lyrebird and the Australian magpie, he reckoned, had a far more beautiful song; but the Australian’s

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<sup>109</sup> A.A. Phillips, ‘The literary heritage re-assessed’, first published in *Meanjin* 1962, *Responses*, pp. 78/9.

<sup>110</sup> A.A. Phillips, ‘Through a glass absurdly’.

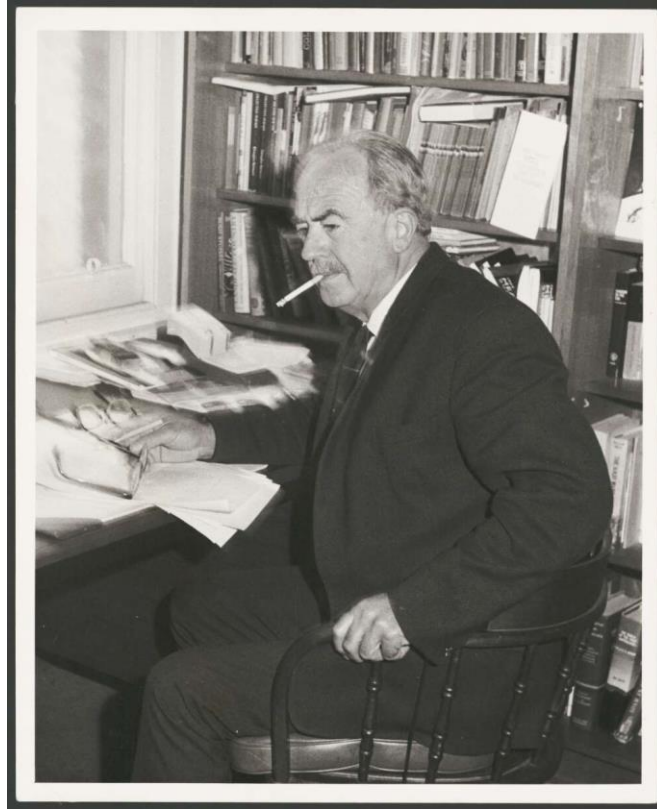
natural assumption was one of the inferiority of the native birds.<sup>111</sup> This was the cringe he fought to destroy his entire career.

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<sup>111</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'Cultural nationalism in the 40s and 50s'.

## CHAPTER 2

### Clem Christesen: 'The Wound as the Bow'



Clem Christesen in his office, 18 November 1969. He possessed 'a combative peevishness that seemed to twitch his small moustache and line his forehead with marks of self-defensive and retaliatory emotions.'

i) Introduction: 'The liberal intellectual in isolation'

'I make bold to suggest that the work recorded in *Meanjin's* eighty-eight issues will in years to come prove to be of the utmost value', wrote its founding editor Clement B. Christesen in 1962.<sup>1</sup> Envisioning his legacy, he foresaw a time when historians would chart the birth of a meaningful Australian cultural scene, one owing an awful lot to his magazine. The fact that it had survived at all – a

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<sup>1</sup> C.B. Christesen, 'The twenty-one lives of *Meanjin Quarterly*', reprint of article from *The Texas Quarterly*, vol. 5, no. 2, Summer 1962, p. 93, in Stephen Murray-Smith Papers, Box 166. Christesen was editor of *Meanjin* from 1940 to 1974.

point he never tired of making to his correspondents year after year, decade after decade – was in itself worthy of recognition. He had done it the hard way: ‘the liberal intellectual in isolation’, cruelly suffering ‘kicks from the Right, boos from the Left’.<sup>2</sup> His was the ‘battle’ for high culture of a man of letters, unappreciated in an unfeeling nation.<sup>3</sup> It was a worldview ensnared in victimhood: he, his magazine and Australian writers in general were victims of the cruel philistinism that was everywhere apparent, most cravenly in politicians who ignored the arts and allowed Australia to continue as a second-rate nation with no real culture of its own to boast of. It was in many ways a solipsistic understanding of Australian culture, in which his own travails and ills were extrapolated to encompass all of cultured Australia, and he and his magazine were, as he saw it, the archetype of the downtrodden Australian writer or artist.

Some have seen Christesen’s primary aim as attaining an elite status: becoming party to decisions on arts and letters at a government level, whilst creating and fostering a rarefied culture. ‘Intellectuals too craved power’, says Lynne Strahan, ‘though they probably called it something else more appropriate to their idealism’.<sup>4</sup> John Docker, meanwhile, sees *Meanjin* as seeking to represent the Australian people’s ‘ideal interests’, creating a tradition in the ‘Leavisite and elitist’ mould to ‘ward off the debilitating effects of popular culture’, thus breaking the shackles of cultural inferiority and embarrassment.<sup>5</sup> The cultural nationalists, with Christesen to the fore, wanted to make the arts and the life of the mind more central in Australian life. They constituted the creative minority, which was, not so much fighting the decay of civilisation, because civilization in their estimation was barely taking root in Australian soil, as *promoting*

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<sup>2</sup> C.B. Christesen to David Martin, 30/6/1955, C.B. Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, 1940–74, University of Melbourne Archives, Baillieu Library, 2005.0004, Box 227.

<sup>3</sup> See later in chapter for discussion of warlike terminology employed by cultural nationalists, particularly in *Meanjin*’s 1942 ‘Crisis Issue’ and Christesen’s 1951 editorial, ‘The wound as the bow’.

<sup>4</sup> Lynne Strahan, *Just City and the Mirrors: Meanjin Quarterly and the Intellectual Front 1940–1965*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1984, pp. 260–1.

<sup>5</sup> John Docker, *Australian Cultural Elites*, pp. 85–6 & 89. Docker himself was in thrall to the ‘Leavisite mould’ in his years as an under-graduate at the University of Sydney in the 1960s, as he tells us in the prologue of *In a Critical Condition* (p. 4), entitled ‘How I became a teenage Leavisite and lived to tell the tale’. ‘Criticism’, he says of Leavis’ goals, ‘was the central agency of preservation’ of ‘minority culture’: ‘Critics could develop in themselves the values of responsiveness, vitality, fineness, intelligence, vigour, subtlety, and wit that are created in the best literature. At the same time they would need to have a scalpel-like sense of which literature and which criticism don’t realize such values’. He says that the Leavisite ‘doctrine’ imparted ‘a sense of great power and authority to being a critic. The critic was not a mere follower of writers... but a writer manqué... It certainly wasn’t an unpleasant feeling to regard oneself as part of civilisation’s needed creative minority.’

civilization in the Australian context. And, as we shall see, governments needed to be active in their involvement: in this way, Christesen was part of the Australian tendency to state paternalism in which the state is expected to deliver social justice, equality and, it would seem, culture as well.<sup>6</sup> Whilst *Meanjin* had a small circulation – Christesen often bemoaning the limited ‘cultural core’ of readers and audiences in Australia<sup>7</sup> – it aimed, says Docker, to have a ‘civilising and humanising influence out of all proportion to its subscription’.<sup>8</sup>

If Vance and Nettie Palmer were the doyens of the cultural nationalists, then Christesen was the ringleader, making things happen, spurring writers on, cajoling essays and opinion from them, badgering politicians, and tirelessly, fractiously, irritably publicising the cause of Australian letters. His cultural optimism waxed and waned, but *Meanjin*, very much the epitome of the ‘little magazine’ on the Australian scene, managed to survive, despite his own pessimism and misgivings. This chapter will explore how his obstreperous character contributed to the cause of the cultural nationalists, and show how his campaign for government support of the arts was an important part of the struggle for a meaningful Australian culture. ‘So I plug along as best I can’, he grouched in typical fashion, ‘alienating or depressing friends and associates with my gloom’.<sup>9</sup> Playing the victim became the key part of his persona. His ‘was a saturnine rather than an optimistic temperament’.<sup>10</sup> ‘Clem’, noted Nettie Palmer, is ‘attacked by feelings

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<sup>6</sup> See: John Hirst, ‘Nation building, 1901–14’, in Alison Bashford and Stuart Macintyre (eds), *The Cambridge History of Australia, Volume 2*, Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 15–38.

<sup>7</sup> C.B. Christesen to David Martin, 11/7/1951, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 227. Circulation figures are hard to ascertain, but Lynn Strahan says 250 copies of the first issue were printed (*Just City and the Mirrors*, p. 7) and in a 1945 editorial Christesen said that his magazine had become a ‘well-established quarterly of 80 pages with a circulation of 4,000 copies per issue’ (‘Editorial’, *Meanjin*, vol. 4, no. 1, Autumn 1945, p. 1). This figure is actually very impressive – reflecting the boom time provided by ‘Yank sales’ during the war (Strahan, p. 41 – the term is Leo Batt’s from a letter of 1944, cited by Strahan).

<sup>8</sup> John Docker, *Australian Cultural Elites*, p. 88.

<sup>9</sup> C.B. Christesen to David Martin, 30/6/1955.

<sup>10</sup> Laurie Hergenhan, ‘Clem Christesen (1911–2003)’, Australian Academy of the Humanities, <http://www.humanities.org.au/Portals/0/documents/Fellows/Obituaries/ClemBChristesen.pdf>, 2003, accessed: 29/6/2016.

of inadequacy mixed with immortal longings'.<sup>11</sup> We might consider that this, too, was the condition of Australian literature in the mid-twentieth century.

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<sup>11</sup> Cited in Jim Davison, 'Harmony, with Discord: the Christesens and the Palmers', *Meanjin*, vol. 74, no. 2, Winter 2015, p. 87.

ii) A 'difficult customer': Editor, encourager, cajoler

The 1950s and 60s, as far as Clem Christesen was concerned, were terrible times for Australian letters. In the early stages of the Whitlam premiership the editor sought writers' personal accounts, 'subjective think-pieces', as he told Manning Clark, of what he termed the 'Big Drought', or 'Long Wait'. He wished to record for posterity the sensations of artists, writers and intellectuals who had been 'well and truly clobbered', many having 'finally fled the country'. 'My Australia,' he said, 'died when the Chifley government fell,' and in the years that followed 'the nation's material advancement' was 'gained at destructive cost to the mind and spirit of very many writers, artists, teachers, intellectuals'. He lamented the 'long divorce between intellect and political power,' and attacked 'the mindless clichés' of the Menzies government, which 'resulted in a sort of intellectual torpor'. 'No wonder', he said, 'our writers failed to develop techniques, energies, moral and nervous recognitions similar to those evident in certain foreign literatures':

I think it is true to say that our political leadership has never made manifest a belief that it is through the various forms of art that the inherent tendencies of a society are... made visible and potent; that it is through the enjoyment/appreciation of art that the public happiness is ultimately attained; and that the main reason for the fostering of art is that art is important to the life of a people, and without it the political community falls short of its ideal potentialities.

The arts were essential to a civilized community, and a civilizing political class. He railed against the 'general dullness and flatness, the suffocating blandness' and (quoting Tyrone Guthrie) the 'steak-fed vacuity' of Australian life in the Menzies era. He hoped for a 'truly enlightened political leadership' which would sound 'imperative notes'; notes he believed were now being struck by Whitlam. But the 'extraordinary period' just past needed to be recorded, and in a journal, naturally, such as *Meanjin*, 'which somehow managed to *survive*' (his pride and even wonder at this accomplishment clear in his own

emphasis).<sup>12</sup> Russel Ward, another writer sounded out for his perspective on the Menzies era, described those years as a ‘deep freeze’, and Christesen, in reply, wondered ‘how on earth we managed to survive twenty-three fucking years’.<sup>13</sup>

Many of Christesen’s preoccupations, not to mention his personality and attributes, are in evidence in this correspondence. The bantering spirit, the idiom – ‘have a go, mate’, he implored Ward<sup>14</sup> – reflect the Australian temper of an editor who was adept at getting his would-be contributors to write what he was asking of them. As Phillips said, Christesen had ‘actively cajoled, nudged, guided and developed his contributors’, including, ‘at one time or another, most of the best writers in the community’.<sup>15</sup> In the case of his letter to Clark, his skills as an editor are particularly apparent: he artfully guides his correspondent towards what he is looking for, ‘virtually directing Clark’, as Mark McKenna says, ‘like a film-director telling an actor what to do’.<sup>16</sup> Christesen told Clark that ‘the articles I am hoping to attract will probably be regarded in years to come as historic documents’, and the historian duly responded.<sup>17</sup>

When Christesen stressed his pride at how his magazine had survived, he alluded to the previous two decades of fighting to keep *Meanjin* afloat. As any researcher who has fossicked amongst the reams of Christesen’s correspondence would attest, these battles and the bloody-minded, often ill-tempered and self-pitying manner in which he fought them, were at the heart of his character. In 1949 he was writing to Vance Palmer, detailing his desire to give up and vanish into the Red Centre, ‘a place I’ve never been’.<sup>18</sup> He did not, but three years later he was moaning to Palmer again: ‘doubtless some other fellow could do a better job’; it had ‘long been my disappointment that I am not such a fellow’, but:

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<sup>12</sup> C.B. Christesen to Manning Clark, 11/4/1973, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 82.

<sup>13</sup> Russel Ward to C.B. Christesen, 13/12/1972; Christesen to Ward, 21/12/1972, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 347.

<sup>14</sup> C.B. Christesen to Russel Ward, 21/12/1972.

<sup>15</sup> A.A. Phillips, ‘Tribute to *Meanjin*’, *Overland*, November 1956, p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> Mark McKenna, personal communication (email), 22/9/2015.

<sup>17</sup> Manning Clark, ‘The Years of Unleavened Bread’, *Meanjin*, vol. 32, no. 3, September 1973, pp. 245–50.

<sup>18</sup> C.B. Christesen to Vance Palmer, 17/2/1949, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 259.



I've simply done the best I could, always labouring under an acute sense of inadequacy – and invariably working in almost complete isolation. I can't even recall the last serious talk I had with anyone about Australian literary problems. As to the future of the journal – I am thinking of trying to pass the whole thing over to the University and relinquish my interest in it ... I have the oppressing feeling that the last twelve years have simply gone down the drain, almost entirely wasted. The long devotion to what the journal was attempting, striving to achieve, has got me precisely nowhere – it must now stop.<sup>19</sup>

Such letters invariably attracted a reply decrying Christesen's pessimism, praising his contribution and urging him on. In this case, Palmer commended the 'solid status' the magazine had built up, lauding Christesen's accomplishment in keeping it going, and wondering who else could have done so.<sup>20</sup> Judith Wright was different. She worked for him during the war years before the paper moved from Brisbane to Melbourne, but her early enthusiasm for *Meanjin* and its editor began to wear out as the war drew to its close.<sup>21</sup> Their relationship became properly strained as he agreed to publish her first collection of poetry, *The Moving Image*, and she found his off-the-cuff business methods did not instil confidence.<sup>22</sup> Christesen seems to have suggested that he would just send her all the profits, but she balked at this – she wanted normal, professional business dealings and no preferential treatment.<sup>23</sup> Wright was forthright and refused to pander to his ego or soothe his tetchiness with flattery. 'You know, I have seen quite a good deal of you', she reminded him, 'and in a perfectly friendly spirit I would point out that you are not always very businesslike in your business methods. For a publisher, that is rather a disadvantage'.<sup>24</sup> As

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<sup>19</sup> C.B. Christesen to Vance Palmer, 4/8/1952, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 259.

<sup>20</sup> Vance Palmer to C.B. Christesen, 8/8/1952, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 259.

<sup>21</sup> A note of bantering exasperation enters Wright's letters to Christesen: 'sweating blood' for him on the hottest day of the year, she refers to him as 'my good bloke'; Judith Wright to C.B. Christesen, Box 356.

<sup>22</sup> Judith Wright, *The Moving Image*, Melbourne: Meanjin Press, 1946

<sup>23</sup> 'I assure you I had no idea of being altruistic towards *Meanjin*... and I would really prefer to have matters on an ordinary basis... So if you have a contract form handy, let's get the matter tidy, shall we?' Judith Wright to C.B. Christesen, 24/10/1945, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 356.

<sup>24</sup> Judith Wright to C.B. Christesen, 27/11/1945, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 356.

the book did well their letters became more cordial, but there continued to be strains – Christesen, for example, getting angry when Wright sent poems to a rival anthology.<sup>25</sup> By the end of the forties, their correspondence had dried to a trickle. In 1952 she told him she barely looked at *Meanjin* anymore and, in response to his wondering if she had any thoughts regarding the current state of the magazine, said that she ‘had heard’ that people’s ‘chief criticisms’ were to do with cost and ‘a certain monotony of content’, comments that were sure to raise Christesen’s hackles (and did).<sup>26</sup> In 1962, Christesen having republished *The Moving Image* ‘without a word to me’, she described him as ‘my crawly friend’.<sup>27</sup>

Her estimation of Christesen was clear. She did not support him when he came under suspicion of being a communist.<sup>28</sup> If issues with the publication of her own book were important regarding her disintegrating relationship with Christesen, so was his failure to publish her partner Jack McKinney’s. A 1956 letter from Wright to Christesen gleefully lists American academic magazines which had taken McKinney’s work.<sup>29</sup> Christesen was terse in response:

You mention Jack for the first time since your marriage [they were not in fact married at this stage]. I recall details of the break in what was supposed to be a friendship. Well, I’m glad to hear of his successes. I won’t ask him to contribute to this journal. He knows damn well that the pages of *Meanjin* always have been and will be open to him.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> C.B. Christesen to Judith Wright, 22/9/1947, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 356.

<sup>26</sup> Judith Wright to C.B. Christesen, 24/11/1952, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 356; Christesen replied (28/11/1952) that he had to charge so much in order to keep the magazine going; ‘As for the ‘monotony of content’, I suspect the person who said that really meant something entirely different. It’s all a thankless business, surely.’

<sup>27</sup> Judith Wright to Kathleen McArthur, 5/4/1962, Judith Wright Papers, National Library of Australia, Canberra, MS 5781, Box 78, Folder 570.

<sup>28</sup> See: Veronica Brady, *South of my Days: A Biography of Judith Wright*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1998, p. 157. See later in chapter for Christesen’s ‘hounding’ by ASIO.

<sup>29</sup> Judith Wright to C.B. Christesen, 10/11/1956, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 356. Her delight in McKinney’s seeming acceptance by the academic establishment is ironic, given her (and his) otherwise professed disdain for the academy (see Chapter 10).

<sup>30</sup> C.B. Christesen to Judith Wright, 4/12/1956, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 220.

Wright and McKinney seem almost to have strengthened their bonds through their mutual dislike of Christesen: she laughingly recounted sending back a contract, much to Christesen's evident displeasure (he 'fairly chewed his moustache to ribbons'); or, on another occasion, wrote that she had 'just finished a page and a half of sweet poison to Clem'.<sup>31</sup> In her autobiography she described him as possessing a 'combative peevishness that seemed to twitch his small moustache and line his forehead with marks of self-defensive and retaliatory emotions that I did not much like'. Wright and McKinney saw Christesen as the symbol of the repressive nature of conventional thought: 'not academically qualified himself', said Wright, 'Clem worshipped those who took centre stage with degrees and publications to their credit'.<sup>32</sup>

However, Christesen felt he did not get the support he was entitled to from academia. The lack of funding forthcoming from the University became a regular complaint: 'thirteen bloody years down the drain', he thundered as he threatened to quit for that reason.<sup>33</sup> In 1955, he wrote to Stephen Murray-Smith in typically self-pitying terms, again declaring his intention to divest himself of the responsibility of *Meanjin*:

Well, in future my good friends will be spared unpleasant ear-bashing. I've said my piece, done my best to interest people in the journal's problems. The sense of failure remains... on the personal relationship level as much as any other. Well, there's no need for you to repeat my mistakes.<sup>34</sup>

Murray-Smith, like Palmer and Smith, wrote back to dispute the negative self-appraisal: 'I won't have it', he said, 'you alternate between blaming your strife on the world and then, worse, blaming the

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<sup>31</sup> Judith Wright to Jack McKinney, 'Monday night' (probably 1946) and 'Thursday night' (probably 1945), Patricia Clarke and Meredith McKinney (eds), *With Love and Fury: Selected Letters of Judith Wright*, Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2006, pp. 25 & 21.

<sup>32</sup> Judith Wright, *Half a Lifetime*, Melbourne: Text Publishing, 1999, pp. 170–1 & 186.

<sup>33</sup> C.B. Christesen to Bernard Smith, 19/5/1953, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 306.

<sup>34</sup> C.B. Christesen to Stephen Murray-Smith, 17/6/1955, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 240. Christesen had moved *Meanjin* from Brisbane to Melbourne in 1945, having been invited down to Victoria by the University of Melbourne.

world's strife on yourself. How can we convince you in what love and regard you are held by so many?'<sup>35</sup> Probably this was what he wanted, and his letters show how adroit he was at manipulating his correspondents to shower him in praise; Wright being one of the few not to oblige. She was not the only writer with whom he exchanged angry correspondence. We see a series of contretemps between him and Phillips, for example. In 1952 he was angry with Phillips for questioning the 'language and direction' of *Meanjin* and attacking his editorial 'The Wound as the Bow' (more of which later) as typical of the 'maddening yapping whinge of the Australian writer'.<sup>36</sup> They fell out in 1956 over Phillips' critique of Christesen's politics (to which we will also return later); while in 1958/9 they quarrelled over Phillips' failure to accept a position as associate editor on the magazine, with Christesen curtly declaring: 'don't bother to answer this; our letters don't seem to help matters much'.<sup>37</sup> He ended up questioning the loyalty of Phillips, who was moved to reply: 'if you stick to that view, we're through'.<sup>38</sup> They were not, in fact, 'through', although in 1966 they were back arguing; Christesen penning another fuming missive and Phillips replying: 'Fair go, Clem, surely I don't deserve that diatribe!'<sup>39</sup> Meanwhile, in 1960 Christesen was angry with Smith, by now himself an associate editor, whom he accused of a lack of input into the magazine. Smith replied, in terms many others had employed and would continue to employ: 'I do think you are being quite unreasonable'.<sup>40</sup>

Smith certainly appreciated the editor's contribution to Australian letters, as seen in 1948, when he expressed his admiration for 'the way you stick to *Meanjin* and the way it sticks to you'.<sup>41</sup> Christesen's perseverance, even as he said that he was not going to persevere, was vital to his success. Whilst he may

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<sup>35</sup> Stephen Murray-Smith to C.B. Christesen, 20/6/1955, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 240.

<sup>36</sup> A rather interesting criticism for Phillips, loather of the cultural cringe and ardent supporter of Australian writers, to have made; hand-written comments on C.B. Christesen article 'The Wound as the Bow', undated, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 264. Correspondence between the two on this topic and others 2/6 – 20/6/1952, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 263.

<sup>37</sup> C.B. Christesen to A.A. Phillips, 23/4/1959, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 263.

<sup>38</sup> A.A. Phillips to C.B. Christesen, 24/4/1959, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 263.

<sup>39</sup> A.A. Phillips to C.B. Christesen, 10/6/1966 (in response to Christesen letter of 9/6/1966), Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 263.

<sup>40</sup> C.B. Christesen to Bernard Smith, 31/5/1960; Smith to Christesen, 20/6/1960, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 306.

<sup>41</sup> Bernard Smith to C.B. Christesen, 31/5/1948, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 306.

have been irascible and infuriating, his friends and correspondents knew his value, and in the midst of rows they still offered kind words and encouragement: ‘it is not any flattery’, said Smith as they quarrelled, ‘to say that you are one of the very few really important editors that the country has produced. I suppose that is why you are such a difficult customer to get on with’.<sup>42</sup> Smith was undoubtedly on to something here: to do such a job in such trying circumstances (and did not Christesen love harping on those circumstances!) the successful editor – who had to encourage writers, persuade them to write for little remuneration, champion them and promote them – probably did have to be a ‘difficult customer’.

We can see his needling, cajoling qualities in a 1955 letter to Vance Palmer. Recalling his hopes of ten years previously, that *Meanjin* would play an important role ‘in helping to achieve a progressive and truly democratic Australia’ in the post-war years, he lamented the elder writer’s lack, as he saw it, of a political stance in the subsequent decade. While Christesen questioned Palmer’s political commitment, he also lauded him as ‘the main individual force in Australian literature’. Provoking Palmer to be more vocal and committed; praising his contribution; prodding him for a response (which of course he hoped to publish) – such was Christesen’s style. Hoping Palmer could fulfil Yeats’ imprecation that ‘what Dublin needs is some man who knows his own mind and has an intolerable tongue and a delight in enemies’, we might in fact consider it a description better suited to him, though he bemoaned that he was not such a man, not a ‘communicator’; a self-effacement readers of his erudite, impassioned letters would take issue with.<sup>43</sup>

Christesen’s abrasive personality fits with the traits of the ‘little magazines’ of the mid-twentieth century, what John Tregenza has called their ‘aggressive and often irresponsible character’, particularly as they multiplied in the aftermath of the First World War. These magazines might have had small circulations and dubious finances, but they were uncompromising in their opinions. Tregenza argues that the avant-garde movements of the first half of the twentieth century, ‘and their characteristic little

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<sup>42</sup> Bernard Smith to C.B. Christesen, 20/6/1960, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 306.

<sup>43</sup> C.B. Christesen to Vance Palmer, 12/7/1955, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 259.

magazines’, were ‘begotten by a series of crises – crises in art, thought, economics and international relations’; they were ‘products of an age of anxiety’.<sup>44</sup> Christesen was nothing if not anxious, and this provided him with his editorial voice, which, incorporating the fears of the Pacific War and the Cold War eras, and reflecting these on to the worries and concerns of Australian writers and intellectuals, gave his magazine its distinctive, Australian zeal. Strahan refers to Christesen in his early years as ‘a fervid but unsure editor’, fired ‘by the literary rebels of our century as represented in the little magazine movement’ and his desire to raise ‘national consciousness’.<sup>45</sup> There were some fifty little magazines published in Australia from the twenties to the fifties, and they all, as Tregenza points out, grappled with ‘the special problem of cultural isolation’.<sup>46</sup> Most of them did not last longer than three or four numbers, but *Meanjin* did. Christesen ‘stuck’ to and with *Meanjin*, keeping it going despite the pessimism he often allowed to intrude.

This obstreperous temperament, expressed so vividly in letter after letter to virtually all the important Australian writers of the age, is where his real literary legacy lies. Christesen himself understood this. Murray-Smith, irritated at his rejection of an appeal to review a book on Vance Palmer, scribbled at the bottom of Christesen’s letter: ‘Clem would rather say ‘no’ than ‘yes’, because if he says ‘no’ he can then agonise over the reasons at length and be sure someone will put the letter in some archive’.<sup>47</sup> Sure enough, in this particular letter Christesen did indeed detail his reasons at length, and of course Murray-Smith dutifully filed it away in his archive; one day I came across it in the State Library of Victoria,<sup>48</sup> and thus Christesen’s eye to his own legacy was in some small way vindicated. Christesen’s

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<sup>44</sup> John Tregenza, *Australian Little Magazines 1923–1954: their role in forming and reflecting literary trends*, Adelaide: Libraries Board of South Australia, 1964, pp. 1–2.

<sup>45</sup> Lynne Strahan (citing in part Reed Whitemore, *Little Magazines*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963, p. 32), *Just City and the Mirrors*, p. 2.

<sup>46</sup> John Tregenza, *Australian Little Magazines*, p. 2.

<sup>47</sup> Stephen Murray-Smith, notes dated 29/9/1976 on letter from C.B. Christesen, 23/9/1976, Stephen Murray-Smith Papers, Box 166.

<sup>48</sup> 27/6/2013.

voluminous correspondence was, it would seem, designed to a large degree with posterity in mind.

Phillips put it thus:

The cultural historian of the future will be anxious to exercise his imaginative, interpretive powers on this period, to try to chart the invisible tidal currents that underrun it, to understand the real meaning of its germinations. In that interpretive task what single source of material will he find, to help him understand, more rich than the files of *Meanjin*?<sup>49</sup>

From the late-forties Christesen kept copies of all the letters he sent, as well as those received, and this adds to the sense, when riffling through the 363 boxes in his editorship's archive, that this is his great literary achievement. It is a bit unfair of Murray-Smith to disparage Christesen's eye to posterity, for by annotating his friend's letter and filing it away in his own extensive archive (an even more gigantic 470 boxes and 83 metres long) the *Overland* editor not only took part willingly in the literary game at play, but no doubt had his own archival memory in mind. Everyone played the game. Manning Clark deposited missives to his future biographer throughout his (once again) not insubstantial archive (196 boxes and 27.44 metres).<sup>50</sup> Whilst interviewing for his biography of Clark, McKenna observed how interviewees' reaction to questions was often to cry: 'let me consult my Manning Clark file!' Archived memories are presented 'gift-wrapped' to the researcher, 'framed with the symmetry of narrative'.<sup>51</sup> One box in the manuscripts collection at the University of Melbourne's Baillieu Library is dedicated to the creation of the *Meanjin* Archive, and attests to Christesen's close and dogged interest in the curation of his legacy.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> A.A. Phillips, address at *Meanjin*'s twenty-first anniversary dinner, 11/12/1961, quoted in C.B. Christesen, 'The twenty-one lives of *Meanjin Quarterly*', *The Texas Quarterly*, footnote 12, p. 93.

<sup>50</sup> Mark McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity*, p. 33.

<sup>51</sup> Mark McKenna, 'After Manning Clark: a biographer's postscript', *Meanjin*, vol. 72, no. 2, Winter 2013, p. 91.

<sup>52</sup> C.B. Christesen Archive 1974–1988, University of Melbourne Archives, Baillieu Library, 2010.0008, Box 47. The close interest taken by Christesen in his own archive is not dissimilar to that taken by Manning Clark in his, described by McKenna in *An Eye for Eternity*, pp. 25–41.

The Christesen archive is nothing if not testament to his unflagging energy, even as he bemoaned the ‘psychological damage’ wrought by an unfeeling population which seemingly held his work and ‘national contribution’ at ‘such a low discount’.<sup>53</sup> Murray-Smith understood why Christesen might be ‘depressed’ by ‘examples of bitchiness, apathy, intrigue and dullness of understanding’, but he stressed that ‘I do feel a great and abiding strength and commonwealth about me, even if things are, at a specific time and place, crook’.<sup>54</sup> Once again Christesen’s correspondent provides him with the validation, even love, he craved. To be so clearly a central part of this ‘great commonwealth’ was what he wanted to be reminded of, continually; in fact, *Meanjin* is the best possible proof of its existence. It can be seen in his relationship with émigré Hungarian-Jewish writer David Martin, a figure who seems to have shared many of his traits and foibles. Correspondence between the two began in 1951, a short time after Martin arrived in Australia, and he, like so many others, was on the receiving end of Christesen’s angst. As usual, Christesen deplored his own skills as a communicator:

The problem is communication! I wish I could do more, that I knew more, that I had greater literary talent. I grouse about the place, shaking my head in an attempt to dispel the fog: like someone drugged, in a cage. No longer can I discuss things with my associates as I was once able to do. I meet fewer and fewer people on a genuinely friendly basis. We seem to be living in different worlds. An air of unreality seems to surround even commonplace discussions.<sup>55</sup>

Martin showed sympathy for Christesen’s melancholic sensibility in a way few others did: he said that he himself had ‘never been more testy and difficult’, that he found it ‘increasingly hard to talk to people’. By way of mitigation, he offered the ‘nervous pressure of the (Cold War) period, to which we highly strung types react more strongly than others’. This particular exchange of letters had been set off

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<sup>53</sup> C.B. Christesen to Stephen Murray-Smith, 23/6/1955, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 240.

<sup>54</sup> Stephen Murray-Smith to C.B. Christesen, 20/6/1955, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 240.

<sup>55</sup> C.B. Christesen to David Martin, 25/5/1954, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 227.



by an attack by A.D. Hope on Martin's supposed communist sympathies. 'Lots of people at the moment', said Martin, 'feel they must hold themselves in, cannot expand, let go, be themselves – and it's hard to blame them'.<sup>56</sup> Martin's views on Vance Palmer seemed to chime with Christesen's: 'I can't talk to Vance these days', he said, 'I almost prefer Hope's attack to his well-balanced caution'. Martin felt that in the narrow world of Australian letters (everyone 'knows each other too well; after a while one gets trench fever') the caution exercised by Palmer prevailed, and as a result writers' voices were stifled. He saw Christesen as the man to rectify this situation, and he was moved, like so many others, to deliver a pep talk to his friend: 'for heaven's sake DON'T allow things to get you down – don't give any bastard the satisfaction! Considering all the difficulties of time and place, we are managing pretty well all round', he said, reassuring Christesen that '*Meanjin* is going as strong as ever, our humanistic wing is developing, young writers getting into their stride are being first published by you. There's a price to pay, but so far it has been well worth paying, don't you agree?'<sup>57</sup>

Martin, though, shared his friend's insecurities. We see him castigating himself for not helping Christesen out more, or downplaying his own credentials as an intellectual.<sup>58</sup> In 1960 the two men had an argument, seemingly on an occasion when Martin dropped by the *Meanjin* offices. Christesen accused Martin of over-praising his own work and openly wondered whether this was because of a lack of confidence. With some cruelty, he pinpointed Martin's neediness, but in identifying this, he was also hitting on the thing most needful for all Australian writers: the craving for encouragement.

I can sympathise entirely with your literary frustrations – and I for one genuinely try to do something to relieve them. We can all do with a spot of encouragement, the lack of which is the most depressing feature of the literary scene here.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> David Martin to C.B. Christesen, 27/5/1954, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 227.

<sup>57</sup> David Martin to C.B. Christesen, 27/5/1954; emphasis Martin's.

<sup>58</sup> David Martin to C.B. Christesen, 16/6/1962 & 18/6/1969, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 227.

<sup>59</sup> C.B. Christesen to David Martin, 26/1/1960, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 227.

His honesty must have stung Martin and he soothed the wound by subsequently publishing a special issue on his friend, who thanked him profusely for this ‘landmark in my work here in Australia’.<sup>60</sup> Once more we can see that despite the combative, fractious relationships with his writers, Christesen still supported them as much as he could, and his magazine was vital in providing them with the ‘landmarks’ they needed to carve out reputations.

Australian writers and intellectuals understood Christesen’s importance. With *Meanjin*’s funding once again threatened, Smith defended the magazine at a 1960 University of Melbourne Arts Faculty meeting, describing it as ‘the greatest literary journal this country has produced’; invaluable for the maintenance of high literary standards and never shirking ‘deliberate involvement in controversial issues’.<sup>61</sup> Christesen’s editorialising, his volleys of strident letters and abrasive personality, served to create a milieu of action, of making things happen – or, at least, *trying* to make things happen – in the world of Australian letters. Even as he bemoaned literary standards and lambasted the prevailing atmosphere, Christesen refused to accept ‘the situation of the Australian writer’ as a given. Emerging from the fifties his cultural optimism seemed once more to be waxing, as he declared his ‘firm’ conviction that a ‘major cultural breakthrough is pending’.<sup>62</sup> Pressing the government into action, he believed, would make this happen, as we shall now see.

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<sup>60</sup> David Martin to C.B. Christesen, 17/5/1961, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 227.

<sup>61</sup> Bernard Smith, draft of comments at University of Melbourne Arts Faculty meeting, 4/6/1960, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 306.

<sup>62</sup> C.B. Christesen to Bernard Smith, 5/12/1961, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 306.

iii) 'Starve the vanguard!': Battles and campaigns

Christesen's cultural outlook was shaped by the political situations that prevailed at any given time.<sup>63</sup> Phillips drew attention to the 'personal politics' – 'naïve' and 'crotchety', he said – informing *Meanjin*, nevertheless maintaining that they added to the 'democratic impulse' of the magazine, its 'flavour' and 'individuality'.<sup>64</sup> The political and cultural scenes were closely linked in Christesen's mind, the 'debased' culture of comics stemming from the debased politics of the Menzies age.<sup>65</sup> Philistinism was associated with political conditions in a rapidly evolving consumer society rejected by *Meanjin*.<sup>66</sup> The magazine was part of an intellectual tradition in which, according to Docker, 'literature steps in to preserve and develop humanity's universal "natural" values against the contingencies and false values of industrial, mass society'.<sup>67</sup> Christesen believed, says Campisi, in the 'social importance and function of art and literature';<sup>68</sup> *Meanjin*'s stated aim of 'the promotion of a national culture' chiming with this.<sup>69</sup> Cultural nationalism was inherently political.

Christesen saw the war as a chance for 'the national culture to be revitalised'.<sup>70</sup> In 1943, commemorating Joseph Furphy, he hoped for contributors to 'accept the challenge of our Australian environment, endeavour to interpret today's imagination and thought in prose and verse, reveal awareness of Australia's position in world affairs', and emphasise the development of a 'strong and virile national literature, with all its significant marks of "difference"'.<sup>71</sup> This emphasis on virility or masculinity was not confined to Australia – it was itself an adaptation of the English intellectual tradition which,

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<sup>63</sup> Susan McKernan says that he 'responded to most political events by considering their effects on Australian culture' and 'saw political and social changes to Australian life as directly influencing the writer'; *A Question of Commitment*, p. 8.

<sup>64</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'Tribute to *Meanjin*', p. 7. Christesen, needless to say, took issue, believing Phillips was casting aspersions on his knowledge of political affairs: 'All I can say by way of defence is that I have been a close student of political science and of international affairs for some twenty years'; before adding sarcastically that he may well be 'so bloody dumb that I haven't yet gained a clue'. C.B. Christesen to A.A. Phillips, 29/10/1956, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 263.

<sup>65</sup> Christesen refers to 'debased comics' in a letter to Vance Palmer of 28/11/1958, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 259.

<sup>66</sup> See: Dale Campisi, 'Little magazines, great divides', *Meanjin*, vol. 63, no. 1, March 2004, p. 159.

<sup>67</sup> John Docker, *Australian Cultural Elites*, p. 87.

<sup>68</sup> Dale Campisi, 'Little magazines, great divides', p. 159.

<sup>69</sup> From an early *Meanjin* covering note, sent out to potentially interested parties/subscribers, for example the Mitchell Library, Sydney, 1940/1. One of the earliest issues was the 'Nationality Number', vol. 1, no. 6, Summer 1941.

<sup>70</sup> Susan McKernan, *A Question of Commitment*, p. 8.

<sup>71</sup> C.B. Christesen, 'Note to contributors', *Meanjin*, vol. 2, no. 3, Spring 1943.

argues John Carey, constructed modernism as a deliberate riposte to popular culture, an overtly male, obtuse iteration of culture designed to exclude the masses.<sup>72</sup> Dixon notes the ‘international trend’ to which ‘Inky’ Stephensen, and now Christesen, were subscribing: concerned with ‘mediocrity, salesmanship and advertising’, along with the influence of America, their objective was a High culture, removed from the taint of the masses and their ‘ubiquitous overseas culture-stuff’, as Stephensen termed it.<sup>73</sup>

*Meanjin*’s ‘Crisis Issue’ of March 1942 saw Christesen associating the sudden threat of Japanese invasion with a chance to enter ‘intellectual battlefields’ and ‘cut away from that capitalistic commercialism which is strangling cultural life’.<sup>74</sup> Esther Levy, reviewing Christesen’s 1949 anthology *Australian Heritage*, recalled the ‘limbo of 1942’: ‘lying awake blinking at a roving searchlight’; terrified of ‘a quite conceivable Asiatic blitz’; wondering if ‘those who came after’ would ‘be able to reconstruct our landscape and the way of life of the people who once had their roots here’. Such a question haunted the cultural nationalists, driving Christesen’s ‘credo’ (as Levy termed it): to ‘re-think’ Australia.<sup>75</sup> Continuing the warlike theme, Vance Palmer, in his centrepiece article ‘Battle’ (Tregenza calls it ‘perhaps the most memorable piece of writing to appear in an Australian little magazine’),<sup>76</sup> lamented the lack of tangible Australian culture worth defending – ‘no monuments to speak of, no dreams in stone, no Guernicas, no sacred places’. He wondered how many writers or artists had ‘penetrated the soil with their love and imagination’. Rather, ‘the land has been something to exploit, to tear a living out from and then sell at a profit’, and there was very little in Australia to ‘show the presence of a people with a common purpose or a rich sense of life’. ‘This is the Australia we are called upon to save’, he said. He saw the war and the

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<sup>72</sup> John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880–1939*, London: Faber & Faber, 1992. For more discussion of Carey’s theory in relation to Australian intellectuals, in particular Manning Clark, see Chapter 4.

<sup>73</sup> Robert Dixon, ‘Australian fiction and the world republic of letters, 1890–1950’, in *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature*, pp. 239–40. Dixon cites Stephensen, *The Foundations of Australian Culture*, p. 105.

<sup>74</sup> C.B. Christesen, ‘War on the intellectual front’, *Meanjin*, vol. 1, no. 8, March 1942, p. 3. Colin Clark’s essay ‘The commercialisation of cultural life’ was also in this issue, pp. 7–9.

<sup>75</sup> Esther Levy, review of C.B. Christesen’s *Australian Heritage: A Prose Anthology* and William Carlos Williams’ *In the American Grain*, *Meanjin*, vol. 8, no. 4, Summer 1949, pp. 247–9.

<sup>76</sup> John Tregenza, *Australian Little Magazines*, p. 56.

impending threat to the nation as the chance for Australia to create its own ‘dreams in stone’ and ‘sacred places’.<sup>77</sup>

Elsewhere in the issue, Colin Clark extended the theme of ‘the commercialisation of cultural life’, while J.V. Duhig apocalyptically contemplated the alternative to an intellectual life: a ‘somnambulism and slow death’, in which ‘we should be doomed to a death all the more terrible because our bodies would continue alive’.<sup>78</sup> John K. Ewers, describing lectures on Australian literature at the University of Western Australia, reported finding his students expressing surprise at the existence of ‘such a wide field’, feeling that ‘somehow they had been cheated of an important part of their literary heritage’.<sup>79</sup> This lack of knowledge or understanding of Australian culture was, throughout the number, associated with a lack of meaning in the idea of Australia: without a profound culture, what was the point of defending the nation? Stephen Alomes suggests Australian soldiers had indeed had their interest in their own culture and identity piqued by the war: as the traditionally Anglophone ABC was told to push an ‘Australia first message’, the troops were moved to ‘discover Australia’s past and present’, read Australian books and ‘explore Australian life’.<sup>80</sup> The sense that war was a catalyst for nationalist awakening was seemingly strong.

Some accounts of the war years, by contrast, are permeated with a sense of futility and ennui. Historians have noted this,<sup>81</sup> and it is also apparent in personal accounts. The optimism prevalent in the first volume of Donald Horne’s memoirs, for example, gives way to a pervading sense of lassitude in the second, as Australia’s war meanders towards its end.<sup>82</sup> But for most of the Australian intelligentsia it seemed to have the galvanizing effect depicted by Christesen. In 1946 Max Harris described the ‘boom’

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<sup>77</sup> Vance Palmer, ‘Battle’, *Meanjin*, vol. 1, no. 8, March 1942, pp. 5/6.

<sup>78</sup> Colin Clark, ‘The Commercialisation of Cultural Life’ and J.V. Duhig, ‘Culture and the Crisis’, *Meanjin*, vol. 1, no. 8, March 1942, pp. 7–9/15.

<sup>79</sup> J.K. Ewers, ‘The Audience is Australia’, *Meanjin*, vol. 1, no. 8, March 1942, p. 33.

<sup>80</sup> Stephen Alomes, *A Nation at Last? The Changing Character of Australian Nationalism 1880–1988*, North Ryde, NSW: Angus & Robertson, 1988, pp. 123/5.

<sup>81</sup> See Max Hastings’ account of Australia’s Pacific War: ‘Australians: ‘Bludging’ and ‘Mopping Up’’, in *Nemesis: The Battle for Japan, 1944–45*, London: Harper Perennial, 2007, pp. 363–72.

<sup>82</sup> Horne’s autobiographical writings are discussed in Chapter 8.

in cultural activities during the war years, as 'National Galleries showed more activity than ever before, book shops showed records in all departments, and hope glimmered for the poet and the editors of the literary magazines'. But the post-war years were, by contrast, the 'Faded Years': 'those days are unfortunately now gone', he said, detailing the financial straits of bookshops, printers and of course literary magazines, as his own (*Angry Penguins Broadsheet*) went bust.<sup>83</sup>

Nevertheless, as late as 1949 Christesen maintained some of his cultural optimism, largely derived from the fact that a Labor government was still in power. He wrote that Australia was 'on the threshold of a new national experience', and that 'few 'Western' people face the future with such confidence'. He noted with satisfaction that 'the Left is optimistic, the Right pessimistic'.<sup>84</sup> By 1951, however, any optimism had leached away. Christesen, like Harris, looked back with nostalgia for a time he had hoped would herald a transformative post-war reconstruction. Bitterly chafing against the new Liberal government and the crueling of his earlier optimism, Christesen, in a pugnacious 1951 editorial, said that 'even today, those early numbers (of *Meanjin*) make stimulating reading': the 'Crisis Number' had been a 'fairly accurate reflection of what people were thinking and feeling during those bowel-twisting years'; 'no other literary journal' had strived in the same way 'to articulate the mood of our thinkers and dreamers':

There was a quickened mental alertness, a heightened consciousness, a fresh hope for the nation's future. The promise of a cultural renaissance surpassing that of the 80s and 90s was tremendously exciting to some of us.<sup>85</sup>

Renewed battle cries such as these betrayed the desperation, in the eyes of Christesen and his allies, of the situation. Alomes notes that whilst the forties witnessed the birth of a powerful nationalism,

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<sup>83</sup> Max Harris (cited by John Tregenza) writing in an editorial in the penultimate edition of *Angry Penguins Broadsheet* (July 1946) and then in 'The Faded Years', *Directions*, 1952. Tregenza records a 'marked slump' in Australian little magazines in the post-war years; *Australian Little Magazines*, pp. 76/9.

<sup>84</sup> C.B. Christesen, 'The Author in Australia', proofs (for publication in *The Author, Playwright and Composer*, London), undated (circa 1948/9), Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 73.

<sup>85</sup> C.B. Christesen, 'The Uneasy Chair: The Wound as the Bow', pp. 4/83–91.

it merely ‘bloomed like desert flowers after rain’, fading ‘as dramatically as it had proliferated’; the nationalist aspirations of the war era were replaced, in the Menzies years, by an ‘orgy of Britishness’, evident in the incredible popularity of the Queen’s visit in 1954.<sup>86</sup> The cultural flowering had not materialised; the ‘national idea’ had been nothing more than adumbrated – confidence in an ‘Australian Tradition’ was still a distant prospect.

Christesen alluded to the Menzies government’s attempts to ban the CPA, declaring that the ‘traumatic shock’ suffered by ‘our writers’ had made them ‘inarticulate’.<sup>87</sup> John McLaren attests to the political hounding of Christesen, referring to an ASIO report which classified him as a ‘Communist sympathiser’ with ‘a long record of association’ with Communist front organizations.<sup>88</sup> The Commonwealth Literary Fund (CLF) had given *Meanjin* an emergency grant in 1946, but withheld funds in 1948 and 49 due to suspicion of communist sympathies.<sup>89</sup> Judith Armstrong describes how Christesen and his wife Nina became caught up in the Royal Commission on Espionage which followed the Petrov Affair of 1954: under questioning, Petrov mentioned their names. The Commission, says Armstrong, ‘morally exonerated’ the Christesens; they were guilty ‘only of being classed as intellectuals and writers, who were automatically under suspicion’.<sup>90</sup>

The pressures were very real, but Christesen predicted that soon ‘a fresh impetus will become evident, as the political situation develops’: writers will, he hoped, ‘use the wound as the bow’.<sup>91</sup> He took this term from an Edmund Wilson essay on the Sophocles play *Philoctetes*, in which the American critic seemed to equate the creation of great art with great suffering. The protagonist, marooned by his fellow Greeks on the way to Troy having suffered a terrible wound to his foot, which would not heal and smelt so terrible that others could not bear to be near him, nevertheless possessed a great gift which, it

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<sup>86</sup> Stephen Alomes, *A Nation at Last*, pp. 133/5.

<sup>87</sup> C.B. Christesen, ‘The wound as the bow’, p. 91.

<sup>88</sup> John McLaren, *Writing in Hope and Fear*, p. 28. Don Watson describes the association of philistinism with anti-communism; *Brian Fitzpatrick: A Radical Life*, p. xx.

<sup>89</sup> Lynne Strahan, *Just City and The Mirrors*, p. 3.

<sup>90</sup> Judith Armstrong, *The Christesen Romance*, Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1996, pp. 105–10.

<sup>91</sup> C.B. Christesen, ‘The wound as the Bow’, p. 91.

transpired, was needed by the Greeks if they were to defeat the Trojans: a magical bow. Neoptolemus, the son of Heracles, was sent to bring the spurned Philoctetes back into the Greek fold, eventually winning his trust (despite the presence of the conniving Odysseus) and doing just that. 'In taking the risk to his cause which is involved in the recognition of his common humanity with the sick man' and 'refusing to break his word', argues Wilson, Neoptolemus 'dissolves Philoctetes' stubbornness, and thus cures him and sets him free, and saves the campaign as well'.<sup>92</sup> Janet Groth writes that critics at the time mistook Wilson's main message as being the connection between art and neurosis: an interpretation which would seem to suit the angst-ridden Christesen. But it has since been argued that Wilson was in reality advocating the role of the critic. The key figure in the play is not the wounded bowman himself, but the man sent to collect him. Neoptolemus is the 'archetypal critic', while Philoctetes is the 'archetypal artist', and the sensitivity of the former means he alone can understand the situation of the latter – Neoptolemus feels sympathy for Philoctetes' predicament and admiration for his courage and pride.<sup>93</sup> Wilson, it transpires, was a critic writing a paean to the role of the critic – the person most equipped to understand, and hence promulgate, the truth and beauty of great art. The ideal critic is required to locate the ideal in art. Hence (returning this discussion to the context of 1950s Australia) the importance of *Meanjin*: its problems were Australian literature's problems; but its vision was also the vision that could transform the nation. Twisting Wilson's title to his own ends, Christesen idealised the suffering of the Australian artist (an archetypal figure, of course) and argued that it could be used, as a weapon no less, to create a new conception of Australia. In these high hopes, nearly a decade after the seeming peak represented by the optimism of the war years, he still exhibited faith.

Christesen's energetic prose in 'The Wound as the Bow' was followed in the next edition of *Meanjin* by Martin: was, he asked, there 'ever such a disillusioning' as that of the post-war years? The 'good and common purpose' seen during the war had crumbled, and now the powers-that-be were trying

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<sup>92</sup> Edmund Wilson, 'Philoctetes: The Wound and the Bow', in *The Wound and the Bow: Seven Studies in Literature*, Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1997 (first published 1941), pp. 241–2.

<sup>93</sup> Janet Groth, 'Introduction', *The Wound and the Bow*, pp. ix–x.



to ‘starve the vanguard’. But ‘the vanguard is not retreating’, he cried, and ‘it must not be permitted to go under’.<sup>94</sup> *Meanjin* continued to employ militaristic language – the ‘vanguard’ must survive, the ‘intellectual front’ must prevail – mirroring that of communism. Exclamation marks – ‘Starve the vanguard!’ – give the rhetoric a hectoring, revolutionary flavour.<sup>95</sup> David Walker has said that Christesen’s tendency was to regard his magazine as a ‘left-liberal canary testing the political atmosphere’, and there were those (Vincent Buckley sending him a 3,000-word letter on the topic) who accused *Meanjin* of pro-communism.<sup>96</sup>

The key to *Meanjin*’s stance in these years of ‘struggle’ was not just that it promoted Australian writers, published new writing, or sought to raise standards, all of which were of course very important; it was also that it actively campaigned for government funding of the arts. In 1948 Vance Palmer reported to his friend a meeting he had had with Prime Minister Chifley to discuss the arts and, he said, to ‘present a first-class case for the literary magazines’.<sup>97</sup> But the meeting was cut short, Chifley was soon deposed, and for the next twenty-three years Christesen chased audiences with Prime Ministers and Leaders of the Opposition in the name of the arts. Phillips had identified the lack of ‘bread and butter’ as a big impediment to the productivity of Australian writers, and he had implored politicians to ‘care about our culture’ and to take an ‘active interest’ in it, because ‘it is the signs of evolving national maturity which most readily awaken national pride’. Writers served, by this reckoning, an essential national purpose: ‘Canberra itself cannot confidently know what it stands for’ until the ‘unacknowledged legislators’ (i.e. writers) have ‘made it manifest’. Here was another powerful statement of the values of cultural

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<sup>94</sup> David Martin, ‘The Uneasy Chair: Starve the Vanguard!’, *Meanjin*, vol. 10, no. 2, Winter 1951, pp. 100/205/207. Martin was responding to a classic piece of Christesen persuasion (11/7/1951): ‘I didn’t necessarily wish you to refer to these problems in your editorial, by the way’, he claimed disingenuously, having told Martin exactly what to say, ‘they were mentioned just in passing’. Naturally, Martin ‘worked in’ the editor’s suggestions (as he said in reply of 2/8/1951; both letters in Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 227).

<sup>95</sup> Note also the subtitle of Strahan’s book on Christesen and his magazine: ‘the intellectual front’, the term taken from Christesen’s article in the 1942 ‘Crisis Issue’, ‘War on the intellectual front’, and revisited in ‘The Wound as the Bow’.

<sup>96</sup> David Walker, review of Jenny Lee, Philip Mead and Gerald Murnane (eds), *The Temperament of Generations: Fifty years of writing in Meanjin*, *Labour History*, no. 62, May 1992, p. 175. Buckley’s letter is cited in this book and review.

<sup>97</sup> Vance Palmer to C.B. Christesen, 23/10/1948, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 259.

nationalism. He demanded the appointment of a ‘director’ to administer a government grant-in-aid for Australian arts and letters:

All we need is the right man, equipped with the necessary freedom of action, and provided with a spoonful from the ocean of taxation – and the superior person who sniffs at our cultural aspirations [i.e. the cultural cringer] might be answered within a generation.<sup>98</sup>

A guide as to what could be achieved, and inspiration for the Australian campaign, was provided by Canada, where in 1949 the government had appointed a Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences. This Commission issued its report, the Massey Report (named for chair Vincent Massey), in 1951, and its recommendations resulted in, for example, the foundation of the National Library of Canada, the creation of the Canada Council for the Arts, federal aid for universities, and conservation of historical sites.<sup>99</sup> *Meanjin* was very interested in the Massey Report. An article appeared in the magazine in 1958, by F.W. Watt, outlining the scope and success of what he called ‘the most extensive and ambitious investigation of national cultural life ever initiated by a democratic government’. It was obvious what had spurred Canada into action: ‘first and foremost to the minds of many readers came overwhelming substantiation of their sense of the cultural poverty of Canada’. The ‘creative artist’s predicament’, said Watt, was put by the report ‘with simplicity and bluntness’: ‘no novelist, poet, short story writer, historian, biographer, or other writer of non-technical books can make even a modestly comfortable living by selling his work in Canada’. The same, said the Massey Report, could be said of composers, painters, sculptors, playwrights, actors, producers and anyone else who might reasonably expect to make a living by their creativity. Not only did the Massey

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<sup>98</sup> A.A. Phillips, ‘Culture and Canberra’, 1946, *The Australian Tradition*, pp. 132–8.

<sup>99</sup> J.D.M. Stewart and Helmut Kallmann, ‘Massey Commission’, 02/07/2006 (last edited 03/04/2015), at <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/massey-commission-emc/>; accessed 13/07/2016.

Report so convincingly diagnose the issue, it also, according to Watt, made note of Canada's own cultural cringe:

It is evident that there are many who... became a little claustrophobic at the phrase 'Canadian culture', and at self-conscious attempts to foster it. It is significant that at least one of the Massey Commission has protested vigorously that her concern was not for 'Canadian culture' but for 'culture in Canada'.<sup>100</sup>

Notwithstanding these misgivings, which always troubled cultural nationalists in both Canada and Australia, in 1958 Christesen was engaged in avid correspondence on the topic of 'inaugurating a national movement for increased public support for the arts in Australia'.<sup>101</sup> As we have seen, theatre in particular had been the foremost recipient of attention on this front, but, as the fifties drew towards their end, *Meanjin* was at the heart of the campaign to see government help of a much broader scope for 'the neglected men of culture'.<sup>102</sup> In 1954 the Australian Humanities Research Council was founded, and a report, *The Humanities in Australia*, followed in 1959. Subsequent to this 'predominantly academic' publication, not one but two further reports arrived in 1961. One of them, a 136-page opus entitled *Report of the Arts Enquiry Committee for South Australia*, professed the aim to focus on 'the needs and concerns of the people as a whole'. It concluded that 'a recognised and valuable Australian spirit now exists in the arts and we believe that this should be nurtured and advanced by the active encouragement of the Commonwealth Government, with financial aid no less than benevolent approval'. Australia's cultural patronage, said the report, 'lags behind' most European countries, not to mention the USA and Canada, but 'the arts in Australia are now sufficiently important to deserve the close attention of a Federal Commission of Enquiry'.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> F.W. Watt, 'Canada legislates for culture', draft manuscript dated 16/10/1958 that appeared as 'Aid for Canadian arts and letters', *Meanjin*, vol. 17, no. 4, Summer 1958, pp. 357–64, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 16.

<sup>101</sup> Letter to C.B. Christesen from 'Ian', 19/11/1958, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 16.

<sup>102</sup> Sydney D. Rubbo (Professor of Bacteriology, University of Melbourne), letter to *The Age* following the death of Vance Palmer, 23/7/1959, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 16.

<sup>103</sup> *Report of the Arts Enquiry Committee for South Australia*, pp. 135/6, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 15.

Calls for such an enquiry would continue through the decade, and they had also been made in the (less verbose, at 26 pages) *Report on the Arts and Letters Enquiry Committee for Victoria*, the year's second such report. This document had begun life with the formation of the Australian Arts Enquiry organisation, set up in 1959 and run out of the National Gallery of Victoria. Letters asking for support had been sent out through the year, and meetings held in the gallery.<sup>104</sup> One person who received this letter but declined to offer assistance was Judith Wright, who said she thought institutions designed to support the writer or the artist became overly politicised, strengthening the conservative and failing to support 'the truly original'.<sup>105</sup> Such criticisms seem somewhat churlish given her reliance on CLF grants in order to produce her family biography, *The Generations of Men*. The writing of that book was one big battle against the indignities typically endured by writers of the era – the book itself, she said, represented a challenge to the 'dominance' of the 'cultural cringe', which stipulated that 'there could be little in Australia to interest an audience brought up on overseas bestsellers'. She was forced to make it more novelistic in her attempts to get it published. The Queensland libraries she relied on were understaffed and poorly resourced: when woefully untrained librarians applied for paid leave to attend a course in Melbourne, horrified state MPs, according to Wright, declared that 'the next thing will be that we'll be asked to subsidise training for garbage men!' In such circumstances, she admitted, the CLF's money kept her going.<sup>106</sup>

In *Meanjin* it was claimed that the Arts and Letters Enquiry Committee was teaming up with the Humanities Research Council to try and organise a meeting with the Prime Minister. The general public 'is unaware of the complex of special problems which confronts the creative artist and limits the production of quality work', said *Meanjin* in relation to the enquiry, and the 'chronic' state of Australian

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<sup>104</sup> Letter signed Robin Boyd, Hector Crawford, Andrew Fabinyi, Eric Westbrook 24/8/1959; another letter 8/5/1959; meetings held 2/8/1959 and 21/10/1959; Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 15.

<sup>105</sup> Judith Wright, draft reply to Boyd, Fabinyi, Westbrook, and Crawford, undated (1959), Judith Wright Papers, Box 28, Folder 211.

<sup>106</sup> Judith Wright, 'The historical biographer in isolation', unpublished manuscript, delivered at Rockhampton seminar 'The writer in isolation', 1978, Judith Wright Papers, Box 32, Folder 240.

literature was one of 'youthful promise' never fulfilled: 'as one surveys the history of our literature during the last half century, one is immediately struck by the singular impotence of its creative spirit'.<sup>107</sup> Phillips wrote the introduction to the 1961 Victorian report, and it was couched in emotional terms: 'what our artists need to hear, and what we need to hear ourselves speak, is a simple and confident declaration: 'We are with you; we really care'.<sup>108</sup> It was a reiteration of the desire to see proper encouragement for Australian writers. He mentioned the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust (AETT), the ABC and the CLF as examples of cultural catalysts, but he said that the assistance from government sources had been 'piecemeal', a term used by Christesen on multiple occasions in this context.<sup>109</sup> Now, Phillips demanded a 'properly constituted enquiry' which, of course, should be 'broadly similar' to Canada's Massey Commission, with a clear nationalist design. The report included testimony from a wide range of intellectuals and artists in support of the cause: Russel Ward, for example, stating that 'Australians concerned with culture have organised too little in the past'.<sup>110</sup> Once again, the cultural nationalists borrowed the terminology of socialism, perhaps one way to ensure the Menzies Government's ambivalence to their cause. There was little action following the two reports of 1961, and it is not clear whether the hoped for meeting with the Prime Minister was effected, though Christesen stated that Menzies rejected the Victorian report as 'untimely'.<sup>111</sup>

Five years later, with a new (albeit still Liberal) Prime Minister in office, there was renewed hope of change, and Christesen's cultural optimism was once more waxing. He drafted a statement, 'Need for an Arts and Letters Enquiry', for the Letters Committee of UNESCO. In it he said that another attempt was being made to persuade the government 'to formulate a national policy of the arts and to establish

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<sup>107</sup> Author unknown, 'Arts and Letters Enquiry', draft article, undated, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 15.

<sup>108</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'The state of the arts in Australia', introduction to *Report of the Arts and Letters Enquiry Committee for Victoria*, 1961, pp. 1–3, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 16.

<sup>109</sup> For another reference to the 'piecemeal' nature of government funding, see C.B. Christesen to W. G. Hayden, 16/5/1966, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 15.

<sup>110</sup> Russel Ward, testimonial, *Report of the Arts and Letters Enquiry Committee for Victoria*, p. 9. Some of the other figures who provided testimonials included: C.R. Badger, Arthur Boyd, Christesen (of course), Robert Hughes, Alan Marshall, Alan McCulloch, K.S. Prichard, Chips Rafferty, Harry Seidler, Patrick White, amongst many others.

<sup>111</sup> C.B. Christesen, 'Need for an Arts and Letters Enquiry', draft of statement prepared for Letters Committee of UNESCO, undated (mid-1966), Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 15.

a statutory body'. On his draft he crossed out the term 'Arts Council' – but something like the Arts Councils of Canada or Britain was, indeed, desired. He quoted the Victorian and South Australian reports at length, made reference to the Massey Commission, and said that, since 1961, the UK, Scandinavia, the Netherlands, France and the USA had all initiated 'massive' arts programmes. Harold Holt did in fact seem interested in revisiting arts policy, and he had recently announced that his government would consider establishing a performing arts council, but Christesen again attacked the 'piecemeal' nature of support, particularly taking umbrage with the government's predilection for focusing support on the performing arts – it had long been intellectuals' grievance that high culture as far as the average Australian (or, Australian politician) was concerned stretched no further than the opera. Christesen made it clear what he envisaged: 'an official enquiry could be conducted by, say, a Senate Select Committee or a Commissioner (as in the case of Canada), and the report tabled for Parliamentary debate'; the result would be a 'semi-governmental instrumentality, with its own charter, adequately financed by Federal funds, and empowered to operate on a national basis'. In this way national culture, which had been 'allowed to lag disgracefully behind the nation's immense material advancement', would be invigorated.<sup>112</sup> It would seem that his hopes were at last being realised, as Holt announced in Parliament the creation of an Australian Council of the Arts.<sup>113</sup>

Christesen, though, was unhappy with Holt's proposal, attacking it for its lack of coherence and for offering 'little' to other arts. Holt's Arts Council, he admitted, was at least the longed for advocate 'in the corridors of power', but he worried that its voice would be weak because of its focus on the performing arts, and that it was not an 'all-embracing artistic body'. He admitted he might appear 'ungrateful', given that 'any government move to increase its support for the arts should be welcomed', but he disparaged Holt's proposals as 'timid' and declared that, whilst 'applause may still come', this

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<sup>112</sup> C.B. Christesen, 'Need for an Arts and Letters Enquiry'.

<sup>113</sup> Statement by Harold Holt in the House of Representatives, 'Cultural Activities', 1/11/1967, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 29. Holt also announced work was to begin on the establishment of a National Gallery.

would only happen if or when the ‘scope’ of the government’s commitment was seen to widen.<sup>114</sup> He also took exception to the appointment of the ‘apparently indispensable’ H. C. ‘Nugget’ Coombs to the Council, whom, as a former Chairman of the AETT, he thought would skew bias further towards the performing arts. The cultural nationalists’ distrust of Coombs had been made clear earlier in 1966 by C.R. Badger, by now Director of the Council for Adult Education, who baulked at the civil servant’s perceived domination of arts funding and his association with (as Badger saw it) the ‘crass philistinism’ and ‘indifference’ of a government ‘perfectly content’ to leave the arts ‘in the hands of anyone interested enough to amuse himself as a patron and able enough to avoid giving trouble’.<sup>115</sup> Christesen sent an urgent telegram to the Leader of the Opposition, Arthur Calwell, imploring him to ‘understand what is happening behind the scenes regarding (the) Coombs proposal for reforming (the) arts council’:

WHAT IS NEEDED IS MAJOR REAPPRAISAL WHOLE REPEAT  
WHOLE CULTURAL SITUATION HERE BY MEANS OFFICIALLY  
SPONSORED ENQUIRY STOP COOMBS MANOEUEVER MUST BE  
RESISTED.<sup>116</sup>

Christesen wrote to Holt himself on the same day, deriding his proposals for not going far enough, and once more urging the formation of a statutory body.<sup>117</sup> Furiously lobbying, his imprecations nevertheless had little impact. Whilst change seemed tantalisingly close on occasion through the sixties, it did not arrive in a way acceptable to the cultural nationalists. It was a frustrating time; this frustration amply reflected in the copiousness of the *Meanjin* editor’s correspondence, a body of work dedicated to the curmudgeonly berating of philistinism, the anguished pleading for funding, the self-pitying pursuit of feuds, and the occasionally optimistic yearning for a better cultural future for Australia.

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<sup>114</sup> C.B. Christesen, ‘A federal arts policy?’, draft, undated (probably 1966), Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 15.

<sup>115</sup> C.R. Badger, ‘Crass philistinism of our Federal Government’, letter to *The Australian*, 21/1/1966, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 15.

<sup>116</sup> C.B. Christesen to Arthur Calwell (telegram), 21/6/1966, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 15.

<sup>117</sup> C.B. Christesen to Harold Holt, 21/6/1966, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 15.

iv) Conclusion: 'A man is not born in his native country for nothing'

It was the Whitlam Government that delivered what Christesen wanted: never before had government subsidisation of the arts been so high.<sup>118</sup> Perhaps the cultural battle had at last been won: the years of unleavened bread were over and now Australia had (to quote Barry McKenzie again) 'culture up to our arseholes'. But, as we have already seen in Chapter 1, and as we shall see again, the next generation showed little deference for those who had come before, and by the seventies cultural nationalist preoccupations had been side-lined. The sense that the debate had moved on and old concerns rendered irrelevant was strong. Christesen, at any rate, seemed to have been beset by nostalgia as early as 1951, penning editorials from his 'uneasy chair' and pining for the exciting times of the Second World War. Strahan contends that by the early-sixties his nostalgia was increasing his 'irritation with the present': 'there was a dismal feeling of having been cheated: for what were these personal rewards in the absence of the thing that really mattered – power and influence in the cultural field beyond being Australia's most highly regarded editor?'<sup>119</sup> But was this really what all the campaigns of the sixties were about? The long documents imploring the government for help, the urgent telegrams to or requests for meetings with Prime Ministers and Leaders of the Opposition, the reports written for UNESCO, the harping on the wonders of the Massey Commission: was all this noise just about taking a place at a high cultural table, becoming the bureaucrat who would oversee the dishing out of the money?

Ultimately, such a verdict seems harsh on Christesen, who might have sought power and influence in a more efficient and effective way than by editing an indigent little magazine (even if Docker is correct in seeing its influence as far outweighing its circulation). In all the letters written to him, it is hard to find any that impugn his motives, even if many show obvious weariness with his cantankerousness and self-pity. It should be noted that Christesen and Strahan had a combustible relationship, with its origins in the period when Strahan worked for Christesen in the late-sixties and

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<sup>118</sup> David Carter and Bridget Griffen-Foley, 'Culture and media', in *The Cambridge History of Australia, Volume 2*, p. 255.

<sup>119</sup> Lynne Strahan, *Just City and the Mirrors*, p. 260.



early-seventies – a point made clear in Christesen’s letters to the University of Melbourne Vice Principal when Strahan was working as an archivist on the *Meanjin* collection; and Strahan makes equally clear in her (unsuccessful) application for the editorship of *Meanjin* in 1981.<sup>120</sup> Christesen probably would have liked to have held the chairmanship of a literary board or some other government body dedicated to the arts, but whether this was what motivated him above all else is open to doubt.

His prime motive was to see a rich Australian culture unembarrassed by what it was and where it came from. David Carter says that ‘the most important shift to which *Meanjin* contributed was a new confidence in talk about an Australian tradition’.<sup>121</sup> This is why Christesen and Phillips were such allies over the years. Christesen named his magazine after the Aboriginal term for the spur of land on which Brisbane was built and said that he was influenced in so doing by Lawrence Durrell’s statement that ‘the important determinant of any culture is the spirit of place’.<sup>122</sup> This was the idea that sustained Christesen and his friends, impelling them on and providing a platform for all their seemingly hopeless campaigns of the fifties and sixties. Patricia Excell, Christesen’s secretary in the fifties, remembered a Dean Howells quotation which appeared in the Winter 1944 number of the magazine: ‘A man is not born in his native country for nothing. I wish I might persuade you’.<sup>123</sup> The indefatigable drive to persuade his fellow Australians thus was surely Clem Christesen’s most important, influential and lasting legacy.

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<sup>120</sup> C.B. Christesen to Ray Marginson, Vice Principal of the University of Melbourne, 24/12/1975 and Lynne Strahan, letter of application for *Meanjin* editorship, 21/11/1981. See also: Lynne Strahan to C.B. Christesen, 18/10/1977: ‘I am sorry if I appear to have offended you... I begin to wonder if I’m offensive like sixteenth century stilton’. All in C.B. Christesen Archive 1974 – 1988, Box 47.

<sup>121</sup> David Carter, ‘Australian literature and its criticism’, in Elizabeth Webby (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 270.

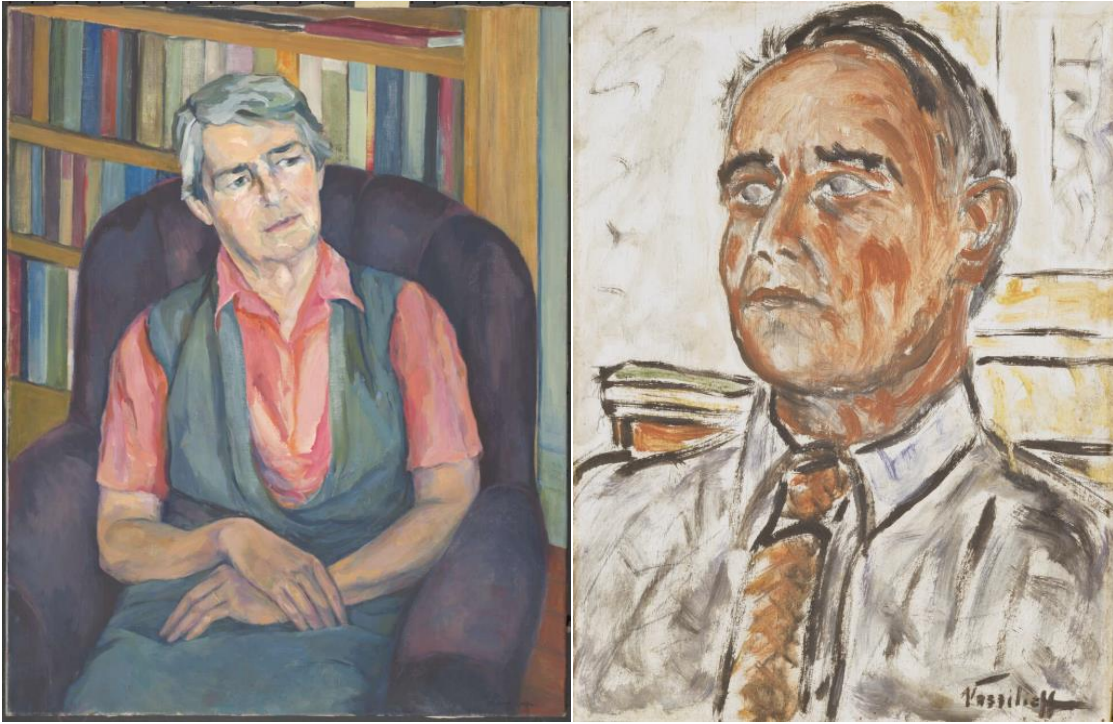
<sup>122</sup> C.B. Christesen, quoted in Patricia Excell, ‘*Meanjin* 1940–1990: Flying without borrowed plumes’, *Antipodes*, vol. 5, no. 1, June 1991, p. 22.

<sup>123</sup> Dean Howells to Stuart Merrill, quoted in *Meanjin*, vol. 3, no. 2, Winter 1944; cited in Patricia Excell, ‘Flying without borrowed plumes’, p. 26.



## CHAPTER 3

### Nettie and Vance Palmer: 'The Watch-Dogs of Australian letters'



Portraits of Nettie Palmer and Vance Palmer, by Lina Bryans (1958) and Danila Vassilieff (1938). 'A unique authority is vouchsafed to them, so that, while there is not an Australian Academy as there is an Académie Française, there are the Palmers.'

#### i) Introduction

Australian cultural nationalism has been called the 'Vance Palmer-*Meanjin* nationalist-internationalist' tradition.<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Serle ought to have added Nettie Palmer's name: he was not alone in allowing her but a subsidiary role to that of her husband, and he was wrong in doing so. It is unsurprising such a cumbersome moniker has not caught on; nevertheless, it illustrates clearly the importance of *Meanjin*, the importance of the Palmers, and the importance they attached to the need for a national literature with international relevance. It was a given that national literature must not be

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Serle, *From Deserts the Prophets Come*, p. 229.

parochial, but this proved fiendishly difficult to accomplish. David Walker puts Vance at the forefront of a group of cultural figures of the 1910s and 20s (he, too, sidelines Nettie) which hoped for a flowering of a democratic Australian culture, inspired by movements such as English utopian socialism and Irish literary nationalism.<sup>2</sup> Here lies the seed of post-war cultural nationalism in the Phillips-Christesen mould. As Nettie spent the 1920s proselytising Australian writing in the meagre literary pages of newspapers, the idea of cultural nationalism was barely nascent; the 1890s not celebrated as they would be in the post-war years, when (as reflected in Vance's *Legend of the Nineties*) they became a fetish, invested with a significance that could serve as the basis for a cultural idea.

However, Walker claims that the 'dream' turned to 'disillusion', and by the sixties, some erstwhile allies and acolytes were questioning Vance and Nettie's 'premature canonisation'.<sup>3</sup> The Palmers themselves harboured their own doubts regarding the robustness, or even worth, of what they had achieved, as Sir Keith Hancock alluded to when he said that they were 'wrong' if 'in their black moods' they questioned their legacy.<sup>4</sup> Phillips and his correspondents might retrospectively claim victory for the 'Palmerites', or 'the faithful' – to use two other terms coined for the cultural nationalists<sup>5</sup> – but whether this victory had in fact been achieved on their terms is not clear at all. The 'exceptional difficulties' of being a writer in Australian society in the first half of the twentieth century were felt particularly by the Palmers – all writers, says Vivian Smith, were 'excessively self-conscious, even anxious' about their roles.<sup>6</sup> As doyens and archetypes, the Palmers were more anxious than most.

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<sup>2</sup> Other figures Walker focusses on are Louis Esson, Frederick Sinclair and Frank Wilmot – referenced in Introduction. Esson is discussed later in this chapter.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Murray-Smith to C.B. Christesen, 19/4/1967, Stephen Murray-Smith Papers, Box 166, File 3. See later in chapter: 'Disillusion'.

<sup>4</sup> Sir Keith Hancock to A.A. Phillips, 22/1/1977, Phillips Family Papers, Box 3385, File 1.

<sup>5</sup> 'Palmerites' coined by Phillips himself, in 'Cultural nationalism in the 40s and 50s: a personal account', undated (1970s); 'the faithful' coined by Ian Mudie, in letter to Nettie Palmer, 24/3/1958, Vance and Nettie Palmer Papers, National Library of Australia, Canberra, MS 1174, Box 12, Folder 109.

<sup>6</sup> Vivian Smith, *Vance and Nettie Palmer*, New York: Twayne Publishers, 1975, pp. 91–2.

The Palmer aspirations illustrate why they were the cornerstone of cultural nationalism, its godmother and godfather: a national culture along the lines of the one W.B. Yeats had helped achieve for Ireland; a professional group of literary figures living the '*vie litteraire*' (Stephen Murray-Smith's term for the life Vance so cherished);<sup>7</sup> the banishment of the amateur stain from Australian culture; an educated audience to consume the Australian cultural product; an appreciation of Australian life and culture around the world. Many of these objectives were ultimately achieved, but not necessarily on the Palmers' terms. The pessimistic terminus of their own dreams is mirrored in the arc of the wider narrative of cultural nationalism. The Palmers, feted in *Meanjin* and celebrated for their nurturing role, ended up the embodiment of the disappointment of so many.

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<sup>7</sup> Stephen Murray-Smith to C.B. Christesen, 19/4/1967.

ii) 'Symbols of Australian literature'

Nettie and Vance Palmer, the cosmopolitan first couple of Australian letters from the 1920s to the 50s, were *the* great promoters of Australian writers and writing in that period. The Victorian Nettie (Janet Gertrude, née Higgins) and Queenslander Vance (Edward Vivian) met in 1909, marrying in London in 1914. Vance spent the years 1910 to 1915 in England, France, Mexico and the USA, and was again abroad with the AIF in 1918/9. The couple returned to Europe in the thirties, spending time in the UK, as well as France and war-torn Spain, where they became involved in the Republican cause. Between those two periods abroad, the couple eked out a living as writers and critics, first in Victoria and then Queensland. According to Serle, their joint income up to 1927 reached barely £6 a week.<sup>8</sup> It was during this time that Nettie became a critic: she has been called 'Australia's finest reviewer of the 1920s' and 'the most important non-academic critic of her period'.<sup>9</sup> Her papers in the National Library of Australia, Canberra, stuffed with articles, clippings, letters, transcripts and pamphlets, attest to her wide-ranging interests and the scope of her activity.

Meanwhile, Christesen told Vance that 'no other living writer has made a more worthwhile contribution to Australian letters'.<sup>10</sup> His followers would come to review this appraisal.<sup>11</sup> However, that was for the future, and when Vance died suddenly in 1959 Christesen busied himself trying to persuade the Prime Minister and other prominent politicians and men of letters of the need for a state funeral in his honour,<sup>12</sup> while the second *Meanjin* issue of 1959, a long-planned tribute to the Palmers, became a

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<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey Serle, 'Palmer, Edward Vivian (Vance) (1885–1959)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/palmer-edward-vivian-vance-7946/text13831>; published in hardcopy 1988, accessed online 1/10/2013.

<sup>9</sup> Humphrey McQueen, *The Black Swan of Trespass: The Emergence of Modernist Painting in Australia to 1944*, Sydney: Sydney Alternative Publishing Cooperative, 1979, p. 15; Vivian Smith, *Vance and Nettie Palmer*, p. 76.

<sup>10</sup> C.B. Christesen to Vance Palmer, 12/7/1955, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 259.

<sup>11</sup> See later in chapter for, in particular, Stephen Murray-Smith's revised analysis of the Palmers after their deaths.

<sup>12</sup> Christesen sent telegrams to Robert Menzies, H.V. Evatt, Canberra-based academic Tom Inglis Moore and others trying to persuade them to hold a state funeral, 16/7/1959, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 259.

valediction for Vance. A flurry of articles praised the pair, crowning Vance ‘Homo Australiensis’.<sup>13</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick lauded ‘the Palmer Pre-eminence’, comparing their influence on the literary scene of post-war Australia to that of Charles and Mary Lamb on literary London of the early nineteenth century, and declaring that ‘a unique authority is vouchsafed to them, so that, while there is not an Australian Academy as there is an Académie Française, there are the Palmers’.<sup>14</sup> Vance’s ‘aid to writers’ was emphasised: the ‘great contribution’ he made to ‘developing the independence of our national literature’, seeing it move from the ‘handicap’ of colonialism to finding its own ‘maturity’. Vance and Nettie achieved this through their ‘wide range of associations with writers over many years’, their home a crucial literary hub.<sup>15</sup>

Drusilla Modjeska says that, taking great ‘pleasure’ in letter-writing (something Vance on the other hand found a ‘chore’) Nettie built up a correspondence with virtually every Australian writer of note.<sup>16</sup> Kathleen Fitzpatrick told Nettie that ‘if you and Vance aren’t the backbone of Australian literature I should like to know just what pretensions to a spinal column it may be said to have’.<sup>17</sup> Phillips said their ‘main aim’ was to ‘nurture the growth of an Australian literature which would have both a sense of the future and a continuity with the Australian past’. He cited Nettie’s own description of herself as ‘the watch-dog of Australian letters’.<sup>18</sup> The Palmers, said Phillips, showed a ‘tireless readiness to welcome any younger Australian who was adventuring into the field of writing’;<sup>19</sup> they were ‘responsive’ to writers at a time when Australians ‘were so indifferent to their own writers’.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Russel Ward; Katharine Susannah Prichard; David Martin; Eleanor Dark; Kathleen Fitzpatrick; Marjorie Barnard; Dymphna Cusack; Leonard Mann; Mary Gilmore; W.A.G. Scott; John Meredith; John S. Manifold; Marcel Aurousseau, ‘Vance Palmer: Homo Australiensis’, *Meanjin*, vol. 18, no. 2, July 1959, pp. 239–63.

<sup>14</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick, ‘The Palmer Pre-eminence’, *Meanjin*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1959, p. 211.

<sup>15</sup> T. Inglis Moore, ‘Vance Palmer’s aid to writers’, *Meanjin*, vol. 18, no. 2, July 1959, pp. 206–10.

<sup>16</sup> Drusilla Modjeska, review of *Dream and Disillusion* by David Walker, *Labour History*, no. 33, November 1977, p. 109. The Palmer Papers ‘Finding Aid’ in the National Library of Australia proudly makes the same point.

<sup>17</sup> Kathleen Fitzpatrick to Nettie Palmer, 19/8/1954, Vance and Nettie Palmer Papers, Box 11, Folder 105. In another letter (27/4/1954, Box 11, Folder 105) she described meeting scions of Henry James’ family in Cambridge, Massachusetts, saying that she felt as at home with them ‘as if I had been visiting Vance and Nettie’.

<sup>18</sup> A.A. Phillips, manuscript of review of Vivian Smith (ed.), *Letters of Vance and Nettie Palmer, 1915–1963*, publication unknown, undated (circa 1977), Phillips Family Papers, Box 3384, Folder 4.

<sup>19</sup> A.A. Phillips, manuscript for speech at the unveiling of a plaque commemorating Vance and Nettie Palmer, Kew Library, Victoria, circa 1976, Phillips Family Papers, Box 3385, Folder 6.

<sup>20</sup> A.A. Phillips, review of *Letters of Vance and Nettie Palmer*.

Nettie, for her part, promoted women writers throughout her life. She had, for example, an important relationship with Henry Handel Richardson, carrying out a long correspondence with her and introducing her work to an Australian audience in 1927 (up to that point Richardson had, says the editor of Richardson's letters to Nettie, been 'known and discussed' in Europe, but not at home).<sup>21</sup> She wrote a series of articles about Richardson's work, and published a book in 1950.<sup>22</sup> Richardson wrote to Nettie that 'I really am very grateful to you both for your appreciation of the Mahony volumes – I read all you write of them with interest – and for your efforts to wake an interest in them in my native land'.<sup>23</sup> This was a sentiment Richardson repeated more than once.<sup>24</sup> Nettie also met Christina Stead, at the Writers' Congress in Paris in 1935. She insisted the two of them share lodgings, and, says Modjeska, her descriptions of the young novelist were 'cheery'. However, Stead did not reciprocate, getting irritated by Nettie and finding her 'snappish' and 'hard to oppose'.<sup>25</sup>

However, through their long careers many Australian writers were happy to share their successes with the Palmers, and give them credit for it. Alan Marshall wrote to Nettie in 1953 that 'it has been my friendship with you and Vance and the great help I have gained from you both over the years that has led me at last to this success. I would not feel comfortable with any tribute to me as a writer that I could not share with you both, for through you both I have earned it'.<sup>26</sup> Phillips, perhaps naturally for a schoolmaster, also saw his role as a nurturing one. The number of writers to whom he gave advice and criticism after close readings of their work – A.D. Hope, James McAuley, Eric Lambert, David Martin and Thomas Shapcott, to name a few – is noticeable: taking his cue from the Palmers, he was a great

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<sup>21</sup> Karl-Johan Rossing (ed.), *Letters of Henry Handel Richardson to Nettie Palmer*, Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells Boktryckeri, 1953, p. 9.

<sup>22</sup> Nettie Palmer, *Henry Handel Richardson, a Study*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1950.

<sup>23</sup> Henry Handel Richardson to Nettie Palmer, 15/12/1927, *Letters of Henry Handel Richardson to Nettie Palmer*, p. 11.

<sup>24</sup> For example, 26/4/1929: 'I can never be grateful enough for all you have done for my books in Australia'; *Letters of Henry Handel Richardson to Nettie Palmer*, p. 12. See also letter of 22/4/1932, p. 25.

<sup>25</sup> Drusilla Modjeska, *Exiles at Home: Australian Women Writers 1925 – 1945*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 2014 (first published 1981), p. 74.

<sup>26</sup> Alan Marshall to Nettie Palmer, 14/11/1953, Vance and Nettie Palmer Papers, Box 11, Folder 103.



encourager.<sup>27</sup> After Phillips had delivered the funeral oration for Vance in 1959, Martin, writing to congratulate him, said that ‘this is a good occasion to remind you that many of us have for you a regard very similar in kind to what we had for Vance’. In another letter ten years later, he described Phillips as ‘perceptive’ and ‘honest’, declaring his ‘generosity is tempered by a commitment to a literary truth’. He again compared Phillips with the Palmers, saying that Nettie ‘used to stress the importance of this kind of encouragement to writers’.<sup>28</sup>

The comparison with the Palmers would no doubt have pleased Phillips. He viewed them as the founders of his own brand of cultural nationalism. Theirs, like his, was a Leavisite ideal: literature must serve a higher purpose, improve the lives of those who came into contact with it. Robert Dixon compares the roles of ‘Inky’ Stephensen and Nettie: both realised Australian literature ‘must be brought actively into being by its advocates’. Stephensen’s famous essay ‘The Foundation of Australian Culture’, says Dixon, was ‘a call to work, a call to create the journals, publish the books, and generate the readership that will bring into being a national literature strong enough to survive internationally as both an import and an export culture’.<sup>29</sup> To assist in the creation of something of objective worth, to make it palatable to international tastes and criticism, to challenge home-grown indifference and disdain – these were the roles of the Australian critic; roles moulded by the Palmers (Nettie in particular) and inherited by Phillips.

The Palmer nurturing of Australian literature was also facilitated through work for cultural groups and literary organisations, in particular the Fellowship of Australian Writers and the CLF.<sup>30</sup> Vance was a travelling salesman for Australian literature: in 1957, for example, he undertook a ‘strenuous’ tour of North Queensland on behalf of the CLF, lecturing, surveying libraries and bookshops, looking at the

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<sup>27</sup> These letters and more in Arthur Angell Phillips, Papers and Correspondence, 1940–71, State Library of Victoria, MS 9160, Box 222.

<sup>28</sup> David Martin to A.A. Phillips, 20/7/1959 and 7/3/1969, Arthur Angell Phillips, Papers and Correspondence, 1940–71, Box 222, Folder 3.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Dixon, ‘Australian fiction and the world republic of letters, 1890 – 1950’, in Peter Pierce (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature*, p. 240.

<sup>30</sup> See: Tom Inglis Moore, ‘Vance Palmer’s aid to writers’, pp. 206–10. Such organisations were the model for Christesen’s continuing campaign for state support of the arts.

teaching of literature in schools, and assessing the organisation of the Queensland Adult Education Department. What he saw did not fill him with optimism, there being a lack of interest in reading and the arts, decreasing as one headed north, and a distrust of education as ‘the Big, Bad Wolf that may attack by adding another year to the school-leaving age’.<sup>31</sup> He concluded that the older generation were past redemption, young people the only hope.<sup>32</sup>

Phillips described the ‘whole range of administrative chores’ undertaken by the Palmers for groups which ‘shared their literary aims’, not to mention the ‘stream’ of articles and broadcasts they produced over decades, dissecting ‘the problems of creating a truly national literature’.<sup>33</sup> Writing to Nettie, he said her friends ought to buy her ‘a special pile of stamps and paper in appreciation of the trouble and thoughtfulness you expend on scratching their vain stomachs’.<sup>34</sup> The help provided writers did not just stretch to the provision of a suitable milieu, but also to the material. In 1952 they provided Kathleen Fitzpatrick’s ex-husband Brian with a loan when he was enduring (particularly) hard times.<sup>35</sup> The small group of writers centred on *Meanjin* were a tight bunch, socialising and holidaying together. Brian’s daughter from his second marriage, Sheila, remembers childhood holidays on the Great Ocean Road with the Palmers, Christesens and Phillips’.<sup>36</sup> For Christesen Vance was something of a totem. This, at any rate, was what he said to the man himself:

As a writer you stand for a great deal in this country. You are in a unique position... Whether you like it or not; whether you aspire to the position or not;

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<sup>31</sup> Report sent by Vance Palmer to Dr Grenfell Price, Commonwealth Literary Fund, Prime Minister’s Department, 30/9/1957, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 259.

<sup>32</sup> Ian Mudie, having attended an Adelaide lecture of Vance’s in which he discussed this North Queensland tour, reported to Nettie that Vance came back to ‘the position that I am afraid all of us of the faithful are being forced into, that the hope lies not in the adult generation but in the one that is growing up’; Ian Mudie to Nettie Palmer, 24/3/1958.

<sup>33</sup> A.A. Phillips, Kew Library speech.

<sup>34</sup> A.A. Phillips to Nettie Palmer, February 1956, Vance and Nettie Palmer Papers, Box 12, Folder 108.

<sup>35</sup> The loan was for £100 ‘to tide over my menaced undertakings’; Brian Fitzpatrick to Vance Palmer, 10/12 & 13/12/1952, Vance and Nettie Palmer Papers, Box 11, Folder 101.

<sup>36</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *My Father’s Daughter: Memories of an Australian childhood*, Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2010, pp. 38/9.

whether you accept the role or not – you are the main individual force in Australian literature, and you stand as a symbol.

Vance felt some ambivalence on this score, as we shall see, but Christesen was adamant that his writings were ‘profoundly meaningful to me as an Australian’: they ‘communicate’.<sup>37</sup> The thing communicated was a cultural understanding that found room for ‘Australianness’ beyond the confines of prevailing archetypes, often anti-intellectual and anti-artistic. Brian Fitzpatrick said the Palmers had ‘lived widely and deeply’, contemplating the country from within and without. When they returned from abroad, they ‘immersed themselves in Australian living, and sought without intermission to make their countrymen eager to cultivate what seemed rewarding in Australian ways’. He insisted this was not an ‘ivory tower habit’, but said that it was their ‘transcendence in this role of *identification* with Australia, which must leave their name illustrious and venerated in our national story’.<sup>38</sup> Russel Ward, meanwhile, said that Vance was ‘the direct heir’ of the original myth-makers of Australia, the bush balladeers of the nineteenth century, ‘and of their urge to interpret to themselves and their fellows the environment which most of us can no longer affect to find strange’. Thus Vance served to show Australians what it was to be Australian: ‘no living writer has done more to show us ourselves’.<sup>39</sup> In so doing he helped Australians be at ease with what they saw: ‘Palmer got rid of our national inferiority complex,’ wrote Frank Dalby Davison, ‘by the difficult though simple-seeming method of dropping it’. By simply taking Australia for granted, ‘life here had a validity and interest equalling life elsewhere’.<sup>40</sup> Phillips had advocated just such a course of action in order to dispel the cringe.

Australia needed a confident and credible literature in order to be a confident and credible nation, and in his affirmation of this Vance achieved what Harry Heseltine calls his ‘significant contribution to

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<sup>37</sup> C.B. Christesen to Vance Palmer, 12/7/1955.

<sup>38</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick, ‘The Palmer Pre-eminence’, pp. 214/5; Fitzpatrick’s emphasis.

<sup>39</sup> Russel Ward, ‘Vance Palmer: Homo Australiensis’, p. 243.

<sup>40</sup> Frank Dalby Davison, ‘Vance Palmer and his writings’, *Meanjin*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1948, p. 12.

cultural nationalism'.<sup>41</sup> 'Your various *Meanjin* articles and editorial notes,' said Christesen to his friend, 'say *exactly* what I feel, and wish I could myself express in similar terms'.<sup>42</sup> His important books were, according to Murray-Smith, 'the embodiment of something about Australia that no historian will ever be able to say as well'.<sup>43</sup> This connection between the contents of books and the external world – the literary canon's influence on public morality and sensibility, its social function – was, according to Vance himself, 'the tendency of the time'.<sup>44</sup> Literature as the great civilizer and improver: to the cultural nationalists, it was not so much about civilising Australia, as creating an Australian *civilisation*.

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<sup>41</sup> Harry Heseltine, *Vance Palmer*, Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1970, p. 200.

<sup>42</sup> C.B. Christesen to Vance Palmer, 12/7/1955; Christesen's emphasis.

<sup>43</sup> Stephen Murray-Smith to C.B. Christesen, 19/4/1967, Stephen Murray-Smith Papers, Box 166, Folder 3. Murray-Smith cites in particular *National Portraits* (1940) and *Legend of the Nineties*.

<sup>44</sup> Vance Palmer, 'The future of Australian literature'.

iii) 'How can we open our ears?'

It was the Palmers' gruelling campaigns on behalf of Australian literature over many decades that led to the grateful encomiums. Writing in 1928, Nettie had declared it 'too easy' to condemn Australian literature. She said that, knowing it 'fairly well' and 'from a variety of angles', she could 'write of it with condemnation in every line'. But many of those who would attack Australian literature, she contended, were lazy, short-sighted cringers to the cult of the import: 'frankly, it is easier to read something that is ready-made and guaranteed 'best imported' than to keep open-eyed for something that is growing up from the life around us'. She drew parallels with America, which had been slow to accept its own literature; a literature, she pointed out, now accepted without question.<sup>45</sup> According to Phillips, in the twenties and thirties Australian literature 'sunk to its lowest ebb', an 'absurd' situation existing in which 'most Australian readers took no notice of Australian writers', assuming 'the books of their own countrymen and women would be of no importance'. In this context, the Palmers' work 'was conceived against a background of Australian pride'. They were devoted 'to the development of an Australian literature which would be nationally characteristic, fecund and read'.<sup>46</sup> Their goal, as Nettie put it, was an authentic voice unapologetically Australian 'in style and attack'.<sup>47</sup>

Such a voice existed in the works of Joseph Furphy. He skewered its antithesis, too: what Australian, for example, would spend his time worrying that 'the Italian government's plan to drain the Campagna was, according to the Church paper, doomed to failure?' Only a 'shiftless creature' such as appeared in *O'Flaherty's Troubles*; a no-hoper lacking engagement with the world around him, empathy for his fellow Australians, or ambition. Furphy's satire, said Vance, was 'sweetened with humour', biting into the colonialism 'that prevented the country from developing in an adult way'. Furphy reviled 'the

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<sup>45</sup> Nettie Palmer, 'Our own books: do we evoke them?', publication unknown, 11/8/1928, Vance and Nettie Palmer Papers, Box 33, Folder 2.

<sup>46</sup> A.A. Phillips, Kew Library speech, 1976.

<sup>47</sup> Nettie Palmer, 'Why authors leave home', *The Bulletin*, 5/8/1926, Vance and Nettie Palmer Papers, Box 33, Folder 1.

tendency to accept romancers from overseas' as 'interpreters of the country'; he hated 'the habit of becoming emotionally involved in affairs at the other end of the earth'. According to Vance, he felt that 'a man's feelings and imagination should be dedicated to the life about him'. Such a life was 'robust' and 'self-contained', part of a country which was 'socialist in economy, democratic in its way of life, and upstanding in its assertion of its rights, including its right to a character of its own'.<sup>48</sup> Phillips compared the 'father-figures' of the Melbourne intellectual scene, the Palmers – 'engaged', 'radical' – with Sydney's equivalent, Norman Lindsay – an aesthete, politically disengaged. The 'Palmerites' were influenced, he said, by radical intellectuals of the European tradition, writers such as Shaw, Wells, Mann, Tolstoy and Ibsen.<sup>49</sup> And they looked to Australian equivalents – Furphy, Lawson – who were thus engaged themselves. The country had to be looked at with 'our own eyes':

Not the most penetrating analysis by Flaubert of the society around Rouen, or the most brilliant description by Meredith of mid-Victorian England, can really take the place of Lawson's story of the drover's wife sitting at midnight in her lonely hut watching for the snake.<sup>50</sup>

Such contentions provided ammunition for those who would attack the cultural nationalists for their lack of ambition and sophistication,<sup>51</sup> but Vance said that while he did not want to 'confuse small things with great', it was nevertheless important to recognise that 'we have a right to our own kind of art and that the emotions and images that affect us most deeply are those that are given a local habitation and a name'. He grew infuriated by the habit of qualifying local writers as 'Australian', with its 'suggestion of

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<sup>48</sup> Vance Palmer, *The Legend of the Nineties*, p. 125. The 'overseas romancer' Furphy took particular exception to was novelist Henry Kingsley, who authored the bestselling *Recollections of Geoffrey Hamlyn* (1859) after a stint in Australia chancing his arm amongst the gold fields, briefly serving as a police trooper, and living off squatters at Langi Willi station near Skipton in the Western Districts of Victoria; A.A. Phillips, 'Kingsley, Henry (1830–1876)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/kingsley-henry-3961/text6247>, published first in hardcopy 1974; accessed online 14/12/2017.

<sup>49</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'Cultural nationalism in the 40s and 50s: a personal account'.

<sup>50</sup> Vance Palmer, manuscript for 'An Australian outlook in our literature: is it desirable?', ABC broadcast, 5/5/1957, Stephen Murray-Smith Papers, Box 191.

<sup>51</sup> We have already seen Donald Horne's views on this in Chapter 1.

amateurishness'. 'Objections to the use of local colour,' he said, 'are oftenest made by people who have an uneasy dislike of the colour of our locality'; but what of *Ulysses*, 'riddled with obscure allusions to the cloistered world of Dublin'?<sup>52</sup>

Nettie also promoted Australian writers with an avidity foreshadowing Phillips' advocacy. She described Lawson's stories as being 'of the loosely-hung type, the plot present but masked'; they had an 'inner delicacy and subtlety of meaning, often covered by a rough surface', containing 'intense human sympathy, pervaded with humour', but also 'a sombre pity'.<sup>53</sup> For Vance, Lawson was 'a sort of Gorky', a voice of the Australian people: the 'very tone and accent of Australia is to be heard in his stories'.<sup>54</sup> He recounted a 1936 conversation he had had with Edward Garnett, the publisher and confidant of D.H. Lawrence, who had befriended Lawson when he was in London at the beginning of the century: 'Lawson's point of view', said Garnett, who had tried to publish him without success, 'is more foreign to English people than if he had been Norwegian'.<sup>55</sup> However, in 1920s Australia, Nettie said, Lawson was only 'accepted as a landmark... not as a signpost for others'.<sup>56</sup> By the fifties, according to Vance, only 'lip-service' was paid to his name, with no serious biography published, 'nor any serious estimate of his work'.<sup>57</sup>

Nettie also remarked on Furphy's and Lawson's 'bush subtlety': comparing it to Conrad's treatment of the sea, she said such a profound understanding of fraternalism ('mateship', of course) was absent in the writing of Henry James, who dealt with 'the complexities' of what was in comparison 'an artificial social code'.<sup>58</sup> The lack of artifice, seen as a profound simplicity, was the Australian voice identified by Phillips. Vance pondered the fate of *Such is Life*, a novel so influential on the nation's literature, but which in thirty

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<sup>52</sup> Vance Palmer, manuscript for 'An Australian outlook in our literature: is it desirable?'

<sup>53</sup> Nettie Palmer, 'Why authors leave home'.

<sup>54</sup> Vance Palmer, 'Civilized Australia', published in *The Listener* (UK), 6/8/1930, Vance and Nettie Palmer Papers, Box 21, Folder 4.

<sup>55</sup> Vance Palmer, review of George Mackaness, *An Annotated Bibliography of Henry Lawson*, Angus & Robertson, 1951, *Meanjin*, vol. 10, no. 3, Spring 1951, p. 311–3.

<sup>56</sup> Nettie Palmer, 'Why authors leave home'.

<sup>57</sup> Vance Palmer, review of *An Annotated Bibliography of Henry Lawson*, p. 313.

<sup>58</sup> Nettie Palmer, 'Such is life', probably published in *Brisbane Courier*, undated (circa early 1930s), Vance and Nettie Palmer Papers, Box 33, Folder 5.

years had barely sold a thousand copies, never to be seen displayed in a bookshop window. It had ‘been allowed to nourish the roots of the country but not to show its head above ground’.<sup>59</sup> Australian literature was sequestered, hidden – an embarrassment. And yet, Furphy’s great work showed there was creative life in the shadows; and such writing, forming a tradition continued by Henry Handel Richardson, could ‘mature us, help us grow up’ – the minds of readers ‘won’t remain as raw as before’.<sup>60</sup>

Three decades later John Berger told Nettie that ‘we must nurture what there is to make it grow bigger’.<sup>61</sup> Nettie’s career was spent doing just this. Overseas literature might be accepted by many Australians, but these same people were ‘in some way dreading the arrival of a literature of our own’. Such attitudes were contemptible: not just ‘slothful’, but ‘provincial in mind’. If, as Walt Whitman had said, ‘to have great poets, we must have great audiences too’, then, said Nettie, ‘our poets will find it difficult to arrive for such an audience of shut ears’. ‘How can we open our ears?’ she wondered.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Vance Palmer, ‘The future of Australian literature’, *The Age*, date unknown (early 1930s), Vance and Nettie Palmer Papers, Box 21, Folder 4.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Vance Palmer, ‘Vance Palmer on the Australian novel’, *All about books*, 19/4/1930, Vance and Nettie Palmer Papers, Box 21, Folder 4. Writers praised by Vance in this article also included Katherine Susannah Prichard and Chester Francis Cobb (‘another experimentalist’), among others.

<sup>61</sup> John Berger to Nettie Palmer, exact date unknown, 1957, Vance and Nettie Palmer Papers, Box 12, Folder 109. Nettie had written to Berger (later famous for his 1972 work of art criticism *Ways of Seeing*) after hearing a broadcast of his on BBC radio. In his reply Berger said he did not know much about Australian art or letters, but made the big claim that ‘I suspect that at present the best writing in the English language is now being produced in your country’. Berger had written on Australian art before, reviewing the 1953 exhibition ‘Twelve Australian painters’, held by the Arts Council at Burlington House, London, for *Meanjin*: ‘As one walked through the gallery one became conscious of a climate, a conditioning, a type of landscape, a quality of light, which seemed specifically Australian’; ‘London exhibition of Australian art’, *Meanjin*, vol. 12, no. 3, 1953, p. 277. Such ideas would later be pursued by Bryan Robertson in his Whitechapel Gallery show of Australian painting in 1961 – see Chapter 7.

<sup>62</sup> Nettie Palmer, ‘Our own books: do we evoke them?’



iv) 'Only what is national in art ever became international'

As with the absence of esteem for home-grown literature, the lack of interest taken by Australians in their own history was something sad, even terrible. Again, the reliance on imported books was telling, and only led to 'shallow and superficial' judgments 'on national questions'.<sup>63</sup> Judith Wright was motivated by such concerns when she came to write *The Generations of Men*, her family history of pioneering squatters.<sup>64</sup> Vance wrote to her on its publication, commending the book in glowing terms.<sup>65</sup> Nettie was a great friend of Wright, and perhaps saw in her something of the vigour of the great figures of the Irish Renaissance, the movement she wished to see emulated in Australia. They had had their own problems in establishing a native voice, but it was through men such as Yeats and George Russell – conscious, said Nettie, of 'the national being' – that the 'integrity of an Irish literature' had been born.<sup>66</sup>

Of central importance was the enabling of people to understand their own environment; to feel comfortable in their Australianness; to forget Home, certainly as something to cling to for emotional security, but to embrace the culture and nature of Australia itself. It could begin with something as simple as an appreciation of Australian flowers. Nettie had always been interested in the local flora. She took umbrage with D.H. Lawrence's assertion that 'flowers don't have much scent in Australia': 'we all know what the matter is', she said – 'it is that hapless 'discovery' made by early settlers... that Australia was antipodean'.<sup>67</sup> The settlers could not cope: reared on a bucolic vision of what the landscape should look like, and faced with the 'weirdness' of Australia, they cowered. Two decades later Bernard Smith said this was what made Australian art so unique, but Judith Wright rejected it as 'Australia's tragedy', arguing for a

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<sup>63</sup> Vance Palmer, 'Vanishing Past', 12/7/1927, probably published in the *Brisbane Courier*, Vance and Nettie Palmer Papers, Box 20, Folder 2. He said: 'It is almost easier to conjure up Elizabethan England from books than early Queensland from the material yet available.'

<sup>64</sup> Judith Wright, *The Generations of Men*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1959.

<sup>65</sup> Vance praised 'the detail, the narrative flow, and the intimacy. Particularly the intimacy'; Vance Palmer to Judith Wright, 16/4/1959, Judith Wright Papers, National Library of Australia, Canberra, MS 5781, Box 31, Folder 230.

<sup>66</sup> Nettie Palmer, 'Our own books: do we evoke them?'

<sup>67</sup> Nettie Palmer, 'Where bright blooms are scentless', undated (circa mid-twenties), probably published in *Brisbane Courier*, Vance and Nettie Palmer Papers, Box 20, Folder 2.

whole new way of seeing.<sup>68</sup> Nettie asserted it was preposterous to contend Australian flowers were scentless: she listed a ‘litany’ of examples, and said that ‘most people could quote their own list from their own neighbourhood. Having done that they will do well to rise and, with all politeness, execrate the person who first said, ‘Australia is a land of scentless flowers.’<sup>69</sup> Vance reckoned Lawrence was ‘too immersed in his own subjective self to spend much time in looking outward at the new phenomena around him’.<sup>70</sup> Galling was the seriousness with which a visiting writer such as Lawrence was taken, at home and abroad – especially when he got it so wrong.<sup>71</sup> Nettie, for one, paid great attention to the world around her. A folder in the Palmer papers is full to the brim of articles she wrote in the 1920s with a zealous focus on Australia, encompassing nature, gardening, walking, wildlife, bushfires, and a great deal else.<sup>72</sup>

The interest in things *Australian* was fired by the example of the Irish. When waiting for demobilisation after the end of the First World War, Vance spent time in Ireland. He talked to George Russell about the importance of ‘soil and climate’ in moulding national character – vaguely organic ideas that would stoke the ire of later commentators.<sup>73</sup> He published articles extolling the democratic character of Irish life and culture, and spent time talking with Australian playwright Louis Esson in London about the need for a national theatre.<sup>74</sup> Dublin’s Abbey Theatre, founded in 1904 by Yeats and others, was something of a fixation for the Palmers: a template of what Australia might achieve.<sup>75</sup> As early as 1917, Nettie was writing about the ‘Irish movement’ of the previous twenty years, extolling the roles of Yeats

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<sup>68</sup> See Chapters 7 and 10 for (much) more. Wright and Nettie were regular correspondents in the fifties. Wright had a great interest in flora, inspired in part by her friend the wildflower painter and environmental activist Kathleen McArthur.

<sup>69</sup> Nettie Palmer, ‘Where bright blooms are scentless’.

<sup>70</sup> Vance Palmer, ‘Literary Visitors’, *The Triad*, December 1927, Vance and Nettie Palmer Papers, Box 20, Folder 3.

<sup>71</sup> See Chapter 8 for discussion of Lawrence and the reverence in which he was held by Australian intellectuals, despite his stay in the country lasting only two months of 1922.

<sup>72</sup> Typical example: Nettie Palmer, ‘Our trees – an appreciation’, date and publication unknown (probably mid- to late-1920s), Vance and Nettie Palmer Papers, Box 20, Folder 4. During the twenties the couple lived in rural areas: firstly, in the Dandenong Ranges, Victoria (1919–25) and then Caloundra on the Queensland Coast (1925–9), which was also where Kathleen McArthur lived.

<sup>73</sup> Smith attacked his rival Paul Haeffliger for such ideas; and McQueen attacked Lawson, Palmer and Ward for their ‘organic’ nationalism. See Chapters 6 and 7.

<sup>74</sup> David Walker, *Dream and disillusion*, p. 119; Vance Palmer articles on Dublin: ‘Dublin days’ and ‘Dublin Nights’, *Fellowship*, March and April 1920; cited by Walker, p. 119.

<sup>75</sup> Nettie Palmer, ‘Irish plays: The Abbey Theatre’, *Brisbane Courier*, date unknown (probably early-1930s), Vance and Nettie Palmer Papers, Box 34, Folder 7a.

and Russell: ‘it is such personalities,’ she said, ‘that guarantee the integrity of the world’, making explicit the connection between national character and international resonance.<sup>76</sup> Such a point was underlined emphatically in 1923 with Yeats’ Nobel Prize, given ‘for his always inspired poetry, which in a highly artistic form gives expression to the spirit of a whole nation’.<sup>77</sup> In 1925 the Abbey became the first state-subsidised theatre in the English-speaking world; an obvious precursor to what the cultural nationalists hoped to achieve.<sup>78</sup>

Nettie wondered why Australia could not have what Ireland had. She was not only interested in the Irish example: ‘characteristically’, said Phillips, she studied Uruguayan writing ‘because it was a colonial literature developing contemporaneously with Australian’.<sup>79</sup> The urge to escape was deeply ingrained in the Australian writer, a fact bemoaned by Nettie, who lamented the exodus of local talent, which served to ‘check’ the ‘genuine native growth’ in evidence (she believed) up to that point.<sup>80</sup> Even if writers did not subscribe to this imperative, it was not for lack of being told. Louis Esson recounted the tale of ‘a visiting artist’ criticising Australian art as ‘too narrow and provincial’, believing that ‘a better state of affairs might be brought about if more of the younger men could get away to the art centres of Europe’. Esson, even though he had been abroad, deplored such drastic measures as having the obvious corollary of ‘soon depriving the country of any artistic talent it might have’. He was vituperative in his condemnation of the visitor’s recommendations, describing them as ‘heretical’:

They would be true only if Australia were some outlying barbaric province  
without any intellectual life, without art, or even the prospect of it, a territory

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<sup>76</sup> Nettie Palmer, ‘Readers and writers’, *The Argus*, 26/1/1917, Vance and Nettie Palmer Papers, Box 20, Box 3.

<sup>77</sup> W.B. Yeats Nobel Prize citation, 1923, [www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1923](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1923): accessed 2/10/2013. Nearly fifty years later Australian literature similarly took its place on the world stage with Patrick White’s own Nobel win – see Chapter 9.

<sup>78</sup> Abbey Theatre website, ‘History’, [www.abbeytheatre.ie/behind\\_the\\_scenes/article/history/](http://www.abbeytheatre.ie/behind_the_scenes/article/history/): accessed 16/9/2013.

<sup>79</sup> A.A. Phillips, manuscript of review of Vivian Smith (ed.), *Letters of Vance and Nettie Palmer, 1915–1963*.

<sup>80</sup> Nettie Palmer, ‘Why authors leave home’.

meant simply for the production of wheat and wool, and not a real country with a definite character of its own.<sup>81</sup>

To help in the development and delineation of this character, writers needed to stay – or return. Esson recounted his years as an aspiring writer in Paris. He met Yeats, ‘gathering his forces together to build up a real Irish literature and drama’, who told him to ‘keep within your own borders’, pointing out that the ancient Greeks, ‘the most perfect artists we have known’, had always done just that.<sup>82</sup> Thus the young Esson began to see his future as lying in Australia, not Europe, helping to create, like Yeats in a similarly small and parochial land, a culture all of Australia’s own. Another Irish writer in Paris, J.M. Synge, told Esson that any young writer ‘who wanted to do anything’ was trying to get out of Paris. The cultural pull of the great centres – Paris, New York, London – could, according to this view, serve to inflict far more damage than help upon an artistic vision. Nettie mentioned Yeats’ encouragement of Esson, saying that the Irish poet himself had ‘regretted that, through spending many of his impressionable youthful years in London, he had ‘begun to forget the true countenance of country life.’ According to Nettie, ‘he welcomed it when he found it in the work of others’. Yeats’ powers of organisation were almost a match for his poetic gifts: when he returned to his homeland in the 1890s, he ‘planned and inaugurated an Irish dramatic movement that was to end in the establishment of the Abbey Theatre itself.’<sup>83</sup> Australia needed such poet-organisers. The likes of Esson had to come home and make something of that home (not Home). He quoted Havelock Ellis with approval: ‘only what is national in art ever became international’.<sup>84</sup> For a cultured man who wanted to make a name for himself in the world of letters, this idea could justify return. It certainly rang true for the Palmers and their followers.

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<sup>81</sup> Louis Esson, ‘Nationality in art’, *The Bulletin*, date unknown (early 1940s), Vance and Nettie Palmer Papers, Box 40, Folder 2.

<sup>82</sup> Louis Esson, ‘Nationality in art’.

<sup>83</sup> Nettie Palmer, ‘Irish plays: The Abbey Theatre’. John Docker notes the influence of the Celtic Twilight and Irish literary nationalism on Vance Palmer and Louis Esson, in *In a Critical Condition*, p. 18.

<sup>84</sup> Louis Esson, ‘Nationality in art’.

v) Dolia Ribush: 'Bringing something living out of the void'

The returning Esson founded the Pioneer Players, his Melbourne theatre company, in 1922. The Palmers were great friends of Esson and his wife Hilda, living next door to them in Emerald, and invested heavily, both materially and intellectually, in the Pioneers.<sup>85</sup> Nettie wrote that the Pioneers, supposedly (according to one academic) the 'Australian Abbey Theatre',<sup>86</sup> involved 'a great sacrifice of energy, leisure and income for all concerned'.<sup>87</sup> However, although a *Bulletin* article of 1927 noted the Pioneers' 'brief blaze of modified glory' as the company pursued its policy of producing 'local raw material', what it 'needed but didn't get' was the support of 'artists, musicians and creators of all kinds'.<sup>88</sup> The lack of a market of reasonable size and stature was bad enough, but when even Melbourne's arts fraternity turned its collective nose up at the Australian cultural product, then it was very difficult for a serious theatre company like the Pioneer Players to gain a foothold, and in 1926, after just four years, the company closed.

There were few theatres putting on Australian works of note in the twenties, and 1929, says John Andrews, saw the number of Melbourne theatres halved from ten to five because of the Wall Street Crash, heralding a 'fifteen year period seen as the lowest ebb in Australian theatrical history'.<sup>89</sup> There were some positives: Betty Roland's important play, *The Touch of Silk*, made its premiere in 1928 in Melbourne, and Katharine Susannah Prichard's radical play *Brumby Innes* won a writing award in 1927, although it was not produced until the 1970s.<sup>90</sup> Another was the work of Dolia Ribush, a Latvian who arrived in Melbourne

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<sup>85</sup> Deborah Jordan, *Nettie Palmer: Search for an Aesthetic*, Melbourne: Department of History, University of Melbourne, 1999, pp. 177–84.

<sup>86</sup> John Andrews, *Melbourne Theatre: 1929–1945: Recession and Response*, MA thesis submitted to the Faculty of Arts, Monash University, 1979, Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library of Victoria, MS 10884, p. 1.

<sup>87</sup> Nettie Palmer, 'Pioneer Players', *Daily Mail*, 11/6/1927, cited in Deborah Jordan, *Nettie Palmer*, pp. 177–84.

<sup>88</sup> 'M.G.S.', 'An Australian National Theatre', *The Bulletin*, 17/3/1927, Vance and Nettie Palmer Papers, Box 20, Folder 1.

<sup>89</sup> John Andrews, *Melbourne Theatre: 1929–1945*, p. 2.

<sup>90</sup> Austlit says that *Brumby Innes* 'did not achieve a promised production with the Melbourne Repertory Theatre [where *A Touch of Silk* was premiered in 1928] although Katharine Susannah Prichard and the director, Gregan McMahon, corresponded about the style and design of the production.' The play eventually saw its premiere, directed by John Smythe, at the Pram Factory in November 1972. Although not produced in 1927, it was the winner of that year's Triad Drama Competition. See: <https://www.austlit.edu.au/austlit/page/C263358>; accessed 16/10/2018.

on Cup Day, 1928. He had a chocolate manufacturing business in Richmond and, in his spare time, put on five productions between 1931 and 1944, the first four being Russian plays and the last the first production of Douglas Stewart's *Ned Kelly*.<sup>91</sup> Ribush, heavily influenced by Stanislavsky's 'Method', was famed for the length of his plays' rehearsal time: gruelling sessions lasting up to seven months, with a refusal to differentiate between major and minor parts and an insistence that the performance of the play was not as important as its gestation. Critics were invited to attend rehearsals, 'to gauge the development of the productions 'over the extended time span'.<sup>92</sup> Phillips, who was business manager for the Ribush Players from 1937 and acted in *Ned Kelly*, said the director never let his actors 'think in terms of audience; they had to think in terms of the bit of human life they were doing'.<sup>93</sup> He recalled going to a country pub with Ribush, the director remarking on the possibilities of the setting, and Andrews notes that this 'proved to be astute: many Australian playwrights had failed to come to grips with the environment', and 'there had been a tendency to portray the vastness of space with a vastness of setting, rather than attempting to convey Australian attitudes in a more localised setting'.<sup>94</sup> By placing his production in a pub, Ribush snagged an Australian sensibility hitherto untapped. It took a newcomer to spot the possibilities. According to Andrews, the success of *Ned Kelly* provided 'a much needed impetus to Australian playwrights', proving that 'an Australian theme could be successfully translated into the dramatic form, and a verse form at that'.<sup>95</sup> Perhaps most impressive (or encouraging) was Ribush's embracing of Australian life, and 'because the theatre was the passion of his life', said Phillips, 'he wanted to see the richness he found in Australian life translated into a play'.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> The production of *Ned Kelly* was the beginning of the long friendship between Stewart and Phillips – first contact being made by the latter when Phillips wrote (24/7/1943) asking permission for Ribush to produce the play: 'we believe... the best play this country has yet produced'; Eighteen letters from Arthur Angell Phillips to Douglas Stewart, 1943–c. 1977, State Library of Victoria, MS 10533, MSB 228.

<sup>92</sup> John Andrews, *Melbourne Theatre: 1929–1945*, p. 61.

<sup>93</sup> A.A. Phillips and Rosa Ribush interview with John Andrews, transcript, 12/3/1979, Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library of Victoria, MSB 331.

<sup>94</sup> John Andrews, *Melbourne Theatre: 1929–1945*, p. 57.

<sup>95</sup> John Andrews, *Melbourne Theatre: 1929–1945*, p. 69.

<sup>96</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'Dolia Ribush and the Australian Theatre', *The Australian Tradition*, p. 123.

Writing in her diary, Nettie Palmer described in gushing prose the experience of attending one of Ribush's rehearsals:

He's not merely a producer, he's a creator, keyed up in every nerve to bring something living out of the void. There's a beautiful intensity in those dark implacable eyes of his as he watches some scene gather momentum... A being that is not himself, but separate, projected by the force of his imagination, the subtlety of his intonations, and imposed on us. Yet he won't let the actors copy his movements, or gestures; no, they must get inside the characters themselves, feel the words they say.<sup>97</sup>

It is easy to see the appeal Ribush held for the likes of the Palmers and Phillips. What enthused Nettie was the seriousness with which he took his work. Although working with amateurs, there was nothing amateurish about Ribush. Phillips said that given the 'raw' and 'inexperienced' casts he had to work with, the standard of Ribush's plays was 'beyond anything Australia had seen'.<sup>98</sup> He mentioned a mid-thirties Melbourne visit by Arthur Haskell, a British dance critic influential in the foundation of the Royal Ballet School, who was persuaded to come to a rehearsal of Ribush's production of Gorky's *The Lower Depths*. Haskell arrived during the rehearsal of a minor street scene, and Ribush 'took the scene over and over and over again for nearly an hour', though it demanded 'only five minutes'.<sup>99</sup> Haskell, in a memoir, described the discipline of Ribush's company as 'exceptional': it was 'the finest amateur performance' he had ever seen, as Ribush 'bullied and sweated' his players 'until they behaved like Gorky's unfortunate Russians, moved like them'.<sup>100</sup> This was not shoddy Australian practice in the 'she'll be right'

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<sup>97</sup> Vivian Smith (ed.), *Nettie Palmer: Her Private Journal 'Fourteen Years', poems, reviews and literary essays*, St. Lucia, Qld.: University of Queensland Press, 1988, p. 245. Nettie's diary was first published by Christesen: *Fourteen Years: Extracts from a Private Journal 1925-1939*, Melbourne: Meanjin Press, 1948.

<sup>98</sup> A.A. Phillips and Rosa Ribush in interview with John Andrews.

<sup>99</sup> A.A. Phillips and Rosa Ribush in interview with John Andrews.

<sup>100</sup> Arthur Haskell, *Dancing around the world*, 1937; cited in John Andrews, *Melbourne Theatre: 1929 - 1945*, pp. 59/60.

mould, but a play done properly, with great artistic integrity. ‘In everything’, said Phillips, ‘he demanded, not that it should be ‘good enough’ – that great Australian fallacy – but that it should be *right*’.<sup>101</sup>

Ribush’s other great service rendered was the artistic atmosphere and community he fostered: ‘the Ribush house became a meeting place for the community of actors that began to develop in Melbourne,’ says Andrews, with big parties held on Sundays, attended by all sorts of artistic types, including visiting ballet companies.<sup>102</sup> Such a community was what the Palmers and Phillips craved, almost as much as good novels and professional plays. Phillips said Ribush never, ‘as so many foreigners do’, disparaged Australia as a ‘young crude country’, unready for proper culture. Rather, he praised Australian life as containing ‘the colour and vitality of drama’, lacking only one thing: ‘why, why will you not *work* (i.e. work hard) in the theatre?’<sup>103</sup>

Ribush died suddenly in 1947, and the national theatre company he aimed to establish, according to his widow Rosa and Phillips, never happened.<sup>104</sup> Rosa said that ‘in two years he would have dropped his factory’ in order to ‘establish his theatre’. Phillips, meanwhile, believed the national theatre so yearned for had nearly materialised: ‘if (Nugget) Coombs had been there at the time I think we would have got it’.<sup>105</sup> But it did not happen, and the air of disillusion again took hold.

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<sup>101</sup> A.A. Phillips, ‘Dolia Ribush and the Australian Theatre’, p. 115; emphasis Phillips’.

<sup>102</sup> John Andrews, *Melbourne Theatre: 1929–1945*, p. 71.

<sup>103</sup> A.A. Phillips, ‘Dolia Ribush and the Australian Theatre’, p. 124; emphasis Phillips’.

<sup>104</sup> Rosa Ribush and Arthur Phillips lived together after the death of Phillips’ wife Mary in 1968.

<sup>105</sup> Rosa Ribush and A.A. Phillips in interview with John Andrews.



vi) Disillusion

Negativity, first apparent as far back as the twenties with the demise of the Pioneer Players, seemed to stick to Vance like a fungus:

It was just hopeless [said Phillips]. They didn't get anywhere at all. I think that in his (Vance's) last years he was pretty disillusioned generally. After all, his own books were pretty coldly received and he just felt they (the Palmers) hadn't got anywhere. They never gave up in the way Esson did. But I think they were pretty disillusioned.<sup>106</sup>

Murray-Smith had similar things to say, by the late sixties questioning the Palmers' pre-eminent position in Australian letters. He suggested two reasons for 'Vance's failure as a considerable creative figure': the mood of pessimism alluded to by Phillips, which Murray-Smith described as a 'subfusc hue' lying over his personality and actions 'like a miasma' from which 'he never broke free'; and the fact that he 'was not a greatly gifted man', if 'deeply attracted to the *vie litteraire*'. Murray-Smith believed Vance had several traits that enabled him to succeed in Australia's literary world: 'rare guts and determination, the right kind of personality, and perhaps nothing much else he could do as well'. But he could take it only so far, and while 'his influence, role, taste, judgment, humanity' were all 'admirable to the highest degree', nevertheless the success 'that really mattered' – 'to be a great writer' – eluded him. He wondered, 'given what we are often told was their selfless and life-long dedication to the life of literature, that their output was not greater'. Nettie's work he dismissed as 'essentially piffling'; Vance's, despite 'unexampled opportunities for reflection, for reading, for talk', 'not much good'; 'most' of his novels 'failures'. Murray-Smith was cruel. He went so far as to suggest that the atmosphere of the Palmer household, 'thick with the vapours', contributed to the mental health problems suffered by the Palmers' daughters, Helen and

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<sup>106</sup> A.A. Phillips and Rosa Ribush in interview with John Andrews.

Aileen, whom he described as ‘psychological messes’.<sup>107</sup> Writer Jean Campbell had similar things to say: ‘I think Nettie’s shutting away of her personal life was possibly the result of some trauma... I never felt she and Vance were really very close... Nor would their daughters’ personalities – however gifted (they) may be – seem to be the result of a warm, intensely interwoven family background’.<sup>108</sup> Christesen, writing to Vance, reproached him for lacking ‘passion’;<sup>109</sup> Murray-Smith wondered why the Palmers ‘subdued their personalities’, adopting ‘an almost mannered reticence in their work’. He suggested that Vance was scarred by seeing his brother, following a ‘tragic love affair’, go insane and commit suicide. As a result he learnt ‘never to allow his emotions to take control’.<sup>110</sup>

Such barbs from friends and allies seem unforgiving, even cheap. Phillips was less harsh on the Palmers at that time, and came in for some criticism as a result. After a 1965 event at which he and Murray-Smith spoke on the topic of Vance, Jean Campbell wrote to Murray-Smith saying that ‘on such occasions’ Phillips ‘allows himself to become almost embarrassingly emotional and not only speaks with “piety” on his subject but almost with a religious fervour like a literary Billy Graham selling God!’<sup>111</sup> Phillips conceded Vance’s failings as a creative writer, but said he ‘presented and intelligently developed important perceptions, and thus made a contribution of incalculable value to the maturing of the Australian community’s self-explorations’.<sup>112</sup> Murray-Smith elaborated on this theme in the eighties, when he said that Vance

finished his life with the fear of failure hanging over him. Like so many creative people, he was not content with, and could not recognise, the things he did best.

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<sup>107</sup> Stephen Murray-Smith to C.B. Christesen, 19/4/1967, Stephen Murray-Smith Papers, Box 166, Folder 3.

<sup>108</sup> Jean Campbell to Stephen Murray-Smith, 2/3/1965, Stephen Murray-Smith Papers, Box 191, Folder 4.

<sup>109</sup> C.B. Christesen to Vance Palmer, 12/7/1955, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 259.

<sup>110</sup> Stephen Murray-Smith, speech opening Vance and Nettie Palmer exhibition, State Library of Victoria, 19/8/1985, Stephen Murray-Smith Papers, Box 191, Folder 6.

<sup>111</sup> Jean Campbell to Stephen Murray-Smith, 2/3/1965; Campbell says it was Murray-Smith who had first used the word ‘piety’ to describe Phillips’ speech.

<sup>112</sup> A.A. Phillips, manuscript of review of *Vance Palmer*, by Harry Heseltine, publication unknown, 1970, Phillips Family Papers, Box 3386, Folder 3a.

He was a splendid broadcaster, and excellent reviewer... an astute popular historian, a gifted interpreter of cultural moods and movements, a great literary activist... But that was not enough for Vance. As Patrick White wants above all to be a great playwright, so Vance wanted to be a great novelist. His contemporaries saw him as no more than a good journeyman.<sup>113</sup>

For Vance, who dedicated a life to writing, to be dismissed thus was indeed cruel. But the criticisms of Nettie are more unfair. Murray-Smith's appraisal of Nettie was brutal: she 'recognized the agony in Vance', and saw 'as part of her creative role' the maintenance of 'hope' in him 'when there was no hope'. She did not 'sacrifice herself', but, Murray-Smith questionably put it, 'added to her own great stature by understanding the freedom of necessity and seeing this as part of her contribution to the world'. Murray-Smith quoted 'a distinguished woman who knew Nettie intimately', who said that 'unlike many contemporary feminists she did not believe that to be equal to man you had to pull him down'.<sup>114</sup>

Perhaps the fact that this chapter is about both of the Palmers, that Nettie has not been allowed to stand alone, reflects this unfairness towards Nettie – and maybe it is to its detriment. In a similar fashion, Peter Fitzpatrick contends that the reputation of Hilda Esson as a writer and figure of cultural importance has been unfairly overshadowed by that of her husband, Louis: she was 'a casualty of the conventional history, which found her a woman there was no need to remember': 'there are no books about Hilda'. Not only did 'disappointment' (Fitzpatrick's term) seemingly stalk both Essons and Palmers in their pursuit of literary success, but the unfair relegation of the women in the partnerships bound them together, too.<sup>115</sup> Today, though, Nettie's literary legacy is as strong as her husband's: *Fourteen Years* is a well-regarded book; her letters are of more consequence than Vance's (a reluctant letter-writer, as we

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<sup>113</sup> Stephen Murray-Smith, speech opening Vance and Nettie Palmer exhibition, State Library of Victoria.

<sup>114</sup> Stephen Murray-Smith, speech opening Vance and Nettie Palmer exhibition, State Library of Victoria.

<sup>115</sup> Peter Fitzpatrick, *Pioneer Players: The Lives of Louis and Hilda Esson*, Oakleigh, Vic.: Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 2/9/11. Of course, Fitzpatrick had now written a book about her – albeit about her husband, too.

have noted). But at the time, as Frances De Groen writes, despite Nettie's telling influence and 'formidable intellectual credentials', she still 'accepted a subordinate, supportive role in relation to her husband, the creative writer ("genius"?) of the family'. Denying her own poetic drive for the sake of her husband, she undertook her journalism and reviewing in order to support his literary ambitions, whilst also being responsible for their household's domestic work and typing his manuscripts. De Groen says that 'with characteristic feminine self-effacement she became nurturer and promoter of the careers of others, seeking a vicarious fulfilment in their achievements'.<sup>116</sup> We have seen her capacity as a nurturer – there were many writers who owed her so much, but none more so than Vance. Whether he acknowledged this is moot, and he was an often aloof husband. Manning Clark, who wrote much about both of the Palmers in Volume VI of his *History*, says that after their marriage in 1914 Nettie, 'to her dismay', found that Vance 'could not or would not give her what she wanted':

He held back as a lover just as he held back as a writer. He was a man of promise, but not of fulfilment. He was an Olympian: she wanted a Byronic lover, a man who was both Apollo and Dionysus. She became his servant.<sup>117</sup>

The nature of gender roles in the twenties and thirties saw her subordinate and, in terms of her own potential, unfulfilled. Modjeska has much to say on this, describing how Vance 'would write all morning in a separate room and either again in the afternoon or early evening, while Nettie assumed responsibility for the children and household, writing at night or between her chores.' She drew negative comparisons between Vance's 'steady work' and 'her own faltering, interrupted work'. Modjeska says that Nettie 'never received from Vance the quality of support that she gave him'. He was distant and unresponsive to her needs, signally failing to nurture her and her talent in the way she did for him. His

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<sup>116</sup> Frances De Groen, 'Dymphna Cusack's *Comets Soon Pass*', in Maryanne Dever (ed.), *Wallflowers and Witches: Women and Culture in Australia 1910 – 1945*, St Lucia, Qld.: University of Queensland Press, 1994, p. 99; De Groen's parenthesis.

<sup>117</sup> Manning Clark, *A History of Australia, Volume IV: The Earth Abideth Forever, 1851–1888*, Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1978, p. 138.

attitudes, coupled with her need for his affirmation, meant that she lacked confidence in her own literary output. First and foremost, she was a poet, but she was never able to devote the requisite time or energy to her verse. Having published two volumes during the First World War, her poetic output dried up and poetry was ‘rarely mentioned except, with a laugh, as something to entertain the children’. Marriage to Vance was key to this; but so, says Modjeska, was her fearfulness of ‘confront(ing) her poetry and the exposure, the possibility of failure that went with it’ – ‘criticism was safer and in the end she accepted silence from poetry’. Ultimately, ‘her criticism obliterated her poetry’. Her life, as Clark had also noted, became one of service to Vance, whose success ‘became increasingly important to her’. As her own literary fulfilment faded from view, her marriage came under strain and ‘her response of insecurity and self-hatred throws into relief the enormous pressure in bringing together those two entities: Nettie as woman, Nettie as writer’.<sup>118</sup> In light of this, the callous words of Murray-Smith and his friends, their disparaging remarks about the Palmers’ domestic lives and the mental health of their daughters, illustrates their lack of understanding of the pressures under which Nettie in particular lived and worked. And Vance’s failures, his inability to take the step needed to move into the pantheon of great writers, must only have added to the insecurities, self-loathing and angst.

When one looks at the hagiography of *Meanjin*’s Palmer memorial issue, those very contemporaries (including Murray-Smith, as we have seen) lauded Vance and Nettie in effusive prose. But in reality Vance’s last years had not been easy. In the summer of 1958/9, six months before his death, he had been upset that his novel *The Big Fellow* had to share the Mary Gilmore award with another writer, David Forrest. His note to Murray-Smith, one of the judges, was revealing: ‘I feel that *in general* I’ve been given enough credit to last another lifetime... but *in particular*... that’s another matter’.<sup>119</sup> Murray-Smith, speaking in 1985, said that Vance had wanted to ‘force the issue’ of his own recognition as an important

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<sup>118</sup> Drusilla Modjeska, *Exiles at Home*, pp. 232–5. Nettie’s two volumes of published poetry were *South Wind* (1914) and *Shadony Paths* (1915).

<sup>119</sup> Vance Palmer to Stephen Murray-Smith, 31/12/1958, Stephen Murray-Smith Papers, Box 191, Folder 5; emphasis Palmer’s.

Australian literary figure while he was still alive, and that this ‘despair’ and ‘anger’ stemmed from the lack of recognition of the ‘groundwork that he had put into the achievements of others’. He noted that Vance had hoped his own *Legend of Sanderson* would be viewed as a forerunner to Patrick White’s *Voss*, but this never happened.<sup>120</sup>

Vance was, according to Murray-Smith, deeply frustrated with his country. This frustration was the ‘proper end-point’ of a ‘smouldering anger that glowed, not in his own interest so much as in the interest of a mature Australian awareness able to understand the interplay between experience and thought’.<sup>121</sup> This hints at an underlying dissatisfaction with, even disliking of, Australian culture. In 1957 he vilified Australian life, in terms very similar to Hope’s poem ‘Australia’, as ‘smeared with dullness and mental timidity, hardly ever moving into action except when prompted from outside and articulate only in clichés’. Intellectuals, he said, were ‘more concerned with holding their jobs than responding to their inner impulses’.<sup>122</sup> A lifetime spent seeking to improve Australian cultural life had left a residue of resentment. Murray-Smith contended that there existed, within both of the Palmers, a certain ‘disdain and lifting of the skirts’ which somehow permeated their appreciation of Australian literature, and a ‘cordial distaste’ for ‘the whole Lawson tradition’.<sup>123</sup> In 1961 Murray-Smith had written to Nettie in the course of research, asking her about the influence of Lawson and Furphy on the couple. He remarked that ‘you have done a great deal to publicise them, you have fought for their recognition, and for recognition of the values they represented’, but at the same time she and Vance seemed to some extent to be ‘repelled by the nationalism of the nineties’: ‘you wanted to get a whiff of the wider world’. This, said Murray-Smith, could be seen in the way Vance was influenced by Chekhov and the Russians, and ‘while you opposed also the excesses of the Lindsays and the Brennans, who went over, in a sense,

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<sup>120</sup> Stephen Murray-Smith, speech opening Vance and Nettie Palmer exhibition, State Library of Victoria.

<sup>121</sup> Stephen Murray-Smith to C.B. Christesen, 19/4/1967.

<sup>122</sup> Vance Palmer, ‘Comment’, *Meanjin*, vol. 16, no. 1, Autumn 1957, p. 223.

<sup>123</sup> Stephen Murray-Smith to C.B. Christesen, 19/4/1967.

wholesale to Europe', nevertheless 'you represented something of the same movement'.<sup>124</sup> Nettie's reply was terse, saying that she did not understand what he meant.<sup>125</sup> One can imagine her taking offence at these aspersions cast upon her dedication to Australian letters. After all, since the time of the First World War she had been writing in passionate support of them.

But it is true to say that, as far as the Palmers were concerned, Australian literature must be cosmopolitan and worldly. Writers needed a well-travelled sensibility; they had to understand conditions in Europe and the Americas. The Palmers' own travels reflected this. It was what they were. They were 'early enthusiasts', according to Phillips, of Chekhov, Proust and Mann, and 'their cultural nationalism was thus protected from degenerating into jingoism'.<sup>126</sup> This 'internationalist' slant was a vital component of their ideas. But they did have a significant blind spot, Asia: a telling omission when their legacy came to be reckoned. Palmer's defence, in 1921, of the White Australia Policy as 'our chief assertion of character' was picked up by Humphrey McQueen, who used it in his attack on cultural nationalism.<sup>127</sup>

Retrospect facilitated Murray-Smith's judgment (as it did Phillips'). When the Palmers were around, there were fewer willing to criticise the couple who had selflessly helped so many. But neither Nettie nor Vance left much that can take its place in a canon, and it is in their nurturing role and unstinting support of their fellow writers that their greatest legacy lies. In many ways it was a pitiless role in tough times, and was, in itself, deemed worthy of attack: Vincent Buckley, for example, lambasting the cosiness of the Australian literary scene, spurring a correspondent of Nettie's to note that there was certainly 'a readiness to give praise wherever possible and to be as gentle as was compatible with sincerity when something else was called for'. Such a scene was probably better 'for developing literature' than the alternative, for writers to 'flay each other', but the lack of a proper critical edge was certainly bothersome

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<sup>124</sup> Stephen Murray-Smith to Nettie Palmer, 21/6/1961, Stephen Murray-Smith Papers, Box 191, Folder 4.

<sup>125</sup> Nettie Palmer to Stephen Murray-Smith, 22/6/1961, Stephen Murray-Smith Papers, Box 191, Folder 4.

<sup>126</sup> A.A. Phillips, review of *Letters of Vance and Nettie Palmer*.

<sup>127</sup> Vance Palmer, 1921, quoted in Humphrey McQueen, *A New Britannia: an argument concerning the social origins of Australian radicalism and nationalism*, Ringwood, Vic: Penguin, 1986 (first published 1970), p. 270. See Chapter 6.

to many. As we have seen, Horne saw it as allowing writers to get away with being second-rate; White as one more sign of Australia's inadequacy.<sup>128</sup>

Perhaps this situation bothered Vance and Nettie too. Despite being the parental figures of cultural nationalism, they appeared not to be able to make the leap of faith required to truly believe in Australia themselves. Walker argues that Vance's ideas about 'national character and national consciousness', their 'relevance to socialism and to the role of the writer in a modern industrial society', derived from his time in London more 'than his autobiographical essays convey', or 'any critic has appreciated'.<sup>129</sup> The Palmers were, said Murray-Smith, 'somewhat spoilt by their little lingerings on the fringes of London cultural life'. They tried to transport this atmosphere to Australia, but 'couldn't they see that, just because that life was not transplantable here, that didn't mean that this was a cultural desert?'<sup>130</sup> Vance's beloved *vie litteraire* was based on a European ideal, and when he found that it was not easily transplanted to the Antipodes, the problem with his vision became apparent.

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<sup>128</sup> 'John' to Nettie Palmer, 10/7/1953, Vance and Nettie Palmer Papers, Box 11, Folder 103 (Buckley's lecture is referred to in this letter); Donald Horne, 'The Great Australian Fraud', *The Observer*, 31/5/58; Patrick White to C.B. Christesen, 19/11/1960, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 350.

<sup>129</sup> David Walker, *Dream and disillusion*, p. 43.

<sup>130</sup> Stephen Murray-Smith to C. B. Christesen, 19/4/1967.



vii) Conclusion

When Vance Palmer lamented the lack of monuments to defend in time of crisis, he might have been remembering the castles of Spain – a cultural idea to be defended, along with the political ideal of the Republicanism, against the Falangist barbarians. Surveying Australia in 1942 he saw nothing worth defending. Interpreted as a rallying cry for a positive future, in fact his essay ‘Battle’ is a weary, negative image of the nation, an angry repudiation of an Australia that could only be a disappointment when set next to the cultural depth of Europe.<sup>131</sup> Vance saw Australia up that point as a failure, and now that the country might be overrun by the Japanese, even the faintest hope of a cultural legacy might be lost. Where were the myths and cultural beacons so needed by any civilized country? What sort of community was this myth-less desert land? Like Hope, he seemed to despair of Australia. The Palmers spent decades in the service of Australian letters, but the results seemed puny and barely worth the effort. If Murray-Smith was right, underneath it all they actively *hated* Australia. Fitzpatrick’s insistence that theirs was not an ‘ivory tower habit’ begins to look hollow: as we have seen, the paradox of a small elite preaching democratic culture was hard to sustain.

Sadly for the Palmers, as one reviewer pointed out, ‘in the long run the emphasis placed on their work is likely to be much smaller’ than it had been during their lives. When Kathleen Fitzpatrick had wondered what backbone Australian letters could pretend to if it were not for Vance and Nettie, she inadvertently hit on an uncomfortable reality: not much. Australian literature was not reaching maturity in the fifties, and if it had any hopes of doing so, it was not on the Palmers’ terms. Whilst ‘admiration for the bravery, dedication and sheer persistence’ of the Palmers, along with ‘gratitude for the way in which their work has rescued some of the fine detail of Australian life’, coloured the bouquets at the end of their lives, quite quickly the critical applause ebbed as readers singularly failed to respond, and the central

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<sup>131</sup> Vance Palmer, ‘Battle’, *Meanjin*, vol. 1, no. 8, March 1942, pp. 5–6 – we first encountered this article in Chapter 2.

terrible fact of Australian literature remained monumental in its presence: ‘in Australian criticism the judgment of quality is not the first judgment to be made’.<sup>132</sup>

Thus the Palmers’ reputation, whilst deemed important in developing Australian literature, ultimately owed its position to the low standards surrounding them, and the mere fact of their Australianness. Furthermore, as Harry Heseltine wrote of Vance, ‘to be written down as one who, by his practical efforts, made things easier for his successors is not a fate that any serious writer would anticipate with pleasure’.<sup>133</sup> ‘What an irony,’ declared Murray-Smith: ‘the great novel can be written *about* Vance’s tragedy, not *by* him’.<sup>134</sup> Indeed, this was the tragedy of the *whole* cultural nationalist movement: after decades of thankless labour in tough conditions for the writer and artist, the Palmerites, when finally those conditions began to abate, received little recognition for their efforts. The Palmers’ legacy seemed to be enshrined in Phillips’ essay in praise of provincialism – certainly *not* the ‘nationalist-internationalist’ idea so cherished two or three decades before. When the Australian novels that could achieve that goal were finally written, it was not Vance or those influenced by him who managed it: it was in fact Patrick White – no nationalist – persuading the world of a significant and particular Australian voice, allowing Australian culture to assume a worldwide profile, and dealing a blow to the cultural cringe.

‘It’s hell being a serious writer in Australia’, wrote Christesen to Murray-Smith, a view White himself would have heartily endorsed: ‘Palmer has lived, and fought, many years in this form of hell, and survived’.<sup>135</sup> No mean achievement, maybe, to go alongside the Palmers’ unstinting help to writers in every corner of the continent. Perhaps that was, in fact, enough. As Australia clawed its way to cultural maturity, there were bound to be many called, if not chosen, who still had an important role to play.

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<sup>132</sup> Unnamed author, ‘Using art to death’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 8/5/1969, Stephen Murray-Smith Papers, Box 166, Folder 3.

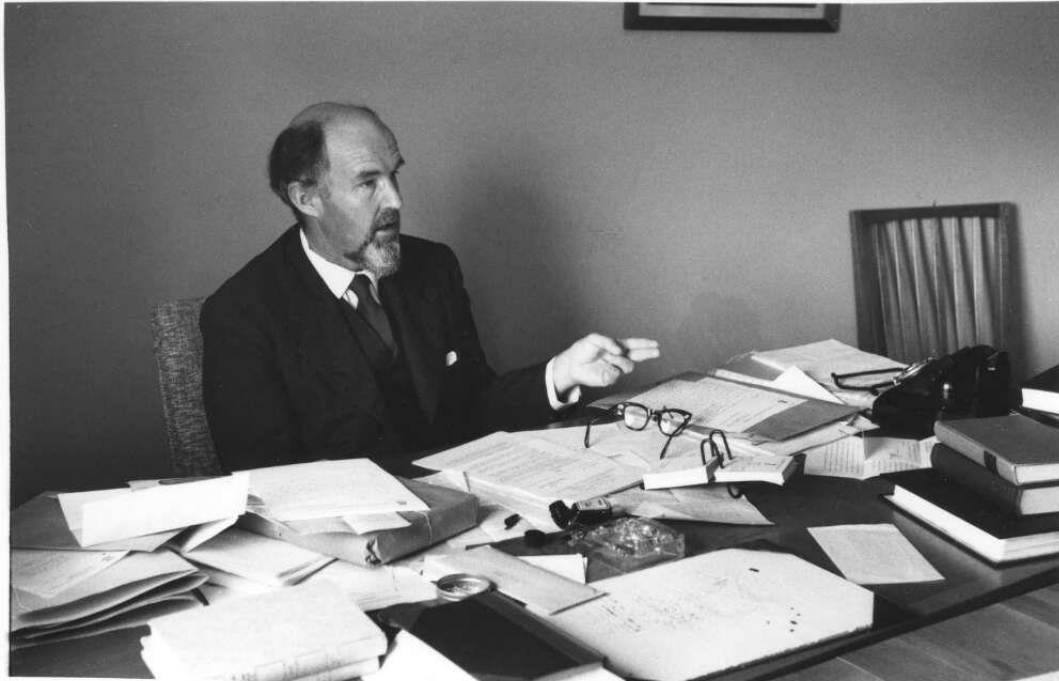
<sup>133</sup> Harry Heseltine, *Vance Palmer*, pp. 199/200.

<sup>134</sup><sup>134</sup> Stephen Murray-Smith to C. B. Christesen, 19/4/1967; emphasis Murray-Smith’s.

<sup>135</sup> C.B. Christesen to Stephen Murray-Smith, 8/1/1959, Stephen Murray Smith Papers, Box 199, Folder 5.

## CHAPTER 4

### Manning Clark: Writing the 'National Book'



Manning Clark in his office, early-1960s. 'Historians should come back to the great themes they abandoned when they joined in the vain search for a science of society.'

- i) Introduction: 'I want to be there when everyone suddenly understands what it has all been for'

Manning Clark's love of Dostoevsky was one of the things that defined him. The manner in which he treated Australia as if it were Tsarist Russia was another. Dostoevsky's works, says the Russian novelist's biographer, 'illuminated, in moving and spellbinding forms, the problems assailing all literate Russians'; his genius 'had raised their indigenous conflicts to universal heights'.<sup>1</sup> Clark sought to achieve no less in Australia. He was striving for the Australian version of Dostoevsky's 'national book': a literary

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: A Writer in his Time*, Princeton, NJ, USA: Princeton University Press, 2009, p. xviii.

creation encompassing myth and identity in an Australian setting.<sup>2</sup> His *History of Australia* has also been compared to *The Aeneid*; Clark, according to J.S. Ryan, mirroring Virgil's purpose: 'to probe the national character, to link past and present, to trace humble origins and the emergence of national ideals, to present major figures less as individuals and more as ideals and warnings'.<sup>3</sup> Clark's Henry Lawson, for example, was a quite different creation to that of Phillips, who, as we have seen, saw his hero's art as the embodiment of the 'pugnacious valuing of the simplicities' he so revered.<sup>4</sup> But to Clark, Lawson, whose biography he wrote, was representative of the triumph and tragedy of a civilisation, part of the 'drama of conflict' implicit in the development of the Australian nation. Like all of the subjects of Clark's histories, Lawson was made to fit into a conflict, as described by Docker, 'between the people who quest for life, vitality and metaphysical understanding, and the repressive conformists who attempt to destroy these questers'.<sup>5</sup> Such themes, Clark hoped, could raise Australia to profound heights.

To thus rescue Australian history from the clutches of materialism was Clark's objective. Unlike Brian Fitzpatrick or Russel Ward, whom we shall explore in turn, Clark repudiated nationalism. His was a unique vision – unprecedented at the time, and never repeated. His *History*, he said, was the story 'of a people who came here with Great Expectations – either in the life of the world to come, or the capacity of human beings for better things', but reality 'robbed them of those hopes and left them all as citizens of the Kingdom of Nothingness', a term borrowed from Tocqueville.<sup>6</sup> But the *History* is an attempt to show that the philistines had not, in fact, prevailed. Radicals, nationalists and materialists had failed to nourish the Australian soul, destroying artists and leaving a spiritual void. Clark's work aimed to

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<sup>2</sup> See: Mark McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity: The Life of Manning Clark*, Carlton, Vic.: Miegunyah Press, 2011, p. 424.

<sup>3</sup> J.S. Ryan, 'A History of Australia as Epic', in Carl Bridge (ed.), *Manning Clark: Essays on his place in history*, Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1994, pp. 61/2.

<sup>4</sup> A.A. Phillips, 'The poetry of Brian Vrepon', *Meanjin*, vol. 11, no. 3, Spring 1952, p. 235

<sup>5</sup> John Docker, 'Manning Clark's Henry Lawson', *Labour History*, no. 37, November 1979, p. 1. Clark's biography of Lawson (which, as Docker points out, was panned by the critics – he describes the 'squall' which 'swept' over the book): *In Search of Henry Lawson*, London: Macmillan, 1978.

<sup>6</sup> Manning Clark, *The Quest for Grace*, Ringwood, Vic.: Viking, 1990, pp. 180–1. Alexis de Tocqueville was the subject of Clark's post-graduate thesis; G.P. Shaw says that his influence on Clark was 'obvious and profound'; 'A sentimental humanist', in Carl Bridge (ed.), *Manning Clark*, p. 38.

transform this situation. He used a proclamation of Ivan Karamazov's as an epigraph: 'I want to be there when everyone suddenly understands what it has all been for'; on numerous occasions he cited this statement of spiritual yearning as a key to his work.<sup>7</sup> Although these words are part of a diatribe questioning the existence of God, G.P. Shaw says that rather than being 'a gesture of despair', they were, at least to Clark, 'a profession of belief': an affirmation that 'there is meaning in life'<sup>8</sup> – *Australian* life. By attaching spiritual significance to the colonisation of Australia and the travails of those who built the nation, the derided philistine continent could break free of its material shackles and enter a philosophical realm. Thus it would cease to be second-rate. The radical nationalist or imperialist schools of historiography could be subverted and replaced. Shaw says Clark's *History* 'lured readers into a fresh discovery of Australia'.<sup>9</sup> Clark himself, characteristically employing a Biblical reference, said he hoped his work 'could have the same effect on the soul of its readers as did music on the soul of Saul'. If well told, he said, 'a story about the past could take readers up into the high mountains from where they would see... all the kingdoms of the world, be aware of the possible in human affairs, and might even catch a glimpse of the direction of the great river of life'.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Manning Clark, epigraph (Dostoevsky quotation), *Select Documents in Australian History, 1851–1900*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1955. Another example of his use of this phrase: *The Puzzles of Childhood*, Ringwood, Vic.: Viking, 1989, p. 192.

<sup>8</sup> G.P. Shaw, 'A sentimental humanist', p. 32.

<sup>9</sup> G.P. Shaw, 'A sentimental humanist', p. 44.

<sup>10</sup> Manning Clark, *A Historian's Apprenticeship*, Carlton, Vic: Melbourne University Press, 1992, p. 9.

ii) In search of 'the something more'

The material and the second-rate were not enough; the nation's story must be more and greater. Manning Clark argued that 'our ideas of the past are taken over from the ideas and aspirations of preceding generations'; they were not a 'response to the problems and aspirations of this generation'.<sup>11</sup> Targeting the radical nationalists whose celebration of Australian independence and self-sufficiency failed, he believed, to address deeper and more important spiritual questions, Clark asserted that their preoccupations simply endorsed the continuing immaturity of Australian culture. A society based on rational concepts of progress or liberalism, he thought, was shallow and philistine. From the start of his career he attacked the 'myth' of 'mateyness' – it was 'just not enough', he said: 'we want, curse us, the something more'.<sup>12</sup> For a society to be great, it must have a spiritual, even transcendental, dimension; an idea he lifted straight from Dostoevsky.<sup>13</sup> It was no longer acceptable to hear the 'perpetual bleat against things Australian' from those with 'white hands', 'exquisite manners' and 'a nostalgia' for the 'old country'<sup>14</sup>. This cultural cringe must be banished, but not through the folk-nationalism of Ward or the economic analyses of Fitzpatrick. The story of the nation needed to be told anew; an alternative sought in a wholly different realm; one of the literary imagination, far from mundane 'ockerism' or materialism. 'For the artists and the intellectuals Australia is almost virgin soil,' Clark declared in 1945. The people, he said, 'want prophets, poets and historians to enrich their appreciation, their awareness of their

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<sup>11</sup> Manning Clark, notes for 'The rewriting of Australian history', 1953, Manning Clark Papers, National Library of Australia, Canberra, MS 7550, Box 187, Folder 8.

<sup>12</sup> Manning Clark, 'Letter to Tom Collins', *Meanjin*, vol. 2, no. 3, Spring 1943, pp. 40/1.

<sup>13</sup> In *The Brothers Karamazov*, the cynical rationalist Rakitin questions the existence of God and queries the worth of his brother Mitya's Orthodox ideas: 'you would do better to concern yourself with the broadening of man's civic rights,' he says, 'or at any rate with trying to keep down the price of beef; by doing that you will demonstrate a plainer and more intimate love of mankind than you will ever by your philosophies'. Mitya counters: 'Without God... you yourself would push up the price of beef by a hundred per cent and make a rouble out of every copeck'. Rakitin's argument sees rationalism as a utilitarian means to a common good: philosophical ideas and spiritual concerns cannot be of practical help to humanity. But Mitya counters that it only leads to selfishness and exploitation. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 1880, trans. David McDuff, London: Penguin, 2003, p. 758.

<sup>14</sup> Manning Clark, manuscript of essay entitled 'Ideals in Australian literature', publication unknown, 28/10/1945, Manning Clark Papers, Box 177, Folder 2.

environment'.<sup>15</sup> In his own estimation, he was all three – a 'scholar-prophet'.<sup>16</sup> 'Do we need a prophet to preach a new myth,' he asked, 'or a sage to convince us that it is better to accept things as they are, better to forget the something more?'<sup>17</sup> The latter option was not acceptable.

Clark resorted to literature, philosophy and spirituality as prisms through which to view Australia. Stephen Holt sees his ideas as a response to the moral and ideological crises of the late-thirties and forties.<sup>18</sup> The Melbourne intellectual establishment's failure, as he saw it, to provide persuasive solutions meant he found himself turning to the literary canon to discover a telling of humanity's story full of 'confrontations' and 'moments of illumination'.<sup>19</sup> G.P. Shaw says Clark's education in literature was 'subversive' to his education in history;<sup>20</sup> describing his 'apprenticeship', Clark focussed on the canon and completely ignored contemporary historians.<sup>21</sup> Thus cut adrift from mainstream historiography, Clark looked to Carlyle (whose sartorial sense Carl Bridge suggests he copied)<sup>22</sup> who, he said, had taught him that 'a man should write about things that matter'.<sup>23</sup> He saw the historian as akin to a composer, poet or artist – certainly not a scientist. 'I was moving towards a tragic view of the human situation,' he writes of his formative years: 'I wanted to sing a hymn of praise in a minor key and was already ill at ease with those who wanted to write about the past like a theorem in geometry'.<sup>24</sup>

Poet Vincent Buckley advised Clark that the 'aridities' of Australia's 'cultural desert' were 'as much possibilities as obstacles'.<sup>25</sup> The story of Australia is in the quest for ideas that will triumph over

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<sup>15</sup> Manning Clark, 'Ideals in Australian literature'.

<sup>16</sup> Carl Bridge's term, 'Manning Clark and the Ratbag tradition', *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 21, issue 54–55, 1997, p. 91.

<sup>17</sup> Manning Clark, 'Letter to Tom Collins', p. 41.

<sup>18</sup> Stephen Holt, *A Short History of Manning Clark*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1999, p. 53; quoted in J.S. Ryan, 'A History of Australia as Epic', in Carl Bridge (ed.), *Manning Clark*, pp. 62–3.

<sup>19</sup> Manning Clark, *The Quest for Grace*, p. 31.

<sup>20</sup> G.P. Shaw, 'A sentimental humanist', p. 34.

<sup>21</sup> Manning Clark, *A Historian's Apprenticeship*, pp. 21–35.

<sup>22</sup> 'Any Australian who visits Carlyle's house in Chelsea and sees the photographs of Carlyle in later life with his hat, stick, beard and thoughtful look will jump with involuntary recognition'; Carl Bridge, 'Manning Clark and the Ratbag tradition', p. 91.

<sup>23</sup> Manning Clark, *The Quest for Grace*, p. 35.

<sup>24</sup> Manning Clark, *The Quest for Grace*, p. 55.

<sup>25</sup> Vincent Buckley to Manning Clark, 15/5/1957, cited by Mark McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity*, p. 384.

philistinism; in this way, as Hope had hoped, from deserts might prophets still come.<sup>26</sup> Clark showed special interest in the ‘victims of Australian philistines’: the Protestant conformity of ‘the Yarrasiders’ (representative of the Australian middle class) crushed the artist and the thinker. ‘He died with his hand still moving at a speed suggesting that even in the shadow of death he was trying to say something to humanity,’ says Clark of Marcus Clarke. The novelist’s ‘own dissolution’, a result of society’s indifference, foreshadowed ‘the shape of things to come’: ‘the power of the conservative, petty-bourgeois view of the world to render impotent all those who, like Clarke, dreamed a great dream, only to see it fade away before the stern facts of Australia’s past’.<sup>27</sup>

Such an engagement with the idea of Australia had its genesis in the Second World War – the catalyst, as we have seen and will see again, for sundry attempts to re-imagine the nation. Clark described how the war ‘turned the minds of many Australians towards the question of who we are’. The ‘myths’ of previous generations were ‘discarded’ as Australians looked less to Europe ‘as a land of holy wonders’, becoming more ‘Australian-centred’.<sup>28</sup> Paul Bourke noted Clark’s conviction that Australian history’s preoccupation with politics led to the ‘well-established belief in our mediocrity’, obscuring ‘the vital spiritual issues of our generation’.<sup>29</sup> But Clark’s understanding of Australian history meant it was no longer, in his words, ‘a branch of British colonial history, or the story of the beginning of British civilisation in the ancient continent of Australia’; neither was it ‘boring or second-hand or mediocre’. In fact, ‘the historical map of Australia was almost a blank’, and he declared that, as a young historian, he had to ‘set out on a journey without maps’.<sup>30</sup> As McKenna has noted, he gave the impression of ‘sailing in unchartered waters, as if Australian history had never been attempted before’.<sup>31</sup> He was Australia’s Herodotus, ‘rewriting Australian history’:

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<sup>26</sup> A.D. Hope, ‘Australia’, in *Penguin Anthology of Australian Poetry*, p. 160.

<sup>27</sup> Manning Clark, *A History of Australia, Volume IV*, p. 316.

<sup>28</sup> Manning Clark, *The Quest for Grace*, p. 159.

<sup>29</sup> Paul Bourke, untitled article, undated (circa 1956–8), Manning Clark Papers, Box 178, Folder 9.

<sup>30</sup> Manning Clark, *The Quest for Grace*, p. 159.

<sup>31</sup> Mark McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity*, p. 249



Is it not time for our historians to abandon their preoccupation with the causes and effects of the Australian Cultural Desert? For one thing, this harping on our pursuit of material gain, and our indifference to the things of the mind and satisfaction with the middling standard creates the idea that there were no differences in the past – and there is, as it were, a dull and depressing sameness to our history – no great issues, no differences of principle, but always the same filthy pursuit of filthy material gain and only a sordid struggle for power between various groups believing they can show us how to achieve it.<sup>32</sup>

Quotidian preoccupations made for leaden history, shedding no light on more profound realities. ‘New ideas for this generation’ were required, and these were simply not to be found amongst the ‘disappointed radicals’,<sup>33</sup> clogging up the universities with ‘more than a fair share’, their reliance on the ‘bankrupt’ principles of the old left seeing them create ‘barren scholarship for scholarship’s sake’. Such historians saw the first settlement of Australia ‘as nothing more than a gaol’; an example, said Clark, of their ‘restricted’ vision. He suggested a ‘more fruitful approach’: ‘to look at the gaol as an odd by-product of the Europeanisation of Asia’, which would establish ‘the connection between Australia and Asia from the start’, thus helping the historian in his or her most important pursuit, the ‘illumination of the present’. He was scathing in his indictment of ‘intellectually lazy’ historians with ‘a predisposition to receiving ideas instead of creating ideas’, all the while failing to make up their minds as to ‘what it is all about’.<sup>34</sup>

Contemporary historical practice, as he saw it, had nothing new to say; in its desire to be ‘impartial and instructing’, it became ‘dull’.<sup>35</sup> He did not subscribe to ‘confidence in the future’ – he was ‘moving towards a tragic view of the human condition’.<sup>36</sup> In the Cold War era, the world was in the grips of ‘doubt,

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<sup>32</sup> Manning Clark, ‘Rewriting Australian History’, 1954, *Occasional Writings & Speeches*, Melbourne: Fontana, 1980, p. 6.

<sup>33</sup> Clark is specifically referring to V. Gordon Childe and Brian Fitzpatrick; ‘Rewriting Australian History’, p. 14.

<sup>34</sup> Manning Clark, ‘New History of Australia’, review of Gordon Greenwood (ed.), *Australia: A Social and Political History*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9/7/1955, Manning Clark Papers, Box 178, Folder 8.

<sup>35</sup> Manning Clark, notes for ‘Lectures on Australian History’, 1953, Manning Clark Papers, Folder 1, Box 186.

<sup>36</sup> Manning Clark, *The Quest for Grace*, p. 55.

confusion, anxiety’;<sup>37</sup> faith in liberal democracy and capitalism were undermined. The traditional preoccupations of Australian historians failed to address this anxiety at the heart of society. Clark believed that the legacy of the 1890s was not in fact one of political or material independence, as the radical nationalists would have it, but of intellectual self-sufficiency. Could Australia fulfil the dreams of the ‘prophets’ of that decade and become an independent nation of the mind, rather than just a ‘semi-colonial or provincial member of the American way of life, a society of men and women bewitched and charmed by greed and titillation culture’?<sup>38</sup> He dismissed stale ‘comforters of the past’: nationalism, Australia’s convict origins, the ‘movement for political democracy’, the ‘creed of the bushman’.<sup>39</sup> The notion that history was a way to ‘illuminate a present in which people (are) still puzzling over the ways and means of creating liberty, equality and material well-being for all’ was, he contended, a fallacy.<sup>40</sup> The radical tradition ‘distorts and warps’, ‘weighing heavily’ on the minds of its advocates and ‘threatening to stop them thinking altogether’.<sup>41</sup> He sought to create a new way of thinking about history which would both re-energise the field, and reposition the nation itself. In this way the idea that Australia was culturally backward or insignificant could be discarded. This vision took Australia seriously in ways previously unimagined.

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<sup>37</sup> Manning Clark, notes for ‘Lectures on Australian History’.

<sup>38</sup> Manning Clark, ‘Themes in *A History of Australia*’, 1978, *Occasional Writings & Speeches*, p. 86.

<sup>39</sup> Manning Clark, ‘Rewriting Australian history’, pp. 9–12.

<sup>40</sup> Manning Clark, ‘New History of Australia’.

<sup>41</sup> Manning Clark, ‘Rewriting Australian history’, pp. 14–5.

iii) ‘What holds the world together in its innermost parts?’

The historian’s role, according to Clark, was to illuminate the human condition, to find answers to explain existence; specifically, Australian existence. He quoted Goethe: ‘what holds the world together in its innermost parts?’ From as early as 1941 he was wondering whether this was a question a historian could answer.<sup>42</sup> He returned to it often down the years – in 1963, for example, as he contemplated Robert Menzies.<sup>43</sup> Novelistic in his approach, the inner workings of the *History*’s central characters were his chief concern, the language employed pointing to the singularity (certainly in terms of Australian historiography) of his vision: ‘so just as Adam learnt to distinguish between good and evil’, he wrote on the purpose of history, ‘we may be able to distinguish between the living and the dead’.<sup>44</sup>

To distinguish thus, Clark focussed on tensions between different philosophical and spiritual ideas; tensions he identified within himself, and which he extrapolated into national themes: namely, Anglican Protestantism, Catholicism and Enlightenment reason. ‘I happen to have had the good fortune to experience in childhood all the conflicts which were central to the human experience in Australia,’ he said.<sup>45</sup> Describing *Volume I* of the *History* as ‘undoubtedly unkind and lacking in all charity to Protestants’, he gives personal experience as the cause: the influence of his father, an Anglican minister, and the young Manning’s ten years enduring the Protestant rigours of Melbourne Grammar School.<sup>46</sup> His autobiography is larded with ruminations on the heavy hand of Protestantism on his childhood: a father portrayed as a free-spirited but repressed man, from a lower social echelon than Clark’s bourgeois, straight-laced and devout mother; Melbourne Grammar School a cruel institution, dampening intellectual inquiry in a

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<sup>42</sup> Manning Clark, ‘History’, draft of essay, 1941, Manning Clark Papers, Box 177, Folder 2.

<sup>43</sup> ‘Opinions may differ on the motives for his behaviour or on what holds together for him in its innermost parts’; in Manning Clark, ‘Whither Australia and New Zealand’, draft manuscript of article for *The Observer* (London), 5/2/1963, Manning Clark Papers, Box 178, Folder 13.

<sup>44</sup> Manning Clark, notes for ‘Lectures on Australian History’.

<sup>45</sup> Manning Clark, in his first Boyer lecture, 1976, quoted in Jill Roe, ‘Manning Clark and the Church’, in Stuart Macintyre and Sheila Fitzpatrick (eds), *Against the Grain: Brian Fitzpatrick and Manning Clark in Australian History and Politics*, Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2007, p. 232.

<sup>46</sup> Manning Clark, ‘Themes in *A History of Australia*’, p. 80.

fashion owing much to the precepts of the British Public School system.<sup>47</sup> The morality, language and narrative of the Bible is portrayed as the preeminent influence on his parents and the trajectory of their lives, and Clark wallows in it: he declared that anyone who had read *The Puzzles of Childhood* would be unsurprised to hear that ‘at the age of eighteen my favourite reading was the Book of Ecclesiastes’.<sup>48</sup> The Clark family’s struggles are thus part of the wider tensions in Australian society, be they class- or religion-based, presented in language which specifically frames Australian lives in a religious context.

Young Manning’s efforts to find his place in the world symbolise the growing pains of the nation; or, as Nicholas Brown puts it, Clark ‘externalises’ the ‘deep class and cultural differences he experienced between his parents’.<sup>49</sup> The *History* is a reflection of his personal experiences and preoccupations. Clark, says Miriam Dixson, ‘often tried to evoke response to complex historical ideas through metaphors tapping powerful childhood imagery’.<sup>50</sup> As she points out, Clark was torn in his conception of Australia between the brilliant storytelling sermons of his father and the ‘ghosts’ of the ‘strange history’ of his mother’s family, whose lineage stretched back to the infamous ‘flogging parson’, Samuel Marsden.<sup>51</sup> His father inspired Clark’s self-identification as ‘Mr Passion’: finding something big to say and the means to say it originated in the memory of his father’s verve at the pulpit.<sup>52</sup> But Charles Clark was suppressed by ‘life-deniers’ and ‘walnut-hearted men’, terms his son repeatedly indulges in as he pillories the Anglican establishment.<sup>53</sup>

Meanwhile, believers in Enlightenment progress are scorned as ‘dry souls’, lacking both ‘the eye of pity’ and ‘the eye for human tragedy’.<sup>54</sup> It was, he says, Dostoevsky and Carlyle who showed him that

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<sup>47</sup> Manning Clark, *The Puzzles of Childhood*, see chapters 1 & 2 (‘My Father’ and ‘My Mother’) pp. 1–45, and chapter 8 (‘The Ordeal’) pp. 177–212.

<sup>48</sup> Manning Clark, ‘What Newman means to me’, lecture delivered at the State Library of NSW, 11/8/1990, in *Speaking Out of Turn*, Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1997, p. 197.

<sup>49</sup> Nicholas Brown, ‘The Gamekeeper’s View: A Memoir’, in Macintyre and Fitzpatrick (eds), *Against the Grain*, p. 225.

<sup>50</sup> Miriam Dixson, ‘Clark and national identity’, in Carl Bridge (ed.), *Manning Clark*, p. 193.

<sup>51</sup> Manning Clark, *The Puzzles of Childhood*, pp. 73/85; see Miriam Dixson, ‘Clark and national identity’, in Carl Bridge (ed.), *Manning Clark*, p. 193.

<sup>52</sup> Manning Clark, *The Quest for Grace*, p. 210.

<sup>53</sup> For example, see *The Quest for Grace*, p. 37.

<sup>54</sup> Manning Clark, *The Quest for Grace*, pp. 34/135.

‘these would-be engineers of the human soul’ were ‘terribly dangerous’, because they had the ‘colossal effrontery to apply the principles and methods of the bookkeeper to the subject of human happiness’.<sup>55</sup> The ‘Promethean figures’ of Australian history – Wentworth, Curtin, Whitlam – were ‘always likely to be crushed in Australia’.<sup>56</sup> Furphy was another: ‘sustained’, said Clark, by ‘a vision of life redeemed by education, refinement, leisure and comfort – of the revolt of enlightenment against ignorance – of justice and reason against the manifestation of the manifestly unworthy’, Furphy kicked against philistinism and brought to the nation a different understanding of what it meant to be human. Clearly, the Enlightenment was acceptable if a man like Furphy believed in it; still, he was ‘concerned with the same question as Kirilov in *The Possessed*: once you have lost faith in the God who became man, you see in man the power to become like God’; his writing led to an Australian contribution to ‘a universal problem of mankind – the life of man without God’.<sup>57</sup> The author of *Such is Life*, a gnostic celebration of bullockies waxing literary around camp fires in the remote Australian bush, attains a philosophical weight that can impart intellectual credibility to a nascent nation. It is quite a different reading of Furphy than the cultural nationalists’.

Clark turned to John Henry Newman, the nineteenth-century Cardinal and theologian, for affirmation. Newman had described a ‘cold’ liberalism and a Protestantism lacking an ‘intellectual basis’, an ‘internal idea’ or a ‘principle of unity’.<sup>58</sup> Reading Newman in his under-graduate days, Clark says he did not know at the time that the ‘stern encounter’ the theologian described between the Church and the Enlightenment ‘would be the subject for a history’, or even ‘a theme for a history of Australia’, but this is what it became.<sup>59</sup> Newman, he said, showed him that, although ‘we’re all involved in some terrible aboriginal calamity’, it was the Catholic Church that could best answer the question of whether it is

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<sup>55</sup> Manning Clark, ‘What Newman means to me’, p. 206.

<sup>56</sup> Manning Clark, ‘Themes in *A History of Australia*’, p. 85.

<sup>57</sup> Manning Clark, ‘Melbourne: an intellectual tradition’, *Melbourne Historical Journal*, no. 2, 1962, p. 20; in Manning Clark Papers, Box 178, Folder 10.

<sup>58</sup> Manning Clark, ‘What Newman means to me’, p. 204.

<sup>59</sup> Manning Clark, *The Quest for Grace*, p. 32.

‘possible for human beings to build a better society’ in the affirmative, because ‘Rome had kept alive the image of Christ... the image of the Galilean fisherman’.<sup>60</sup> The Catholic image of Christ was closest to the common Australian; it was an image of pity and personal salvation far removed from the Protestant obsession with the ‘material setting’. Protestantism had ‘been captured by the Pharisees’ and had ‘corrected Christ’s work’,<sup>61</sup> in the same way as Dostoevsky’s ‘Grand Inquisitor’ had expelled Christ.<sup>62</sup>

The lack of pity in Protestantism can be seen in Clark’s telling of his father’s story. Charles Clark is presented as a man of compassion, at his most fulfilled as minister to the gaols at Darlinghurst and Long Bay: ‘it was the flowering time of his life’.<sup>63</sup> His compassion for the oppressed and unfortunate is contrasted with the unfeeling attitude of the Church authorities, who, despite claiming ‘to represent Christ on Earth’, are nevertheless ‘ruthless to all transgressors’, a ruthlessness extended not just to the inhabitants of Sydney’s prisons, but also to Charles Clark himself, banished to stretcher-bearing work in the First World War and then to a ministership in provincial Kempsey after an extra-marital affair. ‘Unlike the Galilean fisherman’, says Charles’ son, ‘Archbishop Wright (of Sydney) did not forgive the weak, or those who could not stop’.<sup>64</sup>

Katerina Clark makes the connection between her father’s Catholic leanings and his love of Dostoevsky, the two of which he ‘increasingly conflated’.<sup>65</sup> For Clark it was the orthodox Dostoevsky’s religiosity which he equated with Catholicism, in much the same way as his own father, an Anglican minister, is nevertheless associated with Catholicism because of his passion and compassion. Dostoevsky’s ‘great theme’ was the conflict between reason and Christian faith.<sup>66</sup> Rationalism left only a void; he could not comprehend humanity alone without God, which resulted – Clark quoting *The Idiot* –

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<sup>60</sup> Manning Clark, ‘What Newman means to me’, p. 205.

<sup>61</sup> Manning Clark, *The Quest for Grace*, p. 32.

<sup>62</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, pp. 322–44.

<sup>63</sup> Manning Clark, *The Puzzles of Childhood*, p. 41.

<sup>64</sup> Manning Clark, *The Puzzles of Childhood*, p. 55.

<sup>65</sup> Katerina Clark, ‘Manning Clark and Russia: a memoir’, in Macintyre and Fitzpatrick (eds), *Against the Grain*, p. 260.

<sup>66</sup> Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky*, p. 848.

in ‘only a fantasy’.<sup>67</sup> Katerina notes Dostoevsky’s conservatism, antithetical to Clark’s left-leaning views; however, he was still deeply suspicious of a socialism in hock to the material.<sup>68</sup> Clark delivered a series of lectures on Dostoevsky in 1961, the year before publication of *Volume I*: ‘compare with attitudes in Australia and New Zealand’, he wrote in his notes.<sup>69</sup> The antipodes had failed to assert independence; a spiritual, rather than economic or political, independence. His first reading of Dostoevsky, says Clark, had taught him that the denizens of the bars of Russia, far from talking about sport, were in fact discoursing on ‘eternal questions of the existence of God and immortality’.<sup>70</sup> It is not hard to pinpoint when, and from where, Clark had gleaned this information about the lives of Russian barflies: he first picked up *The Brothers Karamazov* as a young student, whilst convalescing, he tells us, following a spell of illness.<sup>71</sup> He would have read one of the novel’s more famous chapters, ‘Mutiny’, in which two of the brothers, Ivan and Aleksey, sit in a disreputable tavern and argue over, of course, the existence of God.<sup>72</sup> Such was the talk he hoped to sow at the ‘communion rails’ of Australia’s pubs.<sup>73</sup>

The scene in the tavern is an example of how Dostoevsky, as Frank says, was able to ‘integrate the personal and the major social-political issues of the day’; what is important about his works ‘is not that his characters engage in theoretical disputations’, but that ‘their ideas become part of their personalities, to such an extent, indeed, that neither exists independently of the other’. He was able to ‘invent actions and situations in which ideas dominate behaviour without the latter becoming allegorical’.<sup>74</sup> This is what Clark was trying to do. For example, in his portrayal of Lachlan Macquarie,

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<sup>67</sup> Manning Clark, ‘Lectures on Dostoyevsky’ (edited notes used for three lectures), Australian National University, August 1961, Manning Clark Papers, Box 42, Folder 45.

<sup>68</sup> Clark’s supposed communism, ‘exposed’ in the 1990s, is not in fact a very useful way into Clark’s ideas. Any reader of the *History* would struggle to identify him as a communist. For the ‘scandal’ of his supposed Order of Lenin, see Macintyre and Clark, ‘The Historian Under Fire: Manning Clark’, in *The History Wars*, pp. 50–71.

<sup>69</sup> Manning Clark, ‘Lectures on Dostoyevsky’.

<sup>70</sup> Manning Clark, *The Quest for Grace*, p. 19.

<sup>71</sup> Manning Clark, *The Quest for Grace*, p. 19.

<sup>72</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, pp. 301–21. In this scene Ivan declares ‘I want to be there when everyone suddenly understands what it has all been for’ – Clark’s appropriated motto.

<sup>73</sup> ‘Alcohol’, said Clark, ‘has been one of our great comforters. The bar rail is the one communion rail we do know something about’; in ‘Writing history in Australia’, 1974, *Occasional Writings & Speeches*, p. 21. There are many examples of Clark’s drinking habits in McKenna’s *An Eye for Eternity*, including pp. 241–2/302/388.

<sup>74</sup> Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky*, pp. xiv–xv.

Clark focuses on his identification with, and desire to help, emancipists. Macquarie's moral quest is couched in the language of Protestantism: the 'rising generation' were to be 'instruct(ed) ... in those principles which, he believed, could alone render them dutiful and obedient to their parents and superiors, honest, faithful and useful members of society, and good Christians'.<sup>75</sup> But in following this righteous Christian path, Clark tells us that Macquarie's enemy Macarthur believed he had been 'misled' by 'the artifice and falsehood of persons who had guided him on his first arrival'. By 1815, this so-called 'mist' could not 'be puffed away by the winds of enlightenment'. That Macquarie's actions are driven by his beliefs is made clear: 'this preoccupation with the righteousness of his own position, as well as the drive to defend it, became so over-powering that it engulfed more and more of his time and energy'.<sup>76</sup>

The *History* unfolds almost as a series of character sketches, with each major character driven on by ideas. Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, says Frank, 'dramatizes' and explores the effects of 'the dilemmas of a representative Russian personality attempting to live by the two European codes' (rationalism and religiosity).<sup>77</sup> The protagonist's ideas engulf him, and this is what happens to Clark's leading characters, too. He described history as the tale 'of how men are led on to their destruction'.<sup>78</sup> His Macquarie is at odds with the forces of Enlightenment and/or Catholicism. Clark tells us that in 1811 Macquarie's 'correspondence with London had uncovered more of the tragic flaw in his make-up'.<sup>79</sup> This appears to have been his desire for the acknowledgment and praise of his work. In 1822 we see him returning to England, where 'he believed the time was at hand when he and his friends would taste the wages of their virtue, and all his foes the cup of their deservings'. But Macquarie's hopes are unrealistic and bound to end in tragedy: 'consuming his energy on what was unattainable, not only for Macquarie, but for any man, he rushed on to his dissolution and destruction'.<sup>80</sup> Clark claims a deep psychological

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<sup>75</sup> Manning Clark, *A History of Australia, Volume I: From the Earliest Times to the Age of Macquarie*, Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1962, p. 269.

<sup>76</sup> Manning Clark, *A History of Australia, Vol. I*, p. 282.

<sup>77</sup> Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky*, p. 416.

<sup>78</sup> Manning Clark, 'Problems in writing Australian history', 1960, Manning Clark Papers, Box 186, Folder 2.

<sup>79</sup> Manning Clark, *A History of Australia, Vol. I*, p. 273.

<sup>80</sup> Manning Clark, *A History of Australia, Vol. I*, p. 367.



insight into his characters. Macquarie is painted as a complex and flawed hero, his decisions and actions emanating from this, rather than social, political or economic forces. He is like the hero of a great historical novel, his personal story of grand ideas and ultimate destruction intrinsically linked with that of the nation.

Clark's approach caused a great deal of debate among his fellow historians. The tone of this debate can be seen at a 1963 seminar ('New Interpretations of Australian History') organised in Sydney by the Australian Association for Cultural Freedom, at which Clark debated with his critics. He affirmed many of his core ideas: in line with his concern with 'the tragic view of life', the first colonists were – regardless of 'ideals', 'faith', or 'material strength' – 'all in one sense beaten', and 'the interest is not in the defeat or wallowing in the pity of their defeat but in the grandeur of their response to their situation'. He wanted to depict what he termed 'the preyers': the officers of the New South Wales Corps, the landowners and the profiteers. Clark declared himself 'overwhelmed' by the fact that the 'innocent or good men... are impotent in the presence of evil'. And he wanted to address 'the problem of human deserts': in late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century New South Wales and Tasmania, he said, 'two moralities were confronting each other', and 'men who accepted... the Protestant notions of desert... were confronted... with people who were acting on quite different moral assumptions'. Such tensions dogged the embryonic years of the colony, as Hunter confronted Macarthur, or Macquarie a seemingly endless cast of antagonists and opponents.<sup>81</sup>

Clark said that in the period covered by *Volume I* 'society was very element(al)': 'it is therefore not odd that the Old Testament should loom so large, as indeed does the Old Testament God of terror and hell-fire'. Evidence for this, Clark said, came in the shape of the Protestant sermons of the time, which 'almost invariably' used Old Testament texts. He was looking, he said, to 'state themes' and 'set the stage'

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<sup>81</sup> Transcript of papers and responses at the 'New Interpretations of Australian History' seminar, organised by the Australian Association for Cultural Freedom, Sydney, 25/8/1963; found in the Donald Horne Papers, Mitchell Library, Box 2144.

for ‘the impending confrontation between the religious and secular view of the world’.<sup>82</sup> The metaphysical debates of the Western world are played out upon a new stage and the nation is forged by intellectual and spiritual argument, not social forces. M.H. Ellis, his chief critic,<sup>83</sup> said he was ‘hoping that this discussion from the beginning would take a more concrete form’. He attacked Clark’s view of the New South Wales Corps’ monopoly on power and concluded that ‘the first basic aim of history is accuracy of statement of facts ... Interpretation is a secondary matter’.<sup>84</sup> This was the antithesis of Clark’s own view, and he was not without supporters at the seminar. He represented a riposte to the ‘parochial outlook’ of some Australian historians, said one; ‘history is not just worrying about what happened in the past’, said another, but is ‘worrying who will write it, how they will write it’.<sup>85</sup> Thus, Ellis was accused of philistinism, and tainted with parochialism. Donald Horne, also present, declared that Clark had dumbfounded many Australians who simply were not up-to-date with ‘the world’s intellectual discussion over the last ten or fifteen years’.<sup>86</sup> Australia’s intellectual backwardness, a favoured theme of Horne’s, was associated with those who sought to denigrate Clark’s work. By elevating historical discourse to a higher level, Horne believed Clark cast off the shroud of the second-rate.

McKenna points out that even in 1962 Clark’s exhumation of the florid style of Carlyle and Macaulay was out-of-date;<sup>87</sup> it was certainly out-of-step with contemporary social histories.<sup>88</sup> His idiosyncratic relationship with his sources did not help. Humphrey McQueen says that he would never ‘go to Manning’ to look up a date; others, meanwhile, record the infuriating experience of trying to follow

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<sup>82</sup> Manning Clark, speaking at the ‘New Interpretations of Australian History’ seminar, 1963.

<sup>83</sup> M.H. Ellis, ‘History without facts’, in Carl Bridge (ed.), *Manning Clark*, pp. 70–7; article first appeared in *The Bulletin*, 22/9/1962, pp. 36–7.

<sup>84</sup> M.H. Ellis, speaking at the ‘New Interpretations of Australian History’ seminar, 1963.

<sup>85</sup> Ernest Bramsted and F.J. Wells, speaking at the ‘New Interpretations of Australian History’ seminar. See introduction to Chapter 6 for Ward’s virulent disdain for Wells. Clark discusses the importance of interpretation as opposed to factual accuracy, for example, in ‘New History of Australia’, his review of Gordon Greenwood’s *Australia*, 1955.

<sup>86</sup> Donald Horne, speaking at the ‘New Interpretations of Australian History’ seminar.

<sup>87</sup> Mark McKenna, ‘Being there: the strange history of Manning Clark’, in Drusilla Modjeska (ed.), *The Best Australian Essays 2007*, Melbourne: Black Inc., 2007, p. 202.

<sup>88</sup> See for example E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, New York: Vintage, 1963 (1966 edition); or, it might be added, Russel Ward’s *The Australian Legend*.

the trail of Clark's footnotes.<sup>89</sup> Even popular travel writer Bill Bryson has noted the 'exasperating' nature of Clark's work.<sup>90</sup> Clark selected his documents with a great deal of prejudice, and often, as McKenna has noted, it is hard to know when his voice begins and that of a given source ends.<sup>91</sup> But Horne, for one, believed Clark's value lay in his use of intellectual and cosmopolitan ideas in the Australian context. In the forties, Horne had wondered whether it was possible to be 'literary' and write 'political science' at the same time.<sup>92</sup> Only the positive resolution of this dilemma would help Australia escape its cultural rut, and Clark seemed to offer just that.

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<sup>89</sup> Mark McKenna, 'Being there', p. 203.

<sup>90</sup> Bill Bryson, *Down Under*, London: Doubleday, 2000, p. 85.

<sup>91</sup> Mark McKenna, 'Being there', p. 203.

<sup>92</sup> Donald Horne, *Confessions of a New Boy*, p. 144.

iv) Epiphanies: 'Literature is life, and life is literature'

Life as a series of 'epiphanies': 'moments of illumination' – 'when something is present over and above what we see and what we hear'<sup>93</sup> – giving the 'scholar-prophet' special insight into historical events. This was the rarefied plane Clark believed he existed upon. Closeted away in 'narrow conformist' Melbourne in the 1930s, he had been far removed from the intellectual and artistic currents that mattered. 'It had never occurred to me,' he says, 'to wonder why for grief, for sorrow, for all the emotions of humanity we Australians borrowed our words and music from Europe'. And thus, it had not occurred to the young Clark that 'Australia had a soul'. Professing himself 'uncomfortable with those who claimed they knew all the answers', exposure to ideas from the world of letters began the process of setting him to looking at Australia in a new way.<sup>94</sup> He tells us of the visit to Melbourne at that time of Poet Laureate John Masefield, who insisted that 'the artist' could see more than the mere 'empirical observer': 'perhaps that was what my mother always insisted lived in me', said Clark, 'this special vision, this awareness of something extra'.<sup>95</sup> Marked for something special from an early age, he believed he had the innate capacity to 'see' more than the average person. He equated the historian's task with that of a 'myth-maker' and perceived his *History* as a 'book of wisdom', an illustration of 'how the world came to be as it is'.<sup>96</sup> The historian's mythologising was of himself, as well as of the characters in his novelistic historical enterprise.

Such mythologizing can be seen in his recounting of his supposed experiences in Bonn on the morning after *Kristallnacht* in 1938. His 'Melbourne delusions', he tells us, were destroyed by the Nazi pogrom. These experiences, coupled with the early promptings of Masefield, took him back to the canonical works of literature, where he could learn about the 'pity and terror in the presence of all human

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<sup>93</sup> Manning Clark, 'Barry Humphries, the creator of Sandy Stone', speech delivered 2/2/1991, in *Speaking Out of Turn*, p. 255.

<sup>94</sup> Manning Clark, *The Quest for Grace*, p. 50.

<sup>95</sup> Manning Clark, *The Quest for Grace*, p. 14.

<sup>96</sup> Manning Clark, 'Epilogue', *A History of Australia, Volume VI: The Old Tree Dead and the New Tree Green, 1916–1935*, Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1987, p. 500. G.P. Shaw talks of Clark's work as fitting in the genre of Leavisite, canonical 'wisdom literature', in 'A sentimental humanist', p. 37.

beings who by some flaw in their clay were pitifully equipped to achieve what they wanted out of life'.<sup>97</sup> Clark was not in fact present in Bonn on 10 November, 1938.<sup>98</sup> Perhaps another 'epiphany' he tells us occurred in Cologne Cathedral days later – 'I will never forget that moment. I had been vouchsafed a vision of what I had previously searched for in vain'<sup>99</sup> – is also fictitious. McKenna points out the literary convention Clark was mimicking in this description: Dostoevsky had such moments in 1867, when he saw Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* in Basel and Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* in Dresden, artistic confrontations that came to symbolise the spiritual crisis at the heart of his work.<sup>100</sup> Likewise, Clark's two 1938 'epiphanies' become central to the picture he wanted to develop of himself: the artist-creator-historian is moved to new levels of insight, whilst Old Europe is shown to be corrupt at its heart.

The *Kristallnacht* farrago also shows Clark's overwhelming desire not just to write history, but to place himself at the heart of it, a participant in events. Taking part in history, Clark and his ideas became the central elements in the story. He was pulling off a solipsistic trick, replacing the old myths of radicalism and nationalism with an alternative in his own image. Michael Cathcart has observed that Clark's preoccupations were his own, not Australia's.<sup>101</sup> The power of the autobiographical in Clark's work, influenced by Henry James' concept of the 'felt life', which he learned from his friend and correspondent, historian Kathleen Fitzpatrick, has been stressed.<sup>102</sup> The idea can, once again, be traced to Dostoevsky. Nikolay Strakhov, philosopher and close associate of the Russian novelist, describes his 'excitable and impressionable' nature; how a 'simple idea', often 'familiar and commonplace', would

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<sup>97</sup> Manning Clark, 'Themes in *A History of Australia*', p. 85.

<sup>98</sup> See: Mark McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity*, chapter 23: 'Remembering *Kristallnacht*', pp. 632–53.

<sup>99</sup> Manning Clark, *The Quest for Grace*, p. 75.

<sup>100</sup> In the back of his copies of Dostoevsky's novels, Clark noted the page numbers in which references to these moments appear; cited in Mark McKenna, 'Being there', p. 224.

<sup>101</sup> Michael Cathcart, 1995, cited by Mark McKenna, 'Being there', p. 206.

<sup>102</sup> Cited by Mark McKenna, 'Being there', p. 207. Fitzpatrick, like Clark, was as much interested in literature as history. Of Henry James, she says that 'many have been the occasions I have turned to him for help when the problems of the conduct of life were too difficult for me to solve unaided'; *Solid Bluestone Foundations*, Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1998 (first published 1983), p. 213. Susan Davies discusses Fitzpatrick's *magnum opus* on James (completed at the beginning of the 1970s after much labour, and 200,000 words in length) which, to her dismay, never found a publisher; 'Introduction', *Solid Blue Foundations*, p. xiii.

‘suddenly set him aflame and reveal itself to him in all its significance’: he ‘felt thought’, says Strakhov, ‘with unusual liveliness’.<sup>103</sup> As, we might aver, did Clark.

The centrality of personal experience is clear. Clark described embarking on the writing of the *History* in ‘a tiny box of a room in Oxford on a golden day of May of 1956’, the very venue and the glorious spring weather an integral part of the writing process. A few weeks earlier he was in Ireland, where he witnessed the ‘monstrous face’ of a be-suited Englishman lecturing to an Irish peasant on ‘The Laws of Political Economy’ in an 1847 political cartoon, as well as political graffiti on Northern Irish walls, and the patronising attitude of English students at a ‘wild party’ at Queen’s College, Belfast. Clark says that such incidents ‘underlined the distinction between those who only had Christ’s promises and those who were hard of heart’, and he compared the attitude of the English in Ireland to ‘those voices in Melbourne who used to explain with a most offensive smugness that those words about the chances of a rich man entering the kingdom of heaven did not apply to those who had won their wealth by their own virtues’. These experiences, he tells us, ‘influenced the tone’ of the early chapters of the *History*.<sup>104</sup>

It was common for him to use travel to furnish his historical imagination: he traversed the British Isles, ‘walking the streets for inspiration’, McKenna comparing him to ‘a film director in search of atmosphere’, drinking in ‘the sense of place’ and ‘hoping to colour his history with the same moods and feelings’. In his notebooks, he scribbled down his impressions of James Cook’s birthplace of Whitby and the surrounding area; of Edinburgh and Cork, where he noted the influence of drink and religion; of a Welsh Congregational church service in Clifton.<sup>105</sup> He tells us he saw, in London’s Brompton Oratory, a destitute alcoholic crying before the image of the Catholic Christ. In the summer of that year he also travelled to Rome, and on the way visited Cologne Cathedral, reacquainting himself with the fourteenth

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<sup>103</sup> Quoted in Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky*, p. xv.

<sup>104</sup> Manning Clark, ‘Themes in *A History of Australia*’, pp. 80–1.

<sup>105</sup> Mark McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity*, pp. 368–9.

century painting of Christ behind the altar which had originally fired his imagination in 1938.<sup>106</sup> This ‘montage of visions’, as McKenna calls it,<sup>107</sup> was foremost in his mind as he began to write.

As well as these physical tours, Clark portrayed his own life as a journey to understand the complex tension in his parents. This was his ‘quest for grace’, and the ‘puzzles’ of his childhood are ultimately unpicked over the course of his writing life: ‘I did not understand then, but I do now’, he repeats like a mantra:

It took over sixty years before I would view him [his father] with the eye of pity and the eye of love. By then I wanted to speak to him and say I now understood what had happened. By then it was too late: his body was rotting in the grave in Box Hill cemetery.<sup>108</sup>

The reader is given to understand that Clark’s own perception comes through his life’s work, the writing of history: ‘literature is life, and life is literature’, as he said.<sup>109</sup> As the historian achieves greatness through his work, so does the nation. So we see that Clark took what can only be described as the bold step of rejecting historians as a way of looking at the past: he advised young practitioners not to read any of their predecessors.<sup>110</sup> He was fond of imagining the day when a researcher would uncover all his Chifley Library borrowing slips and note he never took out a work of history.<sup>111</sup> The value to be gained from the *History* was literary, because this is how the deepest truths are revealed. ‘To be great as literature’, he said, was ‘the aim of all historians’:

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<sup>106</sup> Manning Clark, ‘Themes in *A History of Australia*’, p. 82.

<sup>107</sup> Mark McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity*, pp. 368–9.

<sup>108</sup> Manning Clark, *The Puzzles of Childhood*, p. 1.

<sup>109</sup> Manning Clark, *A Historian’s Apprenticeship*, p. 79.

<sup>110</sup> Cited in Mark McKenna, ‘Being there’, p. 200: ‘Clark warned historians not to read what others had to say until they’d completed their early drafts, ‘and maybe not then’.

<sup>111</sup> Nicholas Brown, ‘The Gamekeeper’s View: A Memoir’, p. 228.

(History) must be written by someone who has something to say about human nature... someone who has pondered deeply over the problems of life and death. Like the fox in the Greek fragment, the historian must know many things, but like the hedgehog, he must know one big thing – and feel it deeply.<sup>112</sup>

Clark had discovered the device of the epiphany in James Joyce.<sup>113</sup> Typing up extracts from *Stephen Hero* (1944) in which fragments of over-heard conversations as well as ordinary objects are equated with the power to deliver profound meaning, he argued that one of the greatest ‘problems’ in writing history was the communication of such epiphanies. Joyce defines the epiphany as ‘a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phrase of the mind itself’. The clock of the Ballast Office on Westmoreland Street, Dublin is one such object: ‘its soul, its whatness leap(ing) to us from the vestment of its appearance’. ‘The soul of the commonest object, the structure of which is so adjusted’, says Joyce (quoted by Clark) ‘seems to us radiant’: thus, ‘the object achieves its epiphany’.<sup>114</sup> Clark wanted to communicate such things: Abel Tasman’s address when planting the flag at Van Diemen’s Land in 1642 was an example he gave.<sup>115</sup> In order to tell William Wentworth’s story, he believed he needed to ‘describe scenes in which he participated’, and so he depicts Wentworth and others gathered to celebrate the departure of Governor Darling:

Wentworth always went in for everything ‘heels up’. On that day in October 1831 ‘Cooper’s and Wright’s best were poured out in libations’ at Vaucluse. Men were rioting in their huts. A band played ‘Over the hills and far away’. Human beings betray what they are like on big occasions. Eliza Darling... had her mind on a quite trivial thing as the uproar on Sydney Harbour became louder and

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<sup>112</sup> Manning Clark, ‘Rewriting Australian history’, p. 19.

<sup>113</sup> Manning Clark, manuscript of ‘Problems in writing Australian history’, 1960, Manning Clark Papers, Box 186, Folder 2.

<sup>114</sup> Extract from James Joyce, *Stephen Hero*, 1944, quoted in Manning Clark, ‘Problems in writing Australian history’.

<sup>115</sup> Manning Clark, ‘Problems in writing Australian history’.



louder. She wondered whether ‘all the coaxing in the world would ever get our girl’s hair to curl’. Wentworth was so carried away by his drunken frenzy that he did not pause to reflect on the significance of one event on that morning. The *Hooghly* was towed down the harbour by a steam boat. The change in the sub-culture had begun in Australia. The power of the class whose goodwill Wentworth had begun to cultivate, the landed gentry of New South Wales, was about to wither away. The ‘master-mistress of his passion’, his ambition to take the top place in a colonial version of a British aristocratic society, can never be realized, not just because of the flaws within the man himself but because material change will end this world of privilege and deference.

Clark focuses on minutiae and detail, using these ‘moments of illumination’ to reveal his themes. Change is revealed through a set-piece scene in which characters act as if they are in a novel. Clark’s Eliza Darling might be a woman in any number of Patrick White novels. He said of Wentworth that he was ‘a colonial Ishmael, a man who believed his hand should be raised against every man, because every man’s hand was raised against him’.<sup>116</sup>

For Clark, the greatest ‘epiphany’ was the arrival of the First Fleet.<sup>117</sup> This was a cornerstone of Australia’s history and his own *History*. Depicting it was one of the great challenges of his career. Rising to it in typical fashion, he stressed the Protestant origins of the colony, focusing on the religious ritual which occurred as the Europeans arrived at Sydney Cove. In the first month of the colony a multiple wedding ceremony was conducted (fourteen couples, he tells us); Governor Phillip swore allegiance to the King in an affirmation, Clark says, of ‘Protestant ascendancy’; the ‘sacrament of the Lord’s Supper’ was celebrated and Lieutenant Ralph Clark (no relation) ‘was so carried away by the solemn occasion that

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<sup>116</sup> Manning Clark, *A Historian’s Apprenticeship*, pp. 61–3.

<sup>117</sup> Manning Clark, ‘Problems in writing Australian history’.

he vowed to keep the table as long as he lived, as it was the first table that ever the Lord's Supper was taken from in this country'.<sup>118</sup> Clark's preoccupations are given centre stage; the actions of the first Europeans imparted with a symbolic weight of the historian's creation. 'The historian is a creative writer,' said Clark, 'using the past as his material'. His personal, poetic desires drive the selection of material, and there is an overt religiosity in the whole craft of history: 'the main problem for a historian in the end,' he concluded, 'is a statement of faith'.<sup>119</sup>

In fact, the idea that the historian might be reliant on his material is jettisoned. When Clark, like a nineteenth century romantic novelist, has Robert O'Hara Burke riding back to Melbourne to see his true love after the first day of his fateful expedition – 'overwhelmed by one of those rash impulses which swept through him when his heart was hot within him'<sup>120</sup> – we must conclude, as McKenna points out, that he had no way of knowing this.<sup>121</sup> How could he know, too, that 'no dark thoughts troubled' the members of Burke's expedition 'as they prepared for departure'? Clark paints Burke as a Shakespearian figure – he is like Lear on the heath, his great scheme brought crashing down by 'madness in his own heart',<sup>122</sup> or he is like Mitya Karamazov – the whole question of a nation's identity wrapped up in his character. History is a psycho-drama in which men wrestle with ethics, ideas, passions and spirituality, and in so doing shape Australia. As with his Macquarie, it is something in the soul which drives the Clarkian Burke on: he is a tragic figure, beset by a fatal flaw in his character, doing battle with himself in the terrible Australian elements. We can see what Clark meant when he said that 'my story was to be about men and women who through a defect in their being, such as overweening pride, were brought to their destruction'.<sup>123</sup> In this lies the tragedy and 'the eye of pity'. McKenna says that, in the tale of Burke and Wills, Clark 'came to see the embodiment of everything he had tried to convey in writing Australian

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<sup>118</sup> Manning Clark, *A History of Australia, Vol. I*, p. 89.

<sup>119</sup> Manning Clark, 'Problems in writing Australian history'.

<sup>120</sup> Manning Clark, *A History of Australia, Vol. IV*, p. 149.

<sup>121</sup> Mark McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity*, p. 485.

<sup>122</sup> Manning Clark, *A History of Australia, Vol. IV*, pp. 149/51.

<sup>123</sup> Manning Clark, *A Historian's Apprenticeship*, p. 23.

history... All that he wanted to say about man and his environment in Australia could be said in the telling of their tragic story'.<sup>124</sup> This was 'the something more', the new myth which would set Australia apart and create a national story of depth and grandeur. And this is achieved through literary, not historical, methods.

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<sup>124</sup> Mark McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity*, p. 478.

v) The shaman in the 'weird' landscape

Burke's journey into Australia's heart of darkness was, like Kurtz's journey up the Congo, shaped and defined by the landscape:

They had come to assert the dominion of the white man over every living thing. They did not pause to look at the carvings on the rocks with their intimation of a kingdom quite different from what was eating at the heart of Mr Burke. They saw the gaunt gidgee trees, the wattles which emitted an unbearable stink before rain, the fragile, sombre mulga, the tussocks of grass, the rock pools, the flat, uninviting earth, and the apostle birds. They shuddered and went on their way to the Cooper.<sup>125</sup>

When Clark went to England in 1938 his letters home became fixated on the memory of the Australian landscape, rejecting the idea that 'deepest antiquity' lay in Europe: it was, in fact, in his homeland. This idea was inspired, not by millennia of Aboriginal presence on the land, but by the 'weird melancholy' described by Marcus Clarke, and the unearthly descriptions of the landscape to be found in D.H. Lawrence's Australian novel, *Kangaroo*.<sup>126</sup> Here we see how Clark's ideas travelled, fatally, on a divergent path to Judith Wright's. He could have tried to 'pause' and understand the ancient nature of the land, but, like his Burke, he failed to do so. McKenna says he was 'too much a prisoner of European civilization to embrace the history or culture of indigenous Australia'.<sup>127</sup> Later, he would regret the way his *History* had not paid enough attention to the Aborigines.<sup>128</sup> By then it was too late. Wright, who had written of the First Australians in poetry and in historical prose, had set a different course. She refused

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<sup>125</sup> Manning Clark, *A History of Australia, Vol. IV*, p. 151.

<sup>126</sup> See: Mark McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity*, p. 146. For more on Lawrence in Australia, see Chapter 8.

<sup>127</sup> Mark McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity*, p. 233.

<sup>128</sup> Mentioned in Mark McKenna, 'Clark, Charles Manning (1915–1991)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/clark-charles-manning-225/text29719>, published online 2015; accessed online 16/4/2018.

to base an idea of Australia on the observations of a sojourning Englishman. Her vision was *Australian*, inspired by the Aboriginality of the ancient continent. Clark could not make this conceptual leap, and Horne, his supporter obsessed with intellectual trends from overseas, made the same mistake.<sup>129</sup>

As his research developed, Clark increased focus on the landscape, as his footnotes attest: the above description is cited ‘personal visit to site, 13 May 1975’. When he tells us that, by the time Burke and Wills reached Camp 119, ‘their only satisfaction was to taste the salt water which swept over the boggy ground at high tide’, we find out he knows this from a visit he made on 21 to 22 July 1975.<sup>130</sup> His notebooks became ‘one of his most important sources’; McKenna notes that this was ‘the kind of notebook few historians keep, a record of personal and sensory impressions’ more akin to the musings of an artists or a novelist. His method ‘was that of a painter’.<sup>131</sup> Clark professed particular admiration for Patrick White and Sidney Nolan, as well as other poets and artists such as Hope, James McAuley and William Dobell. They did not, he said, indulge in the ‘aggressive brag about the dinkum Aussie’, but produced art engaged in ‘the universal problems of mankind’.<sup>132</sup> The historian’s job was the same. Like Voss in White’s eponymous novel, Burke is pitted against the unforgiving environment, and this clash creates the story, not just of the man, but of Australia. The lonely figure in the Australian landscape, such as Burke or Ned Kelly (as imagined by Nolan) or Voss or Stan Parker (by White) becomes, in Clark, a historical, as well as an artistic, idea. Such a figure was not just a symbol of Australia; such a figure *was* Australia.

Clark described a visit to Menindee in 1967, where he ‘stood in silence in the room in Maiden’s Hotel where Burke and Wills had stayed on 19 October 1860, and where Burke... had raged and stormed against the men – till then unaware of that side of him’. He depicts many other such moments of personal

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<sup>129</sup> See Chapters 8 and 10 for more on these themes.

<sup>130</sup> Manning Clark, *A History of Australia, Vol. IV*, pp. 151/4.

<sup>131</sup> Mark McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity*, pp. 481/4.

<sup>132</sup> Manning Clark, ‘The Writing of History’, talk to the Victorian Historical Society, 29/9/1967, in *Speaking Out of Turn*, p. 64.

communion with his subjects, describing ‘the quest’ for Burke as ‘unending’. It is a quest taking place in the landscape, not the archives, and the historian’s personal encounters with the sites of Burke’s epic journey are fundamental to his understanding of events. The journey evokes connections with great art and literature: in Broken Hill ‘the words of Verdi’s *Pie Jesu Domine* came into my mind’: ‘Have pity, Lord, on our profound error. You alone can take away the evil from the world’. And as the historian considers the mourning gentlemen gathered ‘to pay their last respects to two of their class’ (Burke and Wills), he relates the ‘moving cry’ from the pit – ‘What about poor Charlie Gray?’ – to (naturally) ‘Marmeladov’s hope in *Crime and Punishment* that Christ will forgive drunkards, indeed especially drunkards’.<sup>133</sup>

In one 1975 diary entry as he followed Burke and Wills’ trail through the desert Clark wrote: ‘the spirit of a place, a place which belongs to those who do not crack up’.<sup>134</sup> These would seem to be the Aborigines, only now vaguely acknowledged. It was Burke who ‘cracked up’, and again we see an allusion to Dostoevsky: specifically, Book IV of *The Brothers Karamazov*, entitled ‘Crack-ups’. The Russian term (*nadryvy*) is not easily translated: it can mean ‘cracks’, ‘ruptures’, ‘harrowings’ and ‘hysterias’: it ‘connotes a breaking, tearing and straining beneath an intolerable weight of mental, emotional and spiritual suffering’.<sup>135</sup> Clark’s characters, in similar fashion, progress through the Australian landscape under great mental strain, their destination seemingly inevitable destruction. Clark says he ‘wanted to show Burke and his party as pitiful victims of mid-nineteenth century British arrogance – and of the new faith in science and progress’; he had discovered ‘another big thing about the story of human beings in the continent’, namely that ‘the Earth abideth forever’. He concludes: ‘the earth and the sky were indifferent to all our striving, all our dreams, all our visions’.<sup>136</sup> Images of Caspar David Friedrich’s lone Alpine traveller are summoned in the reader’s mind: Clark’s vision is a Romantic one; it is egocentric and

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<sup>133</sup> Manning Clark, *A Historian’s Apprenticeship*, pp. 69/71.

<sup>134</sup> Manning Clark, diary entry, Weipa 26/7/1975, quoted in Mark McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity*, p. 484.

<sup>135</sup> David McDuff, footnote in *The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 997.

<sup>136</sup> Manning Clark, *A Historian’s Apprenticeship*, pp. 72–3.

solipsistic – powerful creator-thinkers conjure a nation in to being. Burke is such ideas made flesh, his charismatic presence indivisible from the landscape.

Like Burke, Nolan, who paints his story, or Clark, who writes it, are archetypal masculine figures, shamans of the Australian experience. The ‘madness’ in Burke is also in Nolan, in White, and it is, he would have us believe, in Clark – ‘we give what we have, the rest is the madness of art’.<sup>137</sup> It is a ‘madness’ shared by the continent’s pioneers and their memorialisers in paint, verse or prose, and it is an intensely male experience. Clark, in fact, used his wife, Dymphna, to further his own intellectual fantasies, appropriating her life and her ideas. His supposed experiences in Nazi Bonn in November 1938 were in fact hers.<sup>138</sup> With her European heritage and the political affiliations of her father, says Brian Matthews, she ‘brought to the experience’ of walking ‘among the glass and wreckage in the morning light of 11 November’ a background and understanding ‘more complex than Clark brought to his eventual appropriation of it’.<sup>139</sup> He made a pivotal moment of twentieth century history central to his own psyche; a selfish act, an act of consuming masculinity, which in many ways denied his wife her own experiences, and even, one could argue, the victims of the Nazis theirs. To force oneself into the centre of history in such a way is an egotistical act. When he peppers his *History* with references based on his own journeys, the story he has to tell is again undermined by his need to place himself squarely in the centre of it. Objectivity is absent. The virile histrionics required for such a move serve only to weary the reader and, worse, alienate him or, especially, her: Kathleen Fitzpatrick complained to Clark that the *History* ‘makes me feel a homeless person – it has no place for women’.<sup>140</sup> It was the supposedly creative engagement of men with the continent that gripped his imagination. He did write some women into his narrative – examples being Elizabeth Macarthur, wife of John (according to Clark, she believed that God ‘had given her dearest love the gift of Midas, and He had given her that precious gift of a loving heart’) and Western

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<sup>137</sup> Manning Clark, paraphrasing Henry James, cited in Mark McKenna, ‘Being there’, p. 199.

<sup>138</sup> See: Mark McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity*, pp. 638–9.

<sup>139</sup> Brian Matthews, *Manning Clark: A Life*, Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2010, pp. 428/33.

<sup>140</sup> Kathleen Fitzpatrick to Manning Clark, 14/5/1978, cited in Mark McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity*, p. 590.

Australian botanist Georgiana Molloy (another example of the God-fearing colonial wife: ‘she likened her life to the Garden of Eden before Eve was expelled from paradise’).<sup>141</sup> He also wrote much about Nettie Palmer.<sup>142</sup> However, these are three of the exceptions, and for the most part his grandiloquent prose reinforces a male vision of the world.

John Carey has written about the ‘exclusively male fantasy’ of the ‘twentieth century intellectual’, railing against the ‘feminization’ perpetrated by mass culture.<sup>143</sup> Clark, like many of the intellectuals Carey describes, abjured this ‘titillation culture’ (as we have seen him call it). Clark kept a wartime copy of *The Publicist*, P.R. Stephensen’s virulently nationalist journal, which, in an ‘A to Z of Nationalism’, defined feminism as a ‘symptom of national decadence’.<sup>144</sup> Such a view tallies with the ‘Nietzschean tradition’, described by Carey as being so influential on early-twentieth century intellectuals, in which ‘the emancipation and education of women were signs of modern shallowness’. Nietzsche’s followers saw themselves as lonely heroes holding out against the depredations of a mass culture primed to destroy western civilization. Philistinism could only be kept at bay by the elect, a small band of ‘intellectual aristocrats’ who alone could comprehend and foster high culture.<sup>145</sup>

Clark may have balked at describing himself as an aristocrat, but in the Australian context it was the lone Romantic creator in the desiccated landscape – his ‘mythopoeic site’ as McQueen called it<sup>146</sup> –

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<sup>141</sup> Manning Clark, *A History of Australia Volume III: The Beginnings of an Australian Civilization 1824–1851*, Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1973, p. 30 and *A History of Australia Volume II: New South Wales and Van Diemen’s Land 1822–1838*, Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1968, p. 21.

<sup>142</sup> For some of his opinions on Nettie Palmer, from *Volume VI*, see Chapter 3.

<sup>143</sup> John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, pp. 72/183. Some of the subjects of Carey’s book include such canonical giants as George Bernard Shaw, T.S. Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, George Gissing, H.G. Wells and Clive Bell. The lone woman is Virginia Woolf. In Chapter 2 we noted Christesen’s demand for a ‘virile’ culture, and the genesis of his and Stephensen’s ideas in the European intellectual currents explored by Carey.

<sup>144</sup> *The Publicist*, no. 61, 1/8/1941, found in Manning Clark Papers, Box 194, Folder 6. There is also an unpleasant letter from Stephensen to Manning and Dymphna Clark, dated 19/8/1952, in the Manning Clark Papers, Box 1, Folder 2. Startling in his anti-Semitism and racism, Stephensen says that ‘I’m thinking there should be a Non-Jewish Council Against Communism and Semitism, to restore common sense’, and defends the White Australia Policy: ‘If Australia is to be mongrelized, like the U.S.A., by the admission of Asians, Jews, Italians, the prospects of National Unity and of a distinctive Australian Culture will soon disappear’. He concludes: ‘I’m expecting that, before the end of the century, the White Races everywhere will combine for self-preservation.’ What the Clarks thought of it, or whether they replied, is unsure.

<sup>145</sup> John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, pp. 8/72.

<sup>146</sup> Humphrey McQueen, 1987, cited by Mark McKenna, ‘Being there’, p. 203.



asking what it was like ‘to be a human being in this harsh, weird and beautiful land of Australia’; or contemplating ‘what Mozart said in the last *Requiem*’: ‘that there must be someone, somewhere, who will forgive us all for our great folly and madness’.<sup>147</sup> McKenna draws attention to the Charles Blackman sketch, ‘Drifting’, hanging in Clark’s Canberra sitting room:<sup>148</sup> the picture depicts a ‘ghostly’ form, defying the current; an obvious reference to Clark himself, to his artistic confreres, indeed to all intellectuals, as well as to their subjects, to Burke, Kelly or Voss, the men who symbolise the superhuman battle with these forces of philistinism threatening to smother the continent in a suffocating blanket of materialism, and thus rescuing Australia from a terrible fate.

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<sup>147</sup> Manning Clark, interview with Hazel de Berg, 1967, National Library of Australia, Canberra, quoted in Mark McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity*, p. 431; and ‘What Newman means to me’, p. 206.

<sup>148</sup> Mark McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity*, p. 452.

vi) Conclusion

A.G.L. Shaw said of Clark's work that it was '*a* vision, not *the* vision; *a* history, not *the* history'.<sup>149</sup> His dislocation from mainstream historiography, his lax relationship with the facts, his literary themes and rhetorical flourishes, his wilfulness and his intensity, and his lacunae and perverse preoccupations, are all hard to stomach for the modern reader. But they take Australia seriously in ways previously inconceivable, and it is in this that Clark's importance lies, because, as a refutation of the cultural cringe and a statement of Australia's importance, what could be more potent? 'Historians,' he said, 'should come back to the great themes they abandoned when they joined in the vain search for a science of society'.<sup>150</sup> Undoubtedly, he 'returned' to these themes himself and, as Horne argued, his engagement with intellectual ideas was worthy in itself, as Australia tried to become an intelligent nation.

We might take issue with the ideas, but the fact is that Clark had ideas, and he saw Australian in sweeping terms, as a great canvas on which to paint powerful images. When Paul Keating went to Clark's house to listen to Mahler he did so because he hoped that, in company with this portentous shaman of the Australian story, he could 'suck the life experience'.<sup>151</sup> As Clark fought against the Kingdom of Nothingness, hoping that his countrymen would discourse philosophically over their schooners and understand their unique place in the world, so his political acolyte tried to mould a self-confident and intellectually mature nation. It was a cultural awareness that both men strived for – a high culture, steeped in the Western tradition, learned, historical, and, of course, Australian. But Clark's ideas and his historical methodology now seem so old fashioned, and while we may say that the 'enormous condescension of posterity' (as E.P. Thompson termed it)<sup>152</sup> fuels our judgment, nevertheless it is worth remembering that Clark's eyes were very firmly focused on that posterity. His 'national book' was, in his mind, a great work

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<sup>149</sup> A.G.L. Shaw, speaking at 'New Interpretations of Australian History' seminar, 1963.

<sup>150</sup> Manning Clark, 'Rewriting Australian history', p. 19.

<sup>151</sup> Quoted in Mark McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity*, p. 611.

<sup>152</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 12.

of literature designed to shape a nation as all such works must do. The ambition was amazing and the challenge to the cringe audacious; but the relevance, in twenty first century Australia, is dwindling, and posterity's verdict on the would-be mythologiser of the nation is cruel.



## CHAPTER 5

### Brian Fitzpatrick: ‘The Origins of the People are not in the Library’



Brian Fitzpatrick: ‘One of the great iconoclasts of our age.’

#### i) Introduction

Brian Fitzpatrick was an anti-authoritarian. This was the bedrock of his writing, his historical practice, his personality and his life. His anti-authoritarianism went hand-in-hand with his radicalism, and his heroes were Paine, Cobbett and Hazlitt: the original literary radicals. He despised philistinism with a vehemence matching his hatred of authority: ‘the philistine,’ says Don Watson in his biography of the historian, was ‘an enemy of almost the same dimensions as authority, indeed, they were almost synonymous’.<sup>1</sup> If authority maintained privilege, obstructed social justice and negated civil liberties, it did so using the law and political power, of course, but also, in the Australian context, through the

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<sup>1</sup> Don Watson, *Brian Fitzpatrick: A Radical Life*, Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1978, p. xix. There are eighteen references to philistinism in the index of Watson’s book.

manipulation, sidelining and wilful ignoring of culture. Without an interested and engaged intellectual class, Australia would forever be a 'nation without ideas' (Donald Horne's term). Like Horne, Fitzpatrick was a campaigner for a free, open and civilized society, and he viewed as his enemy anyone who obstructed these aims. Although (citing novelist Malcolm Bradbury) he asserted that 'it is as well I am a liberal, and can love all men; for if I were not, I doubt if I could',<sup>2</sup> his work in fact testifies to his love of Australia and its people in the face of the many injustices he identified as having been visited upon them, most obviously by the pernicious Imperial British, not to mention their lackeys, the Australian conservative class. He said he hated 'few', before sketching a lengthy list of those he did, in fact, hate, including 'governments, pretend-oppositions in Parliament, majorities, mobs ... the numerous assemblages of scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites', not to mention 'jacks of office', 'wretches who wantonly harm the innocent or weak' and 'all the Cold War congeries of spies and provocateurs'.<sup>3</sup> A fighter for the common people of strong socialist principles, he was also well aware of his own hankering after a cultured and engaged intellectual elite, and viewed this as a prerequisite for a civilized, grown-up Australia.

Fitzpatrick was quite a close associate of Clark; the two hovered in each other's orbits over the years until Fitzpatrick's death in 1965. In later life Clark professed to have 'loved' the older man; but he was also the object of his attack as he 'rewrote' Australian history.<sup>4</sup> Fitzpatrick is remembered as an economic historian, and his interest in arts and letters might seem a strange bedfellow with his other, worldly concerns of wool and wheat, factories and roads, imports and exports. But his overarching concern, the dominance of British imperial capital, reflected the cultural nationalists' own almost

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<sup>2</sup> Malcolm Bradbury, *Eating people is wrong* (1960), quoted in Brian Fitzpatrick, untitled autobiographical essay, submitted to *Meanjin*, unpublished, 1965, Brian Fitzpatrick Papers, National Library of Australia, Canberra, MS 4965, Box 52, Folder 58.

<sup>3</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick, untitled autobiographical essay. The list, as mentioned, is lengthy, and also includes 'informers, delators, turncoats, traitors, timorous persons, corrupters of children and ignoramuses, employers of stool-pigeons to trap the gullible, placemen, time-servers, double-talkers and buck-passers' and, finally, 'fundamentalists, i.e., religious and political controversialists who try to justify untenable positions repugnant to reasoning persons'.

<sup>4</sup> Fitzpatrick was one of Clark's radical nationalist targets in 'Rewriting Australian history', 1956; long after Fitzpatrick had died Clark defensively said, when challenged, that he had 'loved that man'; cited in Stuart Macintyre, 'The Radical and the Mystic', *Against the Grain*, p. 29.

obsessive concentration on the influence of Home. Furthermore, his interest in how Australians could help themselves, his distaste for dreamers or those who would look elsewhere for the answers (with William Lane a notable such figure in the past, and the plethora of expatriate cultural figures in the present) also fits closely with the concerns of those foot-soldiers of cultural nationalism who stayed in Australia to, in Fitzpatrick's own words, 'fight it out'.<sup>5</sup> Come the early-sixties, Fitzpatrick and his friend Clem Christesen were corresponding enthusiastically about their hopes of resuscitating the commitment of the war years and igniting an 'Australian Renaissance'.<sup>6</sup> Aiming in his own life to 'live intelligently', Fitzpatrick hoped this was the way in which the full breadth of Australian life and affairs could be conducted.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick, 'Drama of the false dawn', *The Australasian Book News and Literary Journal*, vol. 2, no. 6, December 1947, pp. 306–7, Brian Fitzpatrick Papers, Box 51, Folder 55.

<sup>6</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick to C.B. Christesen, 17/9/1962, Brian Fitzpatrick Papers, Box 29, Folder 9.

<sup>7</sup> Don Watson, 'Living intelligently', chapter 2 of *A Radical Life*, pp. 28–53.

ii) An iconoclast on the margins

Iconoclasm, according to Brian Fitzpatrick's daughter, was 'the very core of his being'; he loved nothing so much as mounting a 'challenge to conventional wisdom'.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, publisher Andrew Fabinyi, writing to Fitzpatrick's widow Dorothy after his death, described him as 'one of the great iconoclasts of our age'.<sup>9</sup> Whether Dorothy found these words of comfort is probably moot: her late husband's lifetime of baiting authority, attacking sacred cows and making enemies across the political spectrum, in universities and, not insignificantly, in the nation's pubs, meant that life with him was one lived out in a small rented flat in the otherwise upmarket Melbourne suburb of Toorak, with little security or income.

In the early-twenties Fitzpatrick had travelled to Europe, a sojourn which remains shadowy to the biographer. Seemingly consisting of drunken misadventures and failed attempts at a career in journalism, he also spent the time in the persistent wooing of Kathleen Pitt, whom he had met as an under-graduate in Melbourne, and who was now undertaking post-graduate studies at Cambridge. Fitzpatrick followed her around, travelling with her to Paris, and when they returned to Australia they were briefly and unhappily married.<sup>10</sup> Breaking free from conventional bourgeois existence, he took rooms in the so-called 'House of Culture and Rest' (a bohemian bedsit shared with writer Judah Waten and others) aiming, through the committed pursuit of writing, political engagement and heavy drinking, to stay 'in touch with life and politics'.<sup>11</sup> His profile peaked in the late-thirties and the forties, the period of publication of his best-known historical works, his column in the tabloid newspaper *Smith's Weekly*

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<sup>8</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, in conversation during seminar at the University of Sydney, 6/9/2011.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Fabinyi to Dorothy Fitzpatrick, 6/9/1965, Brian Fitzpatrick Papers, Box 31, Folder 58.

<sup>10</sup> Fitzpatrick sailed for England in July 1926 and returned November 1927; Don Watson, *A Radical Life*, p. 29. Kathleen wrote to her ex-husband (7/4/1964) declining an invitation to his testimonial dinner. She wrote that 'your marriage to me was a youthful mistake from which you made a quick and happy recovery but mine to you was a mistake of another order as the effect of it was to make it impossible for me ever to marry again and thus to deprive me of much that makes life worth living.' (Brian Fitzpatrick Papers, Box 58, Folder 3.) The deep sadness of her situation is apparent – her seeming inability to re-marry (because, one presumes, of her Catholic faith) and the fact that she kept his name illustrating the difficulties faced by women in that era. Brian is mentioned only once in Kathleen's memoir, *Solid Bluestone Foundations*, p. 187.

<sup>11</sup> Don Watson, *A Radical Life*, pp. 51–2.



giving him a platform of ample profile from which to inveigh against his favoured targets.<sup>12</sup> However, the regular columns dried up, as did the prolific flow of weighty historical tomes, and Fitzpatrick was forced to disseminate his ideas via self-published newsletters with little circulation or impact on his pecuniary straits. His voice, it would seem, had become marginalised after the Labor defeat, not to mention the folding of *Smith's Weekly*, in 1949. The subsequent years were, as Clark called them in a nod to the effects of Fitzpatrick's alcoholism, 'the years of the ravaged face'.<sup>13</sup> His papers in the National Library of Australia attest to the difficulties of his life as, by now married for a second time and with two children to support, he was constantly applying for grants, jobs and fellowships, ultimately finding himself forced to earn a living in the most prosaic of circumstances, at one stage sorting letters at the GPO.<sup>14</sup>

His unwillingness to submit to authority saw him thrown out of the Labor Party in 1944<sup>15</sup> – he was nothing if not his own man, and his integrity and bloody-mindedness closed many doors to him. These traits also gave him substance as a historian, writer and activist. Not least among his concerns was his implacable opposition to censorship and advocacy of civil liberties, and an important aspect of his career was his integral role with the Australian Council for Civil Liberties (ACCL), an organisation he was a founding member of (in 1935) and for which he served as Secretary until his death (1965).<sup>16</sup> The testimonial held for him towards the end of his life, attended by a wide ranging cast of friends and

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<sup>12</sup> Fitzpatrick's major works from this period include *British Imperialism and Australia 1788–1833*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1939; *A Short history of the Australian Labor Movement*, Melbourne: Rawson's Book Shop, 1940; *The British Empire in Australia: An Economic History, 1834–1939*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1941; *The Australian People 1788–1945*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1946. The rapid succession of books is testimony to his legendary capacity for hard work – Geoffrey Serle says that 'his energy, power of concentration, determination and speed of writing were phenomenal'; 'Fitzpatrick, Brian Charles (1905–1965)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/fitzpatrick-brian-charles-10195/text18015>, first published in hardcopy 1996; accessed online 13/10/2017.

<sup>13</sup> Manning Clark, Brian Fitzpatrick memorial lecture, Victorian Council for Civil Liberties, 21/7/1984, Papers of Dorothy Fitzpatrick, National Library of Australia, Canberra, MS 9920, Box 8, File 4.

<sup>14</sup> For a list of the jobs Fitzpatrick applied for through the 1950s and into the 1960s, as well as mention of his time spent sorting mail at the GPO, see Don Watson, *A Radical Life*, pp. 272–6; see also Brian Fitzpatrick Papers, Box 29, Folders 1–10. One job he applied for (and did not get) was the editorship of the Victorian *Dairyfarmer*. Watson notes that none of his referees were dairy farmers – they were H.V. Evatt, Sir Keith Hancock (eminent historian), Clem Christesen and ANU Professor J.W. Davidson. Watson says this role was 'an unlikely vehicle for scholarship or radicalism' (p. 273).

<sup>15</sup> Don Watson, *A Radical Life*, p. 159.

<sup>16</sup> Geoffrey Serle, 'Fitzpatrick, Brian Charles (1905–1965)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.

supporters from all sides of the political spectrum, including Harold Holt, Justice Sir John Barry, Sir John Latham, Christesen and many others, attests to the regard in which he was held.<sup>17</sup>

Watson contends that the quality of Fitzpatrick's writing did not in any way deteriorate through the fifties,<sup>18</sup> and others have underlined the singularity of his voice: he may have drifted out of fashion (a process that was well under way in his lifetime)<sup>19</sup> but, as R.W. Connell has pointed out, he was a man with 'no successors' – 'at least, none who showed the interconnections between economic and political processes and placed them in a world context'. His was a 'remarkable achievement', but the 'synthesis' that was his particular strength (even if 'flawed') was undermined as the universities demanded more specialism, while his political ideas lost momentum in the 'new conservative hegemony' of the Menzies era.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the targets of his writings were largely untroubled by his barbs.<sup>21</sup>

Fitzpatrick's 'primary assumption', as Robin Gollan put it, was that nineteenth and early-twentieth century Australian history was 'an aspect of British imperial history', and within this context he was 'concerned with Australia as an emerging economy and society in its own right'.<sup>22</sup> It has been pointed out that his biographer is 'far more confident of his importance as a radical than of his impact as a historian'.<sup>23</sup> In the biography's conclusion the radicalism is lionised and the history barely touched upon.<sup>24</sup> His radical politics were remarkably constant throughout his life, and he pursued his interests and goals with enormous energy and tenacity to the end.<sup>25</sup> A self-confessed 'fellow-traveller', plainly stating his

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<sup>17</sup> Fitzpatrick's testimonial dinner was held at Union House, the University of Melbourne, on 19/6/1964. See Brian Fitzpatrick Papers, Box 45.

<sup>18</sup> Don Watson, *A Radical Life*, p. 287.

<sup>19</sup> His ideas came under attack from fellow historians: see, for example, the 'counter-revolution in Australian historiography' debate, discussed later in this chapter.

<sup>20</sup> R.W. Connell, *Ruling Class, Ruling Culture: Studies of Conflict, Power and Hegemony in Australian Life*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977, p. 9. Note that Humphrey McQueen also praised Ward, otherwise the subject of his stringent criticism, for his 'synthesis' and the breadth of his field (see Conclusion to Chapter 6). It is quite common to hear historians mourn the time when their forebears were able to be less specialised.

<sup>21</sup> Don Watson cites the example of the Australian Labor Party leadership ignoring his imprecations for an independent foreign policy, *A Radical Life*, p. 285.

<sup>22</sup> Robin Gollan, Brian Fitzpatrick obituary, *Overland*, no. 23, December 1965, p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> Stuart Macintyre, 'The Radical and the Mystic', p. 30.

<sup>24</sup> Don Watson, *A Radical Life*, pp. 283–7.

<sup>25</sup> For the constancy of Fitzpatrick's political position, see Don Watson, *A Radical Life*, p. xvi.

‘discrimination’ for the ‘organised poor’ against the ‘organised rich’, he viewed the cause of the Labor movement in Australia as primarily about the promotion of ‘social justice’, as opposed to opposing efforts ‘to retain privilege’ which were ‘in opposition to the advancement of society’.<sup>26</sup> By the thirties he felt, says Watson, that democracy was ‘at risk’, and his work, driven by a preoccupation with civil liberties and the democratic ideal, was thus unavoidably political: ‘the very act of writing history was for him a political one’.<sup>27</sup> Thus his preoccupation with, for example, British dominance of the Australian economy, a recurring theme as he investigated foreign investment and monopoly capitalism. He made it clear what he saw as the motivation of the imperial power: ‘the imperial authority could and did decide what capital should be introduced, and the purposes to which it might be put and this discretion was unfettered for two-thirds of a century’. By the time colonial governments assumed control, the pattern had been set as ‘a substantial part of the enduring structure had already been built and allotted, and ‘the introduction of Capital judiciously applied’ had begun to realise the British expectation that such imperial management could ‘not fail to produce the most beneficial results’.<sup>28</sup> Latterly, the imperial hegemony had been continued and extended by means of, chiefly, monopoly, a contention he made clear in his polemical pamphlet *The Rich get Richer* (1944), which explained ‘why monopoly is an evil’: ‘it tends to bring about an economic subjugation, from which follows a social subjugation, of the people and the nation to powers which have been imposed upon them, not set up by them’.<sup>29</sup> Economic and political authority thus blighted Australia and served to restrict the rights and freedoms of its people.

Of great importance, as Fitzpatrick saw it, was that this economic and cultural dependence on Britain were not mutually exclusive, they were very much a part of the same situation. Australia depended on Britain for its ideas and its understanding of itself, as well as for its economic prosperity. How, in such

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<sup>26</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick, *A Short History of the Australian Labor Movement*, p. 9.

<sup>27</sup> Don Watson, *A Radical Life*, p. 65.

<sup>28</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick, draft manuscript for *Australian Capitalism*, 1942, chapter 4, Brian Fitzpatrick Papers, Box 52, Folder 56; he cites Lord Bathurst, British Secretary of State, writing to the agent of the Van Diemen’s Land Company, 1825, *Historical Records of Australia*, Series III, Vol. IV, p. 270.

<sup>29</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick, *The Rich get Richer: Facts of the Growth of Monopoly in the Economic Structure of Australia before and during the War*, Melbourne: Rawson’s Book Shop, 1944, p. 5, Brian Fitzpatrick Papers, Box 51, Folder 53.

circumstances, could the nation be independent and self-confident? The economic and political elites extended their dominance to the cultural sphere, and their philistinism served to retard Australia's cultural growth, and thus social advancement as an independent, self-confident nation as well. This was why it was so important that Australia develop its own literary, artistic and intellectual culture so that the elites dominating the nation might be defeated, their hegemony replaced with a democratic national idea.

iii) The 'situation' of the Australian writer: The 'trade in literature'

The fine line walked by the cultural nationalists between high culture and the Australian democratic tradition was never so treacherous as it was for Brian Fitzpatrick. There was no way this man of the material world and campaigner for the common people could find common ground with the metaphysics of Clark's historical universe. But at the same time his was a vision that saw a vibrant literature and fertile intellectual environment as central to a free and democratic society. Like Clark he took some inspiration from Tocqueville, quoting his attack on the literature of democratic, commercial societies as being 'infested with a tribe of writers who look upon letters as a mere trade'.<sup>30</sup> Fitzpatrick diagnosed the same situation in Australia, as did Christesen, who had bemoaned the 'art of literature' giving way to the 'trade of writing'.<sup>31</sup> 'I submit that the Australian scholar has failed the Australian reader time and again', said Fitzpatrick, deploring the lack of interest in home-grown books and, quoting Schopenhauer, declaring that 'the right standard for judging the intellectual work of any generation is supplied, not by the great minds that make their appearance in it, but *by the way contemporaries receive their work*'.<sup>32</sup> He also bewailed the state of Australian publishing, burdened by the restrictions imposed by the British Board of Trade on Australian book imports. Other issues included the struggles of the 'little magazines' ('the economics of the Australian literary magazine... I am sure would shock many of you'), the lack of free Australian libraries, the paltry import of foreign books because of the crisis in the American dollar,<sup>33</sup> and the seemingly triumphal march of philistinism around the world, exacerbating the Australian public's already entrenched attitudes. He stated that he knew 'of not a single serious writer in Australia today who can devote his full time to quality writing'.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, cited in Brian Fitzpatrick, 'The trade in literature', undated (mid- to late-1940s), Brian Fitzpatrick Papers, Box 53, Folder 64.

<sup>31</sup> C.B. Christesen, 'The Author in Australia', undated (c. 1948/9), Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 73.

<sup>32</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, cited by Brian Fitzpatrick, 'The trade in literature'; emphasis Fitzpatrick's.

<sup>33</sup> There was a worldwide shortage of the US dollar in the late-1940s as it became the world's reserve currency.

<sup>34</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick, 'The trade in literature'.

Fitzpatrick was deeply pessimistic at the lack of a cultured Australian class: there ‘has never been a dominant class in our society which has set a high value on the aesthetic mode of understanding or experiencing human life’, he said, implying Australia’s wide-ranging shortcomings in historical consciousness, aesthetics and literary modes of expression.<sup>35</sup> The materialist powers-that-be mistrusted – or, worse, ignored – the labours of the literary classes, and the egalitarian ethos of the nation only encouraged suspicion of intellectual pursuits. Market forces, exchange rates, commercial imperatives and uninterested governments all contributed to a cultural crisis magnified by parochialism and the tyranny of distance (not that Fitzpatrick used Blainey’s as-yet-uncoined term). Fitzpatrick put it in pseudo-scientific terms (Serle calls his style ‘often wordy and pedantic’):<sup>36</sup>

The total [of intellectual and artistic activity in nineteenth century Australia] was fairly considerable in relation to the population, but the intensity was almost non-existent. Thus our society has been administered more by the forward drive of its inertia in the mass, which happened to be accelerating and therefore kept ahead of its problems, than it was administered by direct intelligence and imagination.<sup>37</sup>

In this atmosphere, writers and artists had to build the ‘cultural capital’ of the ‘Australian tradition’ (the name of an essay he wrote before the publication of Phillips’ book of the same name).<sup>38</sup> Fitzpatrick identified ‘the situation of the writer’, quoting Henry Miller, who, describing the life of a writer, artist or musician in America as a ‘living death’, said that ‘a corn-fed hog’ had a favourable life in comparison. ‘A considerable number of Australian writers, painters and musicians feel the same way,’ said Fitzpatrick, which was why ‘so many’ fled Australia ‘for the more stimulating intellectual climate of Europe’. He

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<sup>35</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick, ‘The trade in literature’.

<sup>36</sup> Geoffrey Serle, ‘Fitzpatrick, Brian Charles (1905–1965)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.

<sup>37</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick, ‘The trade in literature’.

<sup>38</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick, ‘The Australian Tradition’, *Southern Stories, Poems and Paintings*, Melbourne: Dolphin Publications, 1945, pp. 5–17. Ward also used the term, nearly taking it as the title for his most famous book, before Phillips beat him to it and he had to settle for *The Australian Legend*. See Chapter 6.

maintained that many remained to ‘draw their stimulus and inspiration from their native soil’, but there was still an abject lack of encouragement for them in Australia, where ‘a corn-fed hog, it is often felt, has a higher standing in a community where agriculture is ranked above culture’. But he urged action:

Now less than ever should the serious creative artist surrender to the Philistines  
and to commerce. Years ago Zola boldly proclaimed: ‘The truth is on the march’.

That is the role of the writer today – to try to make that truth march.<sup>39</sup>

Fitzpatrick’s belief in the political role of the writer and intellectual is made clear, his terminology and hectoring tone clearly echoing Christesen’s. It was not simply that writers ought to bring political zeal to their work, but that taking up a pen in itself was a political act in a philistine, commercial culture. Because political and economic authority repressed, or at best ignored, culture, the cultural ‘battle’ (Vance Palmer’s term, of course) was also a political one. Those writers who resisted the urge to flee were helping make Australia into a civilized, engaged nation, establishing both a literary culture and an intellectual class, and in so doing discovering the ‘national idea’.

The sound and fury of the Cold War also served to drown out Australian culture. For many of the cultural nationalists, as we have seen, American political hegemony went hand-in-hand with the despised triumph of mass culture.<sup>40</sup> Fitzpatrick’s concern, however, was for civil liberties: the attempt to ban the CPA was, he believed, a far worse crime, and he attacked it as ‘the degradation of our country’.<sup>41</sup> He displayed less anxiety about the deleterious effects of American comic books, describing state governments’ attempts to suppress children’s comics as a ‘grim philanthropy’. He did not believe that ‘humanity’s lesser vessels can be made virtuous by law’:<sup>42</sup> cultural progress in Australia must be a part of

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<sup>39</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick, notes for lecture entitled ‘The situation of the writer’, undated, Brian Fitzpatrick Papers, Box 53, Folder 64.

<sup>40</sup> See Chapter 2.

<sup>41</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick, article in *Australian News-Review*, circa 1951/2, cited in Don Watson, *A Radical Life*, p. 232.

<sup>42</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick, ‘The comics, censorship and the law’, manuscript for submission to the editor of *The Library Association Journal*, 22/3/1954, condensed version of paper delivered at the Public Library of Victoria, Melbourne, 17/3/1954, Brian Fitzpatrick Papers, Box 52, Folder 62. The states in question were South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales.

a free and democratic society, not in antithesis to it. Whilst he yearned for a cultured elite to guide the nation, he did not wish for censorship to be the means of its creation.

He was not opposed to the CLF – ‘no better scheme is in operation in any other English-speaking country’<sup>43</sup> – however, he took umbrage with its political meddling and alluded to problems his own magazine, *The Australian Democrat*, had experienced in this regard.<sup>44</sup> He said that ‘the problem of the writer is bound up with his attitude towards the state’ and, not long after he wrote this, the Liberal electoral victory of 1949 ushered in the decade when this became even more problematic. Fitzpatrick mentioned ‘slandrous’ attacks on the CLF from members of the Opposition – those who were now in government. He proposed that the parliamentary committee of ‘non-literary experts’ should be ‘eliminated’ and that ‘the advisory board of literary men should be made a commission and given a charter, completely free from any political interference’.<sup>45</sup> He recognised the need for state help for writers and artists, but he worried more than most about the potential for political interference.

The other important aspect of cultural nationalism was its contempt for parochialism, philistinism’s ally. Sheila Fitzpatrick points out that her father’s ‘strategy’ to deal with the cultural cringe was to imagine himself a member of the ‘international community of the Left’, a way, at least in his own mind, of removing the taint of parochialism, and certainly a pleasing alternative to being part of a British colony.<sup>46</sup> The problem of parochialism could be reconciled by trying to position himself as an ‘internationalist’. This was difficult, however, because in the isolated world of thirties and forties Australia he had poor information, relying on a disparate and unreliable range of sources, mostly from the USA and the USSR, to find out about the world.<sup>47</sup> He barely travelled – in Australia, let alone further afield –

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<sup>43</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick, ‘The trade in literature’, p. 33. This was not necessarily a view shared by all cultural nationalists, who tended to compare Australian cultural institutions unfavourably with their foreign equivalents, especially in terms of material support for the arts. Again, see Chapter 2.

<sup>44</sup> Fitzpatrick edited *The Australian Democrat* from 1947 to 1951.

<sup>45</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick, ‘The trade in literature’, pp. 33–9.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Sheila Fitzpatrick, 18/9/2015.

<sup>47</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, ‘Brian Fitzpatrick and the world outside Australia’, *Against the Grain*, pp. 37–69.



not because of a parochial mentality, but because he had no money. His one trip to Europe had, as noted, been an abject failure.

An important figure in his life at this stage was the American scholar C. Hartley Grattan, who came to Australia in 1928 and again in 1937/8, and who introduced Fitzpatrick to H.V. Evatt, subsequently his lifelong supporter and friend.<sup>48</sup> Grattan used Fitzpatrick's work to help him with the writing of his book *Introducing Australia*, which he gratefully acknowledged, describing him as a 'brilliant economic historian'.<sup>49</sup> According to Watson, Grattan 'took Australian intellectuals somewhat by storm with his striking self-confidence, professionalism and, most of all, his facility to analyse convincingly Australian society in a year's observation where they had failed in a lifetime'.<sup>50</sup> This type of reaction bears comparison with the influence of other, often brief, visitors to Australia, such as Anthony Trollope and D.H. Lawrence, whose musings, coming from an outside, and in their case of course British, perspective, would be taken more seriously than Australians' interpretations of their own culture.<sup>51</sup> This was an obvious strand of the cultural cringe, and Sheila Fitzpatrick says that there was a competitive interest amongst Australian intellectuals to 'get their word in' with Grattan.<sup>52</sup> In Fitzpatrick's case his friendship with Grattan seems to have been closely connected to the paucity of his friendships with non-Australians and his earnest desire to know how the world was thinking. Frank Dalby Davison said of Grattan that he 'promoted critical discussion' in Australia, an area hitherto lacking, as Fitzpatrick had made clear in his Tocqueville-inspired diatribe.<sup>53</sup> Grattan commented freely and widely on Australian national identity and culture. He pinpointed the issues:

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<sup>48</sup> Ian Turner, Introduction to Brian Fitzpatrick, *A Short History of the Australian Labor Movement*, South Melbourne: Macmillan, 1968 edition, p. 10.

<sup>49</sup> C. Hartley Grattan, *Introducing Australia*, New York: John Day, 1942, p. xv.

<sup>50</sup> Don Watson, *A Radical Life*, p. 166.

<sup>51</sup> See Trollope's influence on Ward (Chapter 6) and Lawrence's on Clark and Horne (Chapters 4 and 8).

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Sheila Fitzpatrick, University of Sydney, 8/9/2011.

<sup>53</sup> Frank Dalby Davison, 'On Australian literature', *The Bulletin*, 10/8/1938, in Vance and Nettie Palmer Papers, Box 37, Folder 11.

As in all young countries, the culture of Australia is to a very small extent an integral part of the national life. It has not worked itself into the social fabric. It is something tacked on. Something apart.<sup>54</sup>

To make Australian writing at the centre of national life was the clear aim of the cultural nationalists, most of whom, of course, were writers themselves, looking for solutions to Australia's cultural malaise, although, as Grattan noted, often living 'in isolation from one another'. He listed, in 1928, many of the other issues afflicting them: the lack of decent literary magazines; no flourishing 'school' of literature since the *Bulletin* group; a lack of 'drive and coherence' in the Australian literary scene; and the 'hard row to hoe' writers had to endure financially – all ideas to be repeated *ad nauseam* in the coming decade by Phillips, Christesen and of course Fitzpatrick. The worst thing of all, Grattan contended, was that 'nobody but the writers seems to care anything about the situation': Australia, he concluded, 'like America of the old days, suffers from a literary inferiority complex'.<sup>55</sup> These observations had been made in 1928, but in 1947 he continued in the same vein, declaring: 'Wanted – an Australian critic', a cry cited and repeated by Fitzpatrick.<sup>56</sup> However, Grattan's political position, unlike his view of Australian letters, had shifted: in a letter of 1949 he took issue with Fitzpatrick's journal *The Australian Democrat*, which he felt gave too much succour to Communism,<sup>57</sup> and a 1957 article in *Quadrant* disparaged the tendency in Australian historiography to 'economic determinism'.<sup>58</sup> His old friend Fitzpatrick never changed political course, and the elitist idea of a cultured nation which he shared with Grattan sat uneasily with his politics. This is the paradox at the heart of the Australian Tradition, and of this thesis. Whilst Tocqueville could despair of democracy from his Old European, aristocratic perspective, democracy was supposed to be at

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<sup>54</sup> C. Hartley Grattan, 'Australian literature', *The Bookman*, vol. LXVII, no. 6, August 1928, p. 625; Vance and Nettie Palmer Papers, Box 37, Folder 11.

<sup>55</sup> C. Hartley Grattan, 'Australian literature', p. 631.

<sup>56</sup> C. Hartley Grattan, 'Wanted – an Australian critic', *The Daily Telegraph*, 5/7/1947; Vance and Nettie Palmer Papers, Box 37, Folder 11; cited by Fitzpatrick in 'The trade in literature'.

<sup>57</sup> C. Hartley Grattan to Brian Fitzpatrick, 1/8/1949; Brian Fitzpatrick Papers, Box 29, Folder 2.

<sup>58</sup> C. Hartley Grattan, *Quadrant*, no. 2, 1957, cited in Ian Turner, 'New fashions in Australian history', *Overland*, no. 11, Summer 1958, p. 23; Brian Fitzpatrick Papers, Box 46, Folder 7.

the heart of what it was to be Australian, even if it had the unfortunate side-effect of reducing literature to the status of a 'trade'.

iv) 'Australian Renaissance'

Escape from the 'ivory tower' and engagement with the public were very important for Fitzpatrick. Frederic Eggleston had lamented the lack of an antipodean equivalent to Edmund Burke, someone to provide 'more than political leadership', but 'intellectual leadership on all great issues': 'we miss in Australia, the publicist, the man detached from politics, but able and well-informed, in whom the public can trust, and who will speak plainly and fearlessly'.<sup>59</sup> As Watson points out, because Eggleston was an 'Australian liberal conservative' he plumped for Burke over Hazlitt, and he ignored the claims of Fitzpatrick who, for those on the Left, did fulfil this role as a 'self-styled independent radical publicist'.<sup>60</sup> Fitzpatrick made much of his friends the Palmers' political engagement, recalling first meeting them in the thirties and embarking with them on a variety of campaigns against the censorship practised by the Lyons government, its craven pusillanimity towards the Nazi regime, and the 'political and moral manipulation of the immigration laws', most famously in the case of Egon Kisch of 1934/5, in which the government tried to stop the Czech-German Communist from entering Australia.<sup>61</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick cites the Kisch affair as being a great formative influence on intellectuals of that era, and attests to her father's 'obsessive concern' with any limitation on freedom.<sup>62</sup> These concerns were strongly linked to the struggle against philistinism. Fitzpatrick declared that the Palmers' 'sense of public duty' was an 'integral part of their passion for civilizing Australia'.<sup>63</sup>

Watson says Fitzpatrick linked his radicalism back to the nineteenth century, as far back as the Irish convict rebellion at Castle Hill in 1804.<sup>64</sup> Historian K.S. Inglis compared Fitzpatrick to Tom Paine

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<sup>59</sup> Frederic Eggleston, *Reflections of an Australian Liberal*, 1953, p. 255; cited in Don Watson, *A Radical Life*, p. 283. Eggleston was a 'lawyer, politician, diplomat, writer and controversialist'; Warren Osmond, 'Eggleston, Sir Frederic William (1875–1954)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/eggleston-sir-frederic-william-344/text10409>, published first in hardcopy 1981; accessed online 19/9/2017.

<sup>60</sup> Don Watson, *A Radical Life*, p. 164.

<sup>61</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick, 'The Palmer Pre-eminence', p. 214. Fitzpatrick attacked Lyons for his 'reproof of the visiting H. G. Wells for denigrating Hitler' and the 'banning of Odets's *Till the Day I Die* at the request of the Nazi Consul-General'.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Sheila Fitzpatrick, Sydney University, 8/9/2011.

<sup>63</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick, 'The Palmer Pre-eminence', p. 214.

<sup>64</sup> Don Watson, *A Radical Life*, pp. 170/284.

and William Cobbett, even suggesting (perhaps a little oddly) that *The Australian Commonwealth* was the type of book they might have written had they been Australians.<sup>65</sup> E. P. Thompson says of Paine that he had an ‘optimism’ which was his great gift to Radicalism, founded on ‘unbounded faith in representative institutions’, in ‘the power of reason’, and in his belief that (in his own words) ‘Man, were he not corrupted by Governments, is naturally the friend of Man, that human nature is not of itself vicious’. Paine believed there was ‘a mass of sense lying in a dormant state’, waiting to be stirred up and given life. These ideals were Fitzpatrick’s too: his whole career was spent in the pursuit of reason and representation in the context of a strong faith in humanity. If he was not, like Paine, a self-educated man, nevertheless he shared his ‘distrust of tradition and institutes of learning’<sup>66</sup> – not least because the latter kept him at arm’s length his entire career. Firmly on the outside of such institutions, anti-authoritarian and unwavering in his convictions, Fitzpatrick aimed, through his writing, his advocacy and his work with the ACCL, to be something akin to Australia’s Tom Paine.

Paine’s audience was receptive to his ideas in a time of revolution and enormous social change. The 1950s in Australia were not such times. Writers and intellectuals struggled to be heard, as we have seen, and many, Christesen for one, were infuriated by this, longing for a milieu of action. Fitzpatrick was one of Christesen’s many long-suffering correspondents. In a 1957 letter the editor predicted (as so often) the imminent folding of his magazine, wondering whether Fitzpatrick was interested in joining forces with him to produce what he called a ‘journal of opinion’: ‘I do think we could pull it off if we really got cracking’.<sup>67</sup> But the two friends did not, in fact, ‘get cracking’ on any such venture, their correspondence falling into abeyance until 1962. In September of that year communication was reignited, the two exchanging letters in which they posited the idea of an organised ‘Australian Renaissance’.<sup>68</sup> The

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<sup>65</sup> K.S. Inglis, ‘Australia’s social and civil life analysed’, *The Age*, 3/11/1956, Brian Fitzpatrick Papers, Box 46, Folder 6.

<sup>66</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 95.

<sup>67</sup> C.B. Christesen to Brian Fitzpatrick, 22/9/1957, Brian Fitzpatrick Papers, Box 29, Folder 5.

<sup>68</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick to C.B. Christesen, 17/9/1962; Christesen to Fitzpatrick, 20/9/1962; Fitzpatrick to Christesen, 25/9/1962; Christesen to Fitzpatrick, 27/9/1962, Brian Fitzpatrick Papers, Box 29, Folder 9.

initial spark came from a Fitzpatrick letter outlining his desire to respond to attacks on radical nationalist historiography, originating with Clark in 1956, and repeated by Peter Coleman in 1962 (the debate is discussed in more detail later). Christesen, responding to Fitzpatrick's idea, linked it to the condescension towards Australian culture which he believed still prevailed in intellectual circles. His ire had been inflamed by the 'odious slant' of the September 1962 'Australian' issue of *London Magazine*, edited by expatriate Charles Osborne, which, he said, did a 'singular disservice to Australian literature'. He did not deny 'many of the defects' of Australian society outlined, but railed against what he saw as the lazy attacks of those resident in far off London who, rather than help Australian literature, partook in the much easier pastime of disparaging it.

What rankled most was the perceived condescension of those who had fled, now pandering to supposed British superiority in the worst traditions of the cultural cringe: 'this public peeing on their native land and culture,' Christesen harangued, 'is disgusting'. He told Fitzpatrick that he would 'dearly like' someone to write an essay on 'the problem of alienation'; the love-hate relationship between writers and others and their country. He was in one of his periods of cultural optimism, the slough of the fifties replaced with bullishness: 'big changes have happened and are happening in the intellectual life of this country,' he declared.<sup>69</sup>

Christesen's excitement – 'receipt of your letter is the best thing that has happened in this office for a long time' – appeared to be paralleled in a renewed Fitzpatrick, ready at last to respond to his detractors and help shape the debate: as Christesen put it, the 'Old Master' was back, launching a 'counter-attack' against his adversaries; and 'the prospect is vastly exciting'. He said it was 'high time you and others began to exert their influence again in print', and he suggested 'allies' – Ward, Phillips, Inglis –

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<sup>69</sup> C.B. Christesen to Brian Fitzpatrick, 20/9/1962. See Chapter 2 for discussion of his waxing and waning cultural optimism from the forties through to the seventies.

who, he believed, would join in this ‘anti-anti-tank corps’ – the ‘heirs and assigns of what I at least still regard as being all that is best in Australian thought and attitudes’.<sup>70</sup>

This concept of an ‘Australian renaissance’ bore striking similarity to Phillips’ idea of a Periclean or Elizabethan-esque ‘wider cultural movement’. Such communitarian ideals owed much to the birth of Radical culture in the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries. The evolution of these ideas did not necessarily require the furnace of revolution and social upheaval which had sustained, for example, Paine. Like 1950s Australia, 1820s England was perceived as a period of political inertia, although Thompson argues that what appeared a stagnant decade in fact transformed ‘working people’s consciousness of their interests and a predicament as a class’.<sup>71</sup> Thompson credited William Hazlitt – the ‘sea-green incorruptible’, as Fitzpatrick called him, borrowing Carlyle’s description of Robespierre<sup>72</sup> – with giving the intellectual heft to working-class consciousness, saying that he had a ‘width of reference and sense of commitment’ that was universal and far from ‘provincial’. However, ‘even in his most engaged Radical journalism’, says Thompson, Hazlitt ‘aimed his polemic, not towards the popular, but towards the polite culture of his time’. The ideas may have been Hazlitt’s, but Thompson gives the main credit to Cobbett, who, he says, was so important ‘not because he offered (Radicalism) its most original ideas, but in the sense that he found the tone, the style, and the arguments which could bring the weaver, the schoolmaster, and the shipwright into a common discourse’, reaching them through his *Political Register* (published from 1802 to 1836).<sup>73</sup>

Fitzpatrick’s role in post-war Australia was not dissimilar. He published no equivalent (at least in terms of prominence) to the *Political Register*, but his *Smith’s Weekly* column had wide circulation, and after it ended in 1949 he continued to publish polemics and commentaries through his newsletters *Australian*

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<sup>70</sup> C.B. Christesen to Brian Fitzpatrick, 20/9 & 27/9/1962.

<sup>71</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 711.

<sup>72</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick, ‘The Palmer Pre-eminence’, pp. 212/3.

<sup>73</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, pp. 746/7.

*Democrat* (1947–51), *Australian News-Review* (1951–53) and *Brian Fitzpatrick's Labor Newsletter* (1958–65), as well as his column 'News and Views' in *The Rationalist* (1954–65). The reach of Fitzpatrick's voice in these years should not be overestimated: Watson says that the *Australian News-Review* began life in January 1951 with 78 subscribers, a number that by October 1952 had increased to 1,300, with 'more than half' of these in Melbourne.<sup>74</sup> These figures tell of the limitations of Fitzpatrick's influence, even if, as the Communist 'crisis' gripped Australia, circulation figures rose impressively. His words certainly had their biggest impact within the world of Melbourne Labor, and it is hard to imagine that he had much reach beyond it. But this was how the communitarian ideal of the Melbourne intellectual community – 'sustained by resistance'<sup>75</sup> – was to achieve resonance beyond the rarefied confines of the literary periodicals, and this is where Fitzpatrick's importance lies: his voice, for all the limits of its reach, was louder, more distinct and more persuasive than many of the other cultural nationalists', and he possessed a 'tone' that could cut through and find a reception with the Labor movement, a group he was more engaged with than was, say, Phillips, the private schoolmaster.

Fitzpatrick spent much of his life in pubs – where he would repair on a daily basis after finishing his work at about noon<sup>76</sup> – and there he engaged in 'companionship with disputatious men', one of his great loves in life. Indeed, his other loves, beyond 'physical activity in sunshine' and 'the girls', included 'argument about ideas' and 'taking up cudgels for persons and their organisations put upon by officialdom',<sup>77</sup> giving some sense of how his political engagement, far from being an 'ivory tower habit', enabled him to tap into the feel of his times and the sensibilities of his readership. Clark, alluding to the same A.E. Housman poem which had given Patrick White the title for *The Tree of Man*, stated that Fitzpatrick was one of those people 'through whom the gale of life blows very high', and called him 'one

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<sup>74</sup> Don Watson, *A Radical Life*, p. 232.

<sup>75</sup> Don Watson's term, *A Radical Life*, p. xx.

<sup>76</sup> Don Watson, *A Radical Life*, p. 1.

<sup>77</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick, untitled autobiographical essay, submitted to *Meanjin*, unpublished, 1965.



of the heroes of our people'.<sup>78</sup> Typically, Clark's extravagant praise came a long time after the recipient had died – no longer a competitor or threat. Still, he was right to suggest both the force of Fitzpatrick's personality, and his popular touch. It is very hard to argue that Fitzpatrick was as influential in 1950s Australia as Cobbett was in 1820s England, but his was a much needed voice of strident and uncompromised advocacy in difficult times for his fellow-travellers. Exactly what Christesen and Fitzpatrick thought was to be 'reborn' as they kicked around their idea of a 'renaissance' is hard to ascertain with any accuracy. For Fitzpatrick it seems that, as his ideas came under pressure from the Dostoevskian School of Australian historiography, it was time to reassert the principles of democracy and egalitarianism that underpinned the nation, to advocate for the Australian working class as Cobbett had advocated for the English labouring classes, and to reiterate that 'the origins of the people are not in the library'.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Manning Clark, speech at book launch for Don Watson's *A Radical Life*, 28/2/1979, Manning Clark Papers, Boxes 180/1, Folders 32–5. The verse from Housman's 'A Shropshire Lad':

'There, like the wind through woods in riot,  
Through him the gale of life blew high;  
The tree of man was never quiet:  
Then 'twas the Roman, now 'tis I.'

<sup>79</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick, 'The origins of the people are not in the library', *Meanjin*, vol. 14, no. 3, Spring 1955, pp. 350–61.

- v) The primacy of experience: ‘Only idealists, fools and unprincipled careerists become disappointed radicals’

Brian Fitzpatrick’s political directness and polemical edge, averred his communist friend Judah Waten, stood in telling contrast to ‘some of the best known present historians whose work is either whimsical or plainly obscurantist’.<sup>80</sup> In 1962 Peter Coleman trumpeted the existence of a Clark-inspired ‘counter-revolution’ in Australian historiography seeking to undermine the view that ‘the Labor Party was the only creative party in Australian history, the only one worthy of and capable of serious study’.<sup>81</sup> Explicitly citing Fitzpatrick, he took aim at the ‘narrow view of Progress’ presented by radical nationalists and their ‘even narrower view of the progressive movement itself’. He declared the radical nationalist school to be ‘the scholarly expression of the Australian legend’.<sup>82</sup> The link between Fitzpatrick and Ward was made clear, and its distinction from Clark’s vision even clearer: how could their narrow, even philistine ‘belief in material progress’ (here Clark targets Fitzpatrick) and ‘mateship’ (here, Ward) have possibly been nineteenth-century Australians’ ‘only comforters against earth and sky, man and beast’?<sup>83</sup>

Fitzpatrick’s riposte, the result of his 1962 correspondence with Christesen, was published in *Meanjin* in 1963. Chafing at the description of himself, his socialist predecessor V. Gordon Childe and friend H.V. Evatt as ‘disappointed radicals’, he underlined his pride in his radicalism: ‘only idealists, fools, and unprincipled careerists become disappointed radicals’.<sup>84</sup> He repudiated many of Clark’s and Coleman’s assertions; declaring, for example, that ‘there was no Golden Age of Australian labour’, as Clark accused the radical nationalists of contending, and stressing that none of the ‘Old Gang’ (Clark’s pejorative term for the radical nationalists) ‘ever dreamed, in print at any rate, that there had been’.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Judah Waten to Dorothy Fitzpatrick, 8/9/1965, Brian Fitzpatrick Papers, Box 58, Folder 3.

<sup>81</sup> Peter Coleman, ‘Introduction: the New Australia’, in Peter Coleman (ed.), *Australian Civilization*, Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1962, p. 8.

<sup>82</sup> Peter Coleman, ‘Introduction: the New Australia’, pp. 6/7.

<sup>83</sup> Manning Clark, ‘Introduction’, *Select Documents in Australian History, 1851–1900*, p. xv.

<sup>84</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick, ‘Counter revolution in Australian Historiography?’, *Meanjin*, vol. 22, no. 2, June 1963, p. 200.

<sup>85</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick, ‘Counter revolution in Australian Historiography?’, p. 202.

Following their exchange of letters, Christesen and Fitzpatrick had both written to Inglis, soliciting a response to their idea for an ‘Australian renaissance’.<sup>86</sup> Inglis replied that he was ‘a bit bewildered about the state of Australian historiography’.<sup>87</sup> He included with his letter a clipping of a review of the first volume of Clark’s *History of Australia*, in which J. McManners berated Clark’s ‘personal schematisation of certain tendencies in human nature’, and skewered his interpretation of the key themes of Enlightenment, Protestantism and Catholicism, words ‘borrowed’ by Clark from history, but ‘really purely personal symbols used to describe states of mind’.<sup>88</sup> Fitzpatrick agreed with these observations, dismissing Clark’s grand themes and metaphysical preoccupations as ‘Aunt Sallys’. He believed his sometime drinking partner ‘talked too much’, overly intruding on the documents.<sup>89</sup> Clark placed too much store by his own interpretations. Fitzpatrick’s methodology, on the other hand, had ‘no hocus pocus about it’; he proclaimed at the beginning of one of his books that ‘I did not invent anything in the narrative which follows’.<sup>90</sup> Ian Turner said of Fitzpatrick’s practice that he was a ‘materialist, not a metaphysical, historian, a practical man of politics rather than a prophet’.<sup>91</sup> Fitzpatrick asserted the primacy of the documents, reflecting as they did real experience. He did not wish to indulge in vague suppositions or dreams in a philosophical realm, and when he stated that the people’s origins were ‘not in the library’, he meant (in part) that they had not been born from the philosophies of Russian mystics or Catholic theologians: they were from labouring class stock, people of action – democratic, free and direct. His hero was Thucydides, not Dostoevsky: ‘a practical man, a man of affairs’, just as he thought of himself, and he quoted the Ancient Athenian historian:

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<sup>86</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick to K. S. Inglis, 12/10/1962, Brian Fitzpatrick Papers, Box 29, Folder 9; Christesen refers to letters he had written to Inglis in his letter of 20/9/1962.

<sup>87</sup> K.S. Inglis to Brian Fitzpatrick, 19/10/1962, Brian Fitzpatrick Papers, Box 29, Folder 9.

<sup>88</sup> J. McManners, ‘Creeds in the cradle’, *Nation*, no. 105, 20/10/1962, pp. 19–21.

<sup>89</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick, ‘Valuable selections’, review of Manning Clark’s *Select Documents in Australian history, 1851–1900, Overland*, no. 7, July 1956, p. 33. Clark and Fitzpatrick sometimes drank together at Melbourne’s Swanston Family Hotel (Fitzpatrick’s favourite pub) among other venues – see Mark McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity*, p. 268.

<sup>90</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick, *A Short History of the Australian Labor Movement*, p. 10.

<sup>91</sup> Ian Turner, Introduction to *A Short History of the Australian Labor Movement*, 1968 edition, p. 43.

And with reference to the narrative of events, far from permitting myself to derive it from the first source that came to hand, I did not even trust my own impressions, but it rests partly on what I saw myself, partly on what others saw for me, the accuracy of the report always tried by the most severe and detailed tests possible.<sup>92</sup>

Fitzpatrick clearly measured his own work by such stringent, Thucydidean criteria. But working on the outside of the academy (even if this had been forced upon him) he also repudiated the ‘mindless fact grabbing’ and ‘pedestrian “research”’ of academic historians; the dull ‘Theory and Method of History’ which guided them. These academics, he averred, had been ‘denied’, and subsequently denied their own students, the ‘vision’ of Thucydides and Gibbon<sup>93</sup> – and thus had become another part of the philistine ‘trade in literature’. He also noted Thucydides’ hope that ‘those enquirers’ seeking help with ‘interpretation of the future’ through ‘knowledge of the past’ would find guidance in his work, but he was quick to point out that ‘Thucydides did not presume to interpret, for those who should come afterwards, what was past to his generation’. Thucydides, he said, dismissed the past in less than five thousand words – it was his own time he wished to interpret. It was this Fitzpatrick hoped to emulate. History, he said, ‘cannot be written from mere study of the documents of successive periods, aided by the comparative study of other documents and by critical reading of those who have dusted the same documents before us’.<sup>94</sup> Endless commentary on commentary was a waste of time; history must be relevant, engaged and alive. Thus Turner said that for Fitzpatrick ‘the writing of history was a part of the process of history, and history was something for men – including himself – to make’.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Thucydides, cited in Brian Fitzpatrick, ‘The origins of the people are not in the library’, pp. 352–3.

<sup>93</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick, ‘The Palmer pre-eminence’, p. 215.

<sup>94</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick, ‘The origins of the people are not in the library’, p. 353–4.

<sup>95</sup> Ian Turner, Introduction to *A Short History of the Australian Labor Movement*, 1968 edition, p. 42.

We can see how Fitzpatrick would have approved of Clark's achievements: he had written history of ambition and scope, and that in itself was worthwhile. It certainly beat the dry and dusty history which had been Australian academic historians' stock-in-trade for too long; the same men who had excluded Fitzpatrick from their institutions. Nevertheless, although Clark too enjoyed baiting academia and challenging its assumptions, he was still a stalwart of the academy, and had, as he attacked the radical nationalists, done so from his 'ivory tower' in Canberra. Despite the ambition and liberties of his own approach, Clark could be conservative when it came to commenting on other historians' work, and praise was often grudging.<sup>96</sup> His was a position of tenured comfort, in stark contrast to Fitzpatrick's. In 1954 Fitzpatrick had attempted to win a research grant from the ANU, enlisting the help of L.F. Fitzhardinge, Keith Hancock and Clark himself. Clark was again mealy-mouthed, his reference lukewarm, even strange – the ANU would get, he said, a 'lively work, and possibly an illuminating work ... (it may have) snatches of greatness in it, for greatness is within his reach'.<sup>97</sup> Fitzpatrick continually failed with such applications. Those ensconced in the seats of learning, such as Clark, kept pushing him away, paying lip service to his practice, but never endorsing the prospect of him as a colleague. His achievements were recognised, but never rewarded. Was it because of his drinking? Maybe his politics? He was not a reliable character, and the role of outsider seemed to fit him well, too well – it was easy to pigeon-hole him thus. After Fitzpatrick's death Clark was defensive regarding his relationship with him. His criticisms dropped away and, challenged, he said (as we have seen) that he had 'loved' Fitzpatrick, delivering eulogies in his honour. A rival now out of the way, he could afford to be magnanimous. Lauded after he was gone; Fitzpatrick had often been shunned in life.

The chief distinction between Fitzpatrick and Clark was that the former was not a dreamer or a speculator. Clark said of Fitzpatrick that his 'sense of the mystery at the heart of things' – the supposed

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<sup>96</sup> For example, see Clark's comments on Russel Ward's doctoral thesis – discussed in Chapter 6.

<sup>97</sup> Manning Clark reference for Brian Fitzpatrick's application for a Social Science Research Council Grant, 11/9/1954, Manning Clark Papers, Box 1, Folder 7; Fitzpatrick's application for this grant detailed in Brian Fitzpatrick Papers, Box 29, Folder 3.

‘sense’ that fed his own muse, of course – was ‘dim, alas, at times’.<sup>98</sup> Fitzpatrick would have been quite happy to hear this. R.M. Crawford, one of the academics who persistently failed to give Fitzpatrick a job, said of him that ‘he saw his work as having one special function’ in enabling ‘the advancement of society’, which was ‘the recognition of necessity’ (as Fitzpatrick himself termed it).<sup>99</sup> Fitzpatrick, as Crawford pointed out, was ‘impartial’ in his condemnation of those who failed to recognise these necessities, and far from celebrating late-nineteenth century Australians in knee-jerk fashion (as Clark accused the radical nationalists of doing) he in fact reprimanded them for lacking ‘the perception of realities to be faced’, laying into ‘the conspicuous minority of gamblers and babblers, boasters and boosters, in stock exchanges, government offices, parliaments, trade hall councils’, not to mention the likes of William Lane, ‘the idolized of the workers, the evangelist of the glorious future, the man without facts’, who ‘summoned his disciples, after the Labor defeat, to different pastures, ever and delusively green’.<sup>100</sup> Fitzpatrick had no truck with such an unrealistic dreamer as Lane, and nor could he stand his willingness to flee Australia and try to create his utopia elsewhere (Paraguay) rather than stay and see the job through at home. His contemptuous view of Lane can be compared with Vance Palmer’s in *The Legend of the Nineties*, which, while not necessarily shying away from some of Lane’s foibles and faults, nevertheless painted a positive picture of the Utopian with the ‘white-hot spirit’ who could ‘always find words to lift people out of themselves and waft them to a region where they breathed a paradisal air’.<sup>101</sup> Reviewing Palmer’s play about Lane, *Hail Tomorrow* (1947), Fitzpatrick described it as a ‘drama of the false dawn’, picking up on the tension between idealism and pragmatism as the most interesting thing about it: ‘the visionary enthusiasm of Lane... against... the dogged plugging of the more humdrum characters who stayed to fight it out’. Fitzpatrick’s sympathies clearly lay with the latter:

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<sup>98</sup> Manning Clark to Axel Clark, date uncertain (mid-sixties), Manning Clark Papers, Box 2, Folder 9.

<sup>99</sup> R.M. Crawford, Brian Fitzpatrick obituary, *Historical Studies*, vol. 12, no. 46, April 1966, p. 328, in Brian Fitzpatrick Papers, Box 58, Folder 3.

<sup>100</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick, *The Australian People, 1788–1945*, cited in Crawford’s obituary of Fitzpatrick.

<sup>101</sup> Vance Palmer, *The Legend of the Nineties*, p. 87. Humphrey McQueen took exception to Palmer’s rose-tinted view of Lane – see Chapter 6.

I do not pretend to be a moralist, any more than I pretend authority to pronounce on playwriting. But I note that William Lane the idealist, the man who could not live in the present when it was not going his way, lasted at his Paraguayan Utopia for no more than half a dozen years, and ended in New Zealand as a Tory leader-writer and editor, and advocate of military conscription.<sup>102</sup>

To Fitzpatrick this was the real crime: to not ‘live in the present’, running away when things went wrong and failing to stay and ‘fight it out’. As an intellectual who had himself stayed, who spent his whole career seeking to improve Australia and who always maintained his radical ideals, Lane’s abrogation of responsibility was unforgivable. Furthermore, the unrealistic nature of his ambitions was also reprehensible: for Fitzpatrick, it was important to stick fast to one’s ideals, but always in the context of how things were, rather than aimlessly dreaming of a different world. Lane had failed in the ‘recognition of necessity’. Although Clark depicted radical nationalists as being subject to ‘infectious optimism’,<sup>103</sup> Fitzpatrick in fact retained an air of realism quite at odds with this view, always keen to stress the pragmatic roots of his work and ideals. He even went so far as to state that both sides of the political divide were motivated by self-interest – ‘not that I blame them’ he said of the conservatives who, in his view, sought only to ‘retain privilege’.<sup>104</sup> His empathy for positions totally opposed to his own is significant.

Fitzpatrick’s strident basis in facts could, indeed, be held against him as his books, larded as they are with footnotes, appendices, statistics, charts and graphs, are often factual to the detriment of readability. Vance Palmer touched on this when he described *The British Empire in Australia* as ‘full of

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<sup>102</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick, ‘Drama of the false dawn’ (review of Vance Palmer’s *Hail Tomorrow*), *The Australasian Book News and Literary Journal*, vol. 2, no. 6, December 1947, pp. 306–7, Brian Fitzpatrick Papers, Box 51, Folder 55. Note the discrepancy between Fitzpatrick’s review of Palmer’s play, and Phillips’ – see Chapter 1.

<sup>103</sup> Manning Clark, ‘Rewriting Australian History’, cited by Brian Fitzpatrick, ‘Counter revolution in Australian historiography?’, p. 201.

<sup>104</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick, *A Short History of the Australian Labor Movement*, p. 9.

matter' and 'naturally... not an easy read'.<sup>105</sup> Similarly, a London review of the earlier *British Imperialism and Australia* had declared that 'the book would have been more valuable if the writer had occasionally forgotten his high academic mission and remembered his primary duty as an author'.<sup>106</sup> Nettie Palmer expressed admiration for his 'objectivity', but remarked that 'your kind of history is difficult to read except in sketches for reference'.<sup>107</sup> *The Australian Commonwealth* is considered his most accessible book, but even it follows its relatively slight 209 pages of main text with 110 pages of 'sources, notes and topics'.<sup>108</sup> His notebooks, with their prodigious quantities of research scribbled down in tiny hand-writing, attest to his status as a 'man of facts'.<sup>109</sup>

Thompson describes Hazlitt's 'fertile allusiveness and studied manner', which, he says, because it belonged 'to a culture which was not available to the artisan, might well arouse their hostility'. Cobbett on the other hand was more precise and wedded to the facts than Hazlitt, whose 'drawl of the patrician Friend of the People' he replaced with 'a bluntness that made even Shelley blench'. Cobbett was 'solid' and related 'not to a literary culture, but to a commonly available experience'.<sup>110</sup> We might say of Fitzpatrick that he had something of Hazlitt about him: he always carried himself in an old-fashioned way, speaking, even when in his cups, in patrician tones, adhering to genteel manners and a disliking for rough language, and writing in a Latinate vein not out of place with this old-fashioned mien.<sup>111</sup> But he certainly followed Cobbett's 'solid' lead. The style might be heavy, but it still spoke of ordinary experience.

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<sup>105</sup> Vance Palmer, 'Events that shaped our lives', review of Brian Fitzpatrick's *The British Empire in Australia*, *ABC Weekly*, 31/5/1941, p. 17, Brian Fitzpatrick Papers, Box 46, Folder 14.

<sup>106</sup> Review of *British Imperialism and Australia*, *National Review*, London, March 1939, Brian Fitzpatrick Papers, Box 46, Folder 15.

<sup>107</sup> Nettie Palmer to Brian Fitzpatrick, 13/4/1949, Brian Fitzpatrick Papers, Box 29, Folder 1.

<sup>108</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick, *The Australian Commonwealth: A Picture of a Community, 1901–1955*, Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1956, pp. 213–323. Sheila Fitzpatrick considers *The Australian Commonwealth* to be her father's most engaging work; interview of 8/9/2011. Don Watson has also commented in this vein: see *A Radical Life*, p. 247, where he refers to it as Fitzpatrick's 'most entertaining book'.

<sup>109</sup> Fitzpatrick's densely packed notebooks are collected in the Brian Fitzpatrick Papers, Box 31; R.M. Crawford's description of Fitzpatrick as a 'man of facts' is in his obituary of Brian Fitzpatrick, p. 328. Note that Bernard Smith was similarly described as a 'facts man' – see Chapter 7.

<sup>110</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, pp. 748–9.

<sup>111</sup> Watson says he had 'a quaint Edwardian demeanour inherited from his family, which seemed as odd in combination with his frequent outrageous acts of drunkenness as it did with his radical world view and hard-headed political style'; *A Radical Life*, p. 1.



vi) Conclusion

As Brian Fitzpatrick observed the attacks on his work towards the end of his life, he probably knew that his legacy as a historian would wax and wane and quite possibly fade away. He might have consoled himself that Clark's legacy would no doubt suffer a not dissimilar fate. Likewise, it is striking how quickly the 'Palmer pre-eminence', so lauded by Fitzpatrick upon the death of Vance, faded from public memory. Perhaps it attests to the lack of understanding of Australian literary history and tradition to this day, thereby illustrating the continued existence of the cultural cringe; or, perhaps it merely sheds light on the dubious quality of the Palmers' literary production, the hopeless anachronism of Clark's worldview, and Fitzpatrick's verbose, dated style.

Nevertheless, the spine of radicalism underpinning Fitzpatrick's ideas still resonates, showing that the origins of the Australian people were *not*, indeed, in the library. Pursuing a life of great integrity, disavowing the 'ivory tower habit' and attempting to return Australian history to the people, Fitzpatrick pursued a heroic course. He never talked down to the people, but devoted his life to 'searching for, and trying to make meaningful, facts which might help to reveal what makes human groups tick'.<sup>112</sup> His conclusion to *The Australian Commonwealth* illustrates his empathy and affection for his fellow Australians, lauding them for 'making heroes of none, except perhaps an outlaw, Ned Kelly, and Carbine, a horse', and extolling their stalwart nature as 'generation after generation, they fought with beasts at Ephesus – blight and drought, fire and flood; their own taskmasters and the covetous alien – and, suffering their setbacks, still made of Australia a home good enough for men of modest report to live in, calling their souls their own'.<sup>113</sup> The historian who could write such a conclusion did not look within himself for answers; he did not consider the growth of the nation in spiritual terms or abstract concepts. He looked

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<sup>112</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick, untitled autobiographical essay, submitted to *Meanjin*, unpublished, 1965.

<sup>113</sup> Brian Fitzpatrick, *The Australian Commonwealth*, p. 209.

outwards, at the people, and he was unashamed of the material substance of his arguments. For this reason, his ideas are peculiarly and particularly Australian in ways Clark's are not.

But there is also a note of ambivalence and sadness in that concluding passage: was he himself one of these men of modest report? A man who had always held high ambitions, intelligent and eloquent and desirous of being cosmopolitan, must he settle for this? He had hoped for more, for himself and also for Australia. Like Phillips ending up composing essays in praise of provincialism, Fitzpatrick's life ended unfulfilled. His daughter concluded that, in the final reckoning, perhaps Fitzpatrick had decided that 'despite the frequent stupidity of its politicians and the intellectual inertia of its people, Australia was as good as it got'.<sup>114</sup> There was some sadness and regret in this conclusion. He had to settle for a compromise, and this was not what he or his fellow intellectuals had wanted at all.

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<sup>114</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, 'Brian Fitzpatrick and the world outside Australia', *Against the grain*, p. 61.

## CHAPTER 6

### Russel Ward: The Colonial Stain



PROFESSOR R.B. WARD  
PROFESSOR OF HISTORY 1967-1979

Russel Ward, Professor of History at the University of New England, and tracer of a 'national mystique'.

#### i) Introduction

The disdain is palpable. 'Young master West is supremely and fatuously unconscious of his own bias', wrote a scathing Russel Ward to Clem Christesen, dripping ire as he attacked English historian F.J. West, who had dared comment on Australian history. Apparently West was a man labouring under the delusion 'that an Upper Middle Class nurture and manner, topped off by a few years drinking flat beer at Cambridge or Oxford, confer on the academic historian the ability to write history purely objectively or

scientifically'. Ward's hatred of such historians, his loathing of what he saw as their unearned superiority and arrogant assumptions, was a driving force behind his passionate desire to write a uniquely Australian history for the Australian people, to give voice to an egalitarian narrative that would show how far Australians had travelled from the world of F.J. West.<sup>1</sup> And in his assertion of this exclusive Australian history, Ward aimed to make the break not just from the 'mother country', but also from those Australian historians still cringing to supposedly 'scientific' Oxbridge.

Previous Australian generations feared the 'convict stain'; Judith Wright said that Australia's convict origins 'had a deep meaning in our twentieth-century consciousness', the twin themes of 'exile and hope' being 'the inner argument of almost all the important writing done here'.<sup>2</sup> But for Russel Ward it was the colonial stain – the residual mindset of subservience to imperial Britain proving so ingrained – that really galled. Ward hated the status of the colonial; it was a condition that obsessed him. It was the reason why, Neville Meaney argues, his *Australian Legend* was 'the only serious attempt to articulate an authentic Australian myth', one that could 'support an exclusive Australian nationalism'.<sup>3</sup> Ward himself stressed the myth-making nature of what he was doing, saying that he was preoccupied with describing the emergence of the Australian 'mystique'; he used the *OED* definition of the word 'legend' to underline his point: 'a traditional story popularly regarded as historical, a myth'.<sup>4</sup> We have noted the myth-making propensity of this generation, and Ward was chief among them. Drew Cottle says that he wished to 'understand something of the history of Australia beyond its status as a possession of imperial Britain', and was part of a wider group who had the same aims, including Ian Turner, Geoffrey Serle and Robin

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<sup>1</sup> The contempt continues: 'He's actually worse than most, being an ashamed scholarship boy from Hull (pronounced Hool) who's worked like a beaver to overlay his original accent with the cultivated and tentative Cambridge bleat'. Russel Ward to C.B. Christesen, 29/7/1956, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Baillieu Library, Box 347.

<sup>2</sup> Judith Wright, 'The Upside-Down Hut', 1961 essay, cited by Kerryn Goldsworthy, 'Fiction from 1900 to 1970', in Elizabeth Webby (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature*, UK: Cambridge, 2000, p. 112. Goldsworthy cites R.D. Fitzgerald's poem 'The wind at your door' (1958) as a key text showing the preoccupation with the so-called 'convict stain', 'one of the most brilliant and complex articulations of historical complicity and inherited responsibility in Australian literature'. Other writers from the era she cites as sharing this preoccupation are Brian Penton, Eleanor Dark and Patrick White.

<sup>3</sup> Neville Meaney, 'Britishness and Australian identity', 2001, p. 83.

<sup>4</sup> Russel Ward, 'Reply to Humphrey McQueen', *Overland*, no. 51, Autumn 1972, p. 80.

Gollan.<sup>5</sup> These historians shared Ward's hatred of the cultural cringe: John Rickard describes, for example, Serle's 'smouldering contempt' for it.<sup>6</sup>

Ward was affiliated with *Overland*, whose Communist editor Stephen Murray-Smith emphasised writing of an egalitarian, working-class stripe, but he was also strongly allied with the cultural nationalism of *Meanjin*. A friend and regular correspondent of Christesen's, to whom he enjoyed firing off tirades in the manner of his excoriation of the unfortunate 'Young master West', Ward contributed to the Australian historical imagination by becoming the historian of cultural nationalism. The coincidence of his originally picking the same title as Phillips – 'The Australian Tradition' – for his most famous book was, says Phillips, 'symptomatic of a developing trend of thought amongst those interested in the Australian culture'.<sup>7</sup> Eulogising Vance Palmer for creating Australian myths, thus 'bringing people together' and 'giving isolated communities something to hold in common',<sup>8</sup> Ward saw himself as fulfilling the same vocation: a writer who could articulate what it meant to be Australian in the post-colonial world, tracing the historical origins of a 'national *mystique*'.<sup>9</sup> His achievement in painting his original picture of the nation was great, but, although the Legend did resonate (and continues to do so) in the end, like Phillips, he came under fire from subsequent generations who felt a disdain for Ward's ideas not dissimilar to his own for certain types of English academic.

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<sup>5</sup> Drew Cottle, 'A Bowyang historian in the Cold War Antipodes: Russel Ward and the making of *The Australian Legend*', *Journal of Australian Colonial History*, vol. 10, issue 2, 2008, pp. 171/9.

<sup>6</sup> John Rickard, 'Geoffrey Serle (1922–1998)', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 29, issue 111, 1998, p. 377.

<sup>7</sup> A.A. Phillips, Foreword, *The Australian Tradition*, Melbourne: Cheshire, 1966 (second edition); cited in Russel Ward, 'Reply to Humphrey McQueen', p. 79. We have already noted that Ward originally chose 'The Australian Tradition', before changing to 'The Australian Legend'.

<sup>8</sup> Russel Ward, 'Vance Palmer: Homo Australiensis', *Meanjin*, vol. 18, no. 77, Winter 1959, p. 243.

<sup>9</sup> Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend*, p. 1; emphasis Ward's.

ii) Making the myth: Ward's folk idea

Only in Australia. Before the Gold Rush, the collectivist notions later seen as particularly Australian by cultural nationalists had been possessed only by the group Anthony Trollope had termed 'the nomad tribe of pastoral labourers': 'one of the strangest institutions ever known in a land'.<sup>10</sup> It was a designation which served Ward well: their like was not to be found anywhere else in the world. Citing Keith Hancock's idea that the collectivist ideals of Tudor England had been transplanted, 'three centuries later', to Australia, Ward argued that, unlike Britain or the USA, Australia, with its 'strong element of collectivism', did not celebrate individualism.<sup>11</sup> Hancock stressed the political nature of the 'tribe'; their drive to association and collectivism: even 'the very soil and climate of Australia,' he said, 'seemed to have a grudge against petty individualism', driving 'disappointed land-hungry diggers into the cities or the shearing sheds or the deep mines – and into association'. According to Hancock, 'thwarted individualism' found solace in 'the gospel of mateship' and expression in 'collectivist manifestos'.<sup>12</sup> This is the basis for Australian radical nationalism. Ward, however, was not convinced of the existence of such a 'political programme'; rather, he identified a 'mental', not political, 'bias', a *social* phenomenon<sup>13</sup> – a 'community of sentiment'.<sup>14</sup>

Meaney argues that the British imperial ideal was not a 'proper national myth' because it showed a failure of Australian imagination; Australians could not see themselves as anything other than part of Britain. Meanwhile, 'Ocker' ideas were in the same basket as hating warm beer or barracking for Australia in the cricket: such parochialism and jingoism was not a true 'test of nationalism' and could not add up

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<sup>10</sup> Anthony Trollope, *Australia and New Zealand*, Melbourne, 1876, p. 69; cited in Russel Ward, 'Collectivist notions of a nomad tribe', *Historical Studies, Australia and New Zealand*, vol. 6, November 1953 – May 1955, p. 460, Russel Ward Papers, National Library of Australia, Canberra, MS 7576, Box 50, Folder 1.

<sup>11</sup> Russel Ward, 'Collectivist notions of a nomad tribe', p. 459.

<sup>12</sup> Keith Hancock, *Australia*, London, 1945, p. 166; and 'A Veray True and Comyn Wele', in *Politics in Pitcairn and other essays*, London, 1947, p. 108; cited in Russel Ward, 'Collectivist notions of a nomad tribe', p. 459. Note the way Hancock is like Phillips in looking to the Tudor age as a paradigm of what the Australian community is, or could be.

<sup>13</sup> Russel Ward, 'Collectivist notions of a nomad tribe', p. 460.

<sup>14</sup> Carl Bridge, quoting Meaney, refers to the 'community of sentiment' in 'Anglo-Australian attitudes: remembering and re-reading Russel Ward', *Journal of Australian Colonial History*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2008, p. 199. However, this is not a term Meaney actually uses in his essay: in 'Britishness and Australian identity' he in fact refers to the 'community of culture', p. 85.

to any sort of a national idea.<sup>15</sup> Ward sought to rectify this situation. His world of the nineteenth-century bush was one in which, faced with a harsh continent and the imperative to find a new way of living, the bushmen did just that. Through song, lore and custom they were able to create a system, based on fraternity and egalitarianism, which helped them survive, gave their lives meaning, and created a consciousness which was independent and distinctive.

Ward's qualifications as the delineator of this working man's paradise were staunchly bourgeois. His memoir has the same title as Watson's biography of Fitzpatrick, *A Radical Life*, but his was not a life lived outside the mainstream in the way Fitzpatrick's was.<sup>16</sup> In his formative years he was a member of the Communist Party,<sup>17</sup> but he was the son of an Adelaide private school headmaster and in the late-thirties and early-forties he taught at exclusive Geelong and Sydney Grammar Schools, teaching English literature to the scions of the wealthy middle classes and coaching rowing.<sup>18</sup> His academic background was in English literature, and his interest in the ballads and folksongs, he said, 'grew naturally into a study of the life, outlook and influence of those who sang them', as he realised they were a rich source for the cultural and social life of Australia.<sup>19</sup>

He completed his doctoral thesis at the Australian National University, Canberra; Manning Clark was one of the markers (as we shall discuss later). Lacking natural allies in academia, in the mid-fifties Ward was at something of a crisis in his life, holed up in Telopea Park High School, ACT, and desperately searching for academic employment. 'You must understand', he wrote to Christesen in response to pleas for help in drumming up support for *Meanjin* in the federal capital, 'I'm a bloke whose 'influence' is

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<sup>15</sup> Neville Meaney, 'Britishness and Australian identity', pp. 78/89.

<sup>16</sup> Russel Ward, *A Radical Life*, South Melbourne: Macmillan, 1988. For more biographical information, Carl Bridge's 'Anglo-Australian attitudes' and Drew Cottle's 'A Bowyang historian' give good potted lives of Ward. Bridge's obituary of Ward also provides a concise biography: 'Author defined white man's dreaming', *The Australian*, 6/9/1995, in Carl Bridge (ed.), *Russel Ward: A Celebration*, NSW: University of New England Union, 1996, pp. 25–7.

<sup>17</sup> Ward joined the CPA in 1941 – Drew Cottle, 'A Bowyang historian', p. 174.

<sup>18</sup> The Sydney Grammar School Archives hold a little bit of information about Ward's time there (1939–42) including photographs of him with his rowing crews, one of which won the prestigious Head of the River in 1940. Bridge says Ward was the youngest coach (at 25) to win that event, and that he went by the nickname of 'Bull' Ward, because of his 'loud and imperious voice'; Carl Bridge, 'Anglo-Australian attitudes', p. 192.

<sup>19</sup> Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend*, p. v.

negligible', having the 'status of a chalky in a dull state school'.<sup>20</sup> Through 1956 he subjected Clark, then in Cambridge and another close friend and confidant, to a torrent of angst-ridden, emotional, 'obsessed and distressed' letters: 'tortured and strangulated bellows of pain and posturings of pseudo-martyrdom', as he himself put it.<sup>21</sup> This was the period when his search for a job in academia was being hampered by his associations with communism. ASIO had a file on him, and when he applied for a lectureship at the University of Technology, Sydney the vice-chancellor vetoed his appointment, despite unanimous support from the selection committee, on the grounds that he had 'been active in seditious circles in Canberra'.<sup>22</sup> Eventually, Ward secured a job at the University of New England, and it was in his early years in Armidale that he converted his 160,000-word thesis into the book that would make his name.<sup>23</sup>

The basis and evidence for the cultural community Ward described were in the folk songs of the convict and colonial eras. He constructed his Legend out of the stuff of the ballads which were the original focus of his research as a student of literature. From the 1890s, as we have seen, historians such as G.A. Wood had challenged the 'disgraceful' image of Australia's convicts. By the time Ward was writing, though, historians such as A.G.L. Shaw and Clark were arguing that, in fact, 'the great majority of our pioneers were habitual criminals, many of them hardened and vicious'.<sup>24</sup> Ward, however, was not interested in whether or not the first colonists were bad; rather, he wished to ask 'how did they react to the strange Australian environment?'; and, in what ways 'has their outlook influenced Australian literary and social traditions?' The answer, he said, lay in 'our almost forgotten folk songs'.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Russel Ward to C.B. Christesen, 23/6/1956, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 347.

<sup>21</sup> Russel Ward to Manning Clark, 15/10/1956 & 14/2/1956, Manning Clark Papers, Box 2, Folder 9.

<sup>22</sup> Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars*, pp. 6–7. Ward's job-hunting travails have become part of the 'history wars' documented by Macintyre and Clark. Frank Crowley argues that his failure to secure the post at UTS had nothing to do with his politics and everything to do with sexual transgressions; 'The Ward Fabrication', *Quadrant*, vol. 48, no. 5, 2004, pp. 30–33. Keith Windschuttle notes the brilliance of Ward's subsequent career in New England and opines that 'at Armidale, it certainly gets cold in the winter but it is not Siberia, where Macintyre's fellow communists sent history professors to their deaths'; 'Stuart Macintyre and the Blainey affair', *Quadrant*, 8/10/2008, at <https://quadrant.org.au/magazine/2008/10/stuart-mcintyre-and-the-blainey-affair/>; accessed 17/4/2018.

<sup>23</sup> The enormous word count is documented by Drew Cottle, 'A Bowyang historian', p. 181.

<sup>24</sup> G.A. Wood (from his 1922 essay 'Convicts', cited in Introduction) and A.G.L. Shaw, cited in Russel Ward, manuscript of 'Felons and Folksongs', *Meanjin*, September 1956, p. 282, Russel Ward Papers, Box 50, Folder 2.

<sup>25</sup> Russel Ward, 'Felons and Folksongs', *Meanjin*, vol. 15, no. 3, Spring 1956, p. 283.



Graeme Davison describes the links between the popular front, the Communist Party and the folklore revival of the forties and fifties.<sup>26</sup> In this Australia took the lead from, in particular, the USA: folklorists such as Alan Lomax and Harry Smith had been travelling across America, and all around the world, collecting ballads and songs since before the Second World War.<sup>27</sup> Folk singers such as Pete Seeger, who joined the Communist Party in the same year as Ward (1941),<sup>28</sup> and Woody Guthrie had also taken a lead role in attacking fascism and extolling the virtues of the working culture. In Australia, meanwhile, folklorists John Meredith and John Manifold had formed their band the Bushwhackers in the 1950s; the New Theatre was putting on Communist Dick Diamond's musical 'Reedy River', set during a shearers' strike of 1891, and touring Australia's capital cities; and Edgar Waters and Peter Hamilton, associates of Ward, made field recordings of folk singers and started a record label, Wattle Records.<sup>29</sup> Waters published an essay in *Overland* about the new interest in collecting folk songs, mentioning that the academic world, in particular in the shape of Ward, was beginning to display an 'unexpected and welcome interest in our folklore'. He mentioned the Australian Folk Lore Society, set up in Sydney in 1953 'to collect, record, publish and popularise the folk lore of Australia', and utilised by Ward to make field recordings.<sup>30</sup>

The tradition of ballad singing arrived from England with the convicts, and it was, said Ward, a method of disseminating current events to an illiterate population. The professional balladeers in England had been known as 'chaunters'. Ward cited an 'Alarmed Schoolmaster', writing in the *English Journal of Education* in 1851, who noted the poor's possession of 'a literature of their own' – the ballad – the influence of which 'a casual observer would not readily credit'. He also quoted a naval surgeon of the

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<sup>26</sup> Graeme Davison, 'Rethinking the Australian Legend', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 43, issue 3, March 2012, pp. 434–5.

<sup>27</sup> In this period Alan Lomax was anthologizing world folk music in an 18 volume LP series for UNESCO, released by Columbia Records. He travelled the Southern states of America in 1958/9, making field recordings, and in 1962 conducted an 'extensive survey of traditional music in the Eastern Caribbean'; see:

[http://www.culturalequity.org/alanlomax/ce\\_alanlomax\\_bio.php](http://www.culturalequity.org/alanlomax/ce_alanlomax_bio.php); accessed 1/5/2017. Harry Smith's multi-volume *Anthology of American Folk Music* was released in 1952 on the Folkways record label; see:

[http://www.harrysmitharchives.com/1\\_bio/](http://www.harrysmitharchives.com/1_bio/); accessed 1/5/2017.

<sup>28</sup> Graeme Davison, 'Rethinking the Australian Legend', p. 442.

<sup>29</sup> Graeme Davison, 'Rethinking the Australian Legend', pp. 441–2.

<sup>30</sup> Edgar Waters, 'Collecting our folksongs', *Overland*, no. 6, Summer 1955/6, pp. 23–25.

1820s describing the transported convicts' propensity for song and verse. The ballad singing tradition, said the surgeon, gained new vitality from the conditions of 'up-country life'.<sup>31</sup> The Australian ballads, unlike English ones such as 'Frankie and Johnny' (said Ward) rarely told the stories of specific individuals, but were 'concerned with describing, in a general way, some aspect of bush life'. Bushranging songs with a hero, he said, were in 'a small minority', and he cited the example of 'The Overlander', with its anonymous narrator and his subjects, 'my boys'. The hero of the songs is a proverbial and collective figure, constructed from 'a whole class of nomadic pastoral workers, conscious of their communal identity and cohesion as against squatters on the one hand and un-acclimatised new chums on the other'.<sup>32</sup> Whilst the bushranger songs celebrated individuals, nevertheless the protagonists had, quoting Keith Hancock, 'self-respect and independence and even a master's pride as *a member of a class*'.<sup>33</sup> Like other historians with a Marxist bent, Ward was concerned to illustrate a consciousness of kind amongst the people. In this way we can see clear similarities with his contemporary E.P. Thompson, who argued that the three foundation blocks of the English working class were association, Methodism and conditions; Ward's foundation blocks, meanwhile, were the loneliness of the bush, mateship and the convict heritage. His thesis was that, in the colonial world, 'the most obvious and natural way of building a sense of national identity was simply to stress those aspects of life which differed most dramatically from the norms – or what colonists felt to be the norms – of the mother-country'.<sup>34</sup> How else, he concluded, could colonists cease thinking of themselves as 'transplanted Britons'?<sup>35</sup>

This folk idea of Australia did not sit easily with academic historians. R.M. Crawford's report on Ward's doctoral thesis noted the candidate's reliance on folk materials and declared that this showed 'pertinacity, thoroughness and imagination'. However, he lamented the 'relative neglect' of 'official

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<sup>31</sup> Both citations from Russel Ward, 'Two early Australian street ballads, being 'Adieu to Old England or the Transport's farewell' and 'The Ballad of *The Catalpa*', draft of article, undated (c. 1954/5), Russel Ward Papers, Box 50, Folder 1.

<sup>32</sup> Russel Ward, 'Collectivist notions of a nomad tribe', pp. 460/1. 'New chums': new arrivals in the colonies.

<sup>33</sup> Russel Ward, citing Keith Hancock, 'Collectivist notions of a nomad tribe', p. 463; Ward's emphasis.

<sup>34</sup> Russel Ward, 'Frontierism' and national stereotypes', paper given to the Canadian Historical Association, Charlottetown, 10 – 13/6/1964, Russel Ward Papers, Box 51, Folder 4.

<sup>35</sup> Keith Hancock's phrase, in *Australia*, London, 1930, cited in Russel Ward, 'Frontierism' and national stereotypes'.

sources', which, he said, Ward was 'inclined to think of dealing only in aggregates'. Crawford objected to the title of the thesis, *History of the Australian Pastoral Worker*, saying that it was inaccurate and that a better title would be *Ethos and influence of the Pastoral worker in Eastern Australia, 1788 to 1900*. He noted how Ward had moved away from a 'straight investigation' of the ballads to a study of the 'social implications' of the folk-attitudes contained within them.<sup>36</sup> The impact of social ideas or trends was being taken much more seriously in this era by historians and intellectuals. Hannah Arendt, for example, had pointed to their importance in the shaping of anti-Semitism: she discussed 'social factors, unaccounted for in political or economic history, hidden under the surface of events, never perceived by the historian and recorded only by the more penetrating and passionate force of poets or novelists'.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, Ward sought to unearth hidden currents – proofs of intangible consciousness that led to a national idea. He said that while songs and ballads may not give a 'reliable account of actual events', they do give an 'accurate picture of social attitudes'. He quoted from John Selden's seventeenth century *Table Talk*: 'though some make slight of libels yet you may see by them how the wind sits... Solid things do not show the complexion of the times so well as ballads and libels'.<sup>38</sup> 'Solid things' had not, as Arendt had found, proven adequate to explain Europe's slide towards totalitarianism. Nor, as Ward asserted, did they do justice to the complexion and complexity of Australia's idea of itself. They could not permeate men's (and his Legend was all about men) minds.<sup>39</sup>

Ward differed from other Marxist historians in that he was not seeking the nature or location of power in the society he was studying. Rather, he asked a cultural or anthropological question: what did people think they were doing in this society? Anthropologist Clifford Geertz, writing about Balinese cockfights, posited that 'man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun' and

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<sup>36</sup> R.M. Crawford, Report on Russel Ward's PhD thesis, 10/7/1956, Manning Clark Papers, Box 2, Folder 9.

<sup>37</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York: Harvest, 1999 (first published 1951), p. 87.

<sup>38</sup> Russel Ward, 'Collectivist notions of a nomad tribe', p. 460.

<sup>39</sup> For a feminist critique of the Australian Legend see: Miriam Dixson, *The Real Matilda: Woman and Identity in Australia, 1788–1975*, Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1976.

these webs are culture.<sup>40</sup> Geertz writes that the cockfight is ‘a Balinese reading of Balinese experience; a story they tell themselves about themselves’.<sup>41</sup> As Ronald G. Walters has said of Geertz, he sustained ‘the faith that it is possible to write a history of common folk from their point of view’,<sup>42</sup> through ritual and culture, which is how Ward, bringing to his work a sensibility which was literary, not necessarily historical, tackled Australian history. Geertz says that attending cockfights for the Balinese ‘is a kind of sentimental education’; it is how they talk to themselves and each other and learn their culture.<sup>43</sup> Ward, similarly, found a way to look at Australian culture and history from the perspective of the Australian people, how they told themselves a story about themselves, and this was through the folk songs and ballads. He said that history’s importance lay in its power to help us ‘know ourselves and our place in the world better by knowing more of how we have come to be what we are’.<sup>44</sup> He found a way to show how the argot of the bushmen was the foundation of an Australian cultural idea: they had created the ‘vernacular republic’.<sup>45</sup> For Ward, the cultural idea became a national idea, and it was an idea that came from the common bushman: history from below, the ‘community of sentiment’.

The other markers of Ward’s thesis had similar concerns to Crawford. Both Clark and John La Nauze were disgruntled with the title; Clark also found fault with the source material and lamented Ward’s neglect of ‘official’ sources: ‘the failure to use parliamentary papers, debates, etc.’ was, he contended, problematic, and he noted Ward’s obdurate persistence ‘in his claim that the bush worker was ‘unique’’. However, ‘one wonders whether he would have modified this statement if he had read the evidence to the committees of the House of Commons and the House of Lords on Ireland in the period 1826 to 52’.

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<sup>40</sup> Clifford Geertz, ‘Thick Description: toward an interpretive theory of culture’, in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books, 1973, p. 5.

<sup>41</sup> Clifford Geertz, ‘Deep play: notes on the Balinese cockfight’, *Daedalus*, vol. 101, no. 1, Winter 1972, p. 26.

<sup>42</sup> Ronald G. Walters, ‘Signs of the times: Clifford Geertz and historians’, *Social Research*, vol. 47, no. 3, Autumn 1980, p. 551.

<sup>43</sup> Clifford Geertz, ‘Deep play: notes on the Balinese cockfight’, p. 27.

<sup>44</sup> Russel Ward, ‘Uses of History’, lecture manuscript, University of New England, Armidale, 22/4/1968, Russel Ward Papers, Box 51, Folder 4. This was published as *Uses of History: an inaugural public lecture delivered in Armidale, New South Wales, on 22nd April, 1968*, Armidale, NSW: University of New England, 1968.

<sup>45</sup> Les Murray’s term – referenced in Introduction.

Clark opined that a ‘thorough study of this material would have forced the candidate to restrict the scope of his thesis’.<sup>46</sup> It is interesting that Clark, whose work would come under intense scrutiny from those who doubted his proper use of the documents,<sup>47</sup> should focus on Ward’s source material. We might also query whether the student of Australian bushmen really needed to travel to London to look at Parliamentary archives. Crawford and Clark, fastidiously picking at Ward’s thesis, could not make themselves look beyond official records and documents; they were inherently suspicious of Ward’s methodology and his findings (and perhaps they also envied his originality). Quentin Skinner has talked of the ‘philistine tradition of brute empiricism in English historiography which has always been resistant to theoretical reflection of any kind’.<sup>48</sup> Australian historians of the fifties, still intent on gaining an academic foothold for their discipline, were tied to this ‘tradition’. La Nauze had ‘spirited objections’ to Ward’s ‘bush myth’;<sup>49</sup> and Crawford, despite his generally positive report on Ward’s thesis, as Chair of the University of Melbourne History Department mistrusted this history of ideas; perhaps he also mistrusted Ward’s communist connections (given his later role in the Cold War politics of the Menzies era).<sup>50</sup> Certainly, Ward’s politics had a negative effect on his career at this stage, and possibly that was an issue. There were other, non-political, issues, however, as we shall now see.

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<sup>46</sup> Manning Clark, Report on Russel Ward’s PhD thesis, July 1956, and John La Nauze, Report on Russel Ward’s PhD oral examination, 6/7/1956, Manning Clark Papers, Box 2, Folder 9.

<sup>47</sup> See for example criticisms of *Volume IV* of his *History of Australia*, as reported in Mark McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity*, p. 589: ‘Clark had ‘Banjo’ Paterson sitting in a chapel at Sydney Grammar School before the chapel was built, while in the 1870s girls from Presbyterian Ladies College in Melbourne sang hymns that had not yet been written.’ In fact, SGS has never had a chapel.

<sup>48</sup> Quentin Skinner, interview, Institute of Historical Research, 18/4/2008, [http://www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/interviews/Skinner\\_Quentin.html](http://www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/interviews/Skinner_Quentin.html); accessed 21/8/2014.

<sup>49</sup> James Curran, ‘Australia should be there: Expo ‘67 and the search for a new national image’, *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 39, no. 1, March 2008, p. 81.

<sup>50</sup> In April 1961 Crawford had written a letter to *The Bulletin* alleging misconduct by an unnamed communist in two unnamed departments of his university. The subsequent scandal saw Crawford taking indefinite sick leave and Kathleen Fitzpatrick resigning from his department in 1962, citing lack of confidence. Robert Dare, ‘Crawford, Raymond Maxwell (Max) (1906–1991)’, *Australian Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/crawford-raymond-maxwell-max-16260>; published online; accessed 2/5/2017.

iii) 'Demographically unbearable'? – the Legend and reality

Ward argued that 'for most ordinary Americans and Australians their fate has seemed tolerably simple – to identify with the indigenous image which serves to differentiate them from citizens of Britain or Europe'.<sup>51</sup> He thus sought to show how, in Australia as in the USA, there was an emphasis on 'frontier attitudes', because these offered the starkest possible contrast to 'respectable British mores'. He was heavily influenced by the work of F.J. Turner, who argued that the frontier had seen the birth of American democracy and nationalism. Ward said that the 'noble frontiersman' was the 'most potent symbol, *especially* in the cities, of American nationalism'.<sup>52</sup> But the seeming irrelevance of rural ideals in urban societies was a problem seized on by critics of cultural nationalism. Horne, for example, bemoaned the 'demographically unbearable' nature of the bush ideal;<sup>53</sup> La Nauze's entrenched dislike of the bush myth, already noted, was because 'the great majority of Australians' are 'urban people' and Australia is 'in truth, an urban society'.<sup>54</sup> But Ward did not see this as an issue, citing the world's television screens, 'choked with gunsmoke and the corpses of a million Indians', reminding cultural commentators 'just how potent an image the noble frontiersman still is'.<sup>55</sup> In responding to his chief critic Humphrey McQueen on this matter, Ward was scathing:

Apparently Mr McQueen's mind can grasp only one idea at a time. To him it is inconceivable that the real historical experience of a small group in Australian society should have given rise to a legendary (i.e. largely unreal) national self-image of a certain sort. For him the image must be wholly consistent with reality *or* it must be wholly false.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> His (mis)use of the term 'indigenous' illustrates the blind spot of the cultural nationalists, to which we will return later.

<sup>52</sup> Russel Ward, 'Frontierism' and national stereotypes'; Ward's emphasis.

<sup>53</sup> Donald Horne, 'The New Nationalism', *The Bulletin*, 5/10/1968, p. 36.

<sup>54</sup> John La Nauze, Minutes of Advisory Committee for the Australian Pavilion at the World Expo, 12/10/1965, cited in James Curran, 'Australia should be there', p. 81.

<sup>55</sup> Russel Ward, 'Frontierism' and national stereotypes'.

<sup>56</sup> Russel Ward, 'Reply to Humphrey McQueen', correspondence, *Overland*, numbers 50–51, Autumn 1972, pp. 79–80; Russel Ward Papers, Box 51, Folder 5; Ward's emphasis.

The cultural nationalists had made these arguments many times. In 1956, Phillips explored the ‘Ulyssean qualities of individualism and initiative’ shown by the bushmen, which he termed ‘Australian Romanticism’: ‘the protest against the gap which yawns between the felt potentialities of the human spirit and the limitations of human circumstance. It is man’s outcry when he finds the straight-waistcoat of civilized living impeding the expansion of the lungs of desire’. He countered those who would say that the modern demographic of Australia simply could not support such mythologizing:

It may be claimed that these bush influences have little to do with the suburban placidity which rules the lives of the majority of contemporary Australians. Such a view ignores the power of the myth in moulding group-attitudes, and the place of the bushmen in Australian mythology.<sup>57</sup>

A debate in the pages of *Overland* on the topic of the Australian Legend touched on this. Film producer Tim Burstall, in conversation with the likes of artist Albert Tucker, editor Stephen Murray-Smith, writer David Martin and young turk Phillip Adams, acknowledged that the ‘average Australian’ was ‘statistically’ a ‘lawn-mowing suburbanite’, but ‘does he conceive of himself in these terms? Are his dreams of that sort?’<sup>58</sup> The implicit answer was no, the outback legend held a triumphant poetic resonance, and whilst Turner, according to Ward, may have done a good job showing how the frontier ideal had shaped ‘nationalist tendencies’, he had not understood that the frontier’s ‘strongest influence was exercised, not on institutions and events and economics, but on men’s imaginations’.<sup>59</sup> Like Arendt, Ward saw the poet as the real delineator of the tides of society.

Ward maintained that middle class writers such as Henry Handel Richardson, Martin Boyd and Patrick White had suffered from what Henry James had called ‘the complex fate of the artist of the trans-

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<sup>57</sup> A.A. Phillips, ‘Douglas Stewart’s *Ned Kelly* and Australian Romanticism’, *Meanjin*, vol. 15, no. 3, Spring 1956, pp. 260/2–3.

<sup>58</sup> Tim Burstall, in ‘The Legend and the Loneliness: a discussion of the Australian myth’, *Overland*, no. 23, April 1962, p. 34.

<sup>59</sup> Russel Ward, ‘Frontierism’ and national stereotypes’.

Atlantic society', torn between the old and the new, 'the traditionally inherited and the indigenous'.<sup>60</sup> However, he said that the 'unselfconscious but deeply-felt outlook of the common folk', his 'proper concern', was the driving force behind an Australian self-image.<sup>61</sup> Australian culture was *not* middle class; it was convict, 'currency', working-class in aspect and texture.<sup>62</sup> Writers such as Furphy or Lawson were unembarrassed by their native culture, lacking second-hand bourgeois hang-ups. Furphy had plenty to say about the survival skills of English gentlemen in colonial Australia: the bullockies of *Such as Life* laugh at them, noting that 'if a feller ain't propped up with cash, this country'll (adj.) quick fetch him to his proper (adj.) level':

No doubt it is very nice to see a 'gentleman' who, when drunk, can lie in the gutter like a 'gentleman'; but will someone suggest a more pitiable sight than such a person trying to compete with an iron-sinewed miner on the goldfields, or with a hardy, knifed bushman in the back country?<sup>63</sup>

The practicality of the Australian bush archetype was thus asserted. It was, said Ward, 'largely' currency values which 'formed the basis of the more self-conscious literary and political nationalism which emerged at the end of the nineteenth century'.<sup>64</sup> He contended that the social mores of England, the obsession with gentility, were useless in the Australian context. Samuel Sidney, in 1852, had noted the traits required for the successful settler: 'gentlefolks with little money and much pride are the least likely to succeed as emigrants'. Clinging to 'European prejudices' and 'sacrificing' independence in the 'struggle' to 'maintain appearances' was not a recipe for success or happiness. A colonist's 'first great prerequisite', said Sidney, was 'action': 'to be able to do anything, to need the least possible assistance, to

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<sup>60</sup> Russel Ward, 'Frontierism' and national stereotypes'. These arguments are similar to those put forward by Bernard Smith (see Chapter 7).

<sup>61</sup> Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend*, p. 61.

<sup>62</sup> 'Currency': the appellation for those born in the Australian colonies.

<sup>63</sup> Tom Collins [Joseph Furphy], *Such is Life*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1962 (first published 1903), pp. 32/41. '(adj)': Furphy's method of showing profanity in speech.

<sup>64</sup> Russel Ward, 'Social roots of Australian nationalism', draft of essay, dated 2/12/1955, p. 2; later published in *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 1, no. 2, May 1956, pp. 179–195; Russel Ward Papers, Box 50, Folder 1.



have a great talent for making shift and being contented – these are golden talents’.<sup>65</sup> These practical men had, as Phillips had put it, risen to the ‘challenge of the actual’.

Ward traced the Australian character and sensibility back to the start of European settlement in 1788: while in nineteenth-century England aristocratic and upper-middle class ‘manners and values’ tended to ‘set the prevailing tone of society’, this, he argued, was inverted in early Australia, where convict and working-class attitudes, ‘modified and often accentuated by the new environment’, quickly came to be seen as Australian. This happened more quickly in the bush, ‘where the environment was most strange and difficult’, as opposed to the ‘Home-like’ streets of Sydney: ‘whatever a man’s station in life, adaptation to the environment was necessarily more rapid and far-reaching in a bark hut on the Bogan than in a George Street cottage’.<sup>66</sup> This was a matter of pragmatic survival. ‘Mateship,’ said Ward, was an ‘imperative’ in the bush because of the loneliness of the life and the harsh conditions: ‘a man who had no mate, if he met with an accident or a serious illness, simply died’.<sup>67</sup>

Ward noted the confluence of the socialist and the conservative in Australian fraternalism.<sup>68</sup> The tension between old and new – sometimes called the ‘Australian Paradox’, and according to Phillips a ‘combative paradox’ – was the basis, Ward argued, for the ‘unusually conservative and conformist’ nature of Australian society.<sup>69</sup> This strange dichotomy was one of the ideas that would irritate Ward’s critics: how could a *conservative* creed lead to *socialist* radicalism? Such arguments meant that the vaunted radicalism of the Australian bush ethos did not in fact exist, or was at the least lazy and slapdash. McQueen, chief amongst those detractors, pinpointed the settlers’ obsession with pianos and the extraordinary lengths to which they went in order to transport them across the world, up the coasts and out into the bush, all in

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<sup>65</sup> Cited in Russel Ward, ‘Social roots of Australian nationalism’, p. 7.

<sup>66</sup> Russel Ward, ‘Social roots of Australian nationalism’, p. 2.

<sup>67</sup> Russel Ward, ‘Collectivist notions of a nomad tribe’, p. 467.

<sup>68</sup> Russel Ward, ‘Collectivist notions of a nomad tribe’, p. 460.

<sup>69</sup> Russel Ward, review of Jean Mackenzie, *The Australian Paradox*, undated manuscript (c. 1961), no publication details, in Russel Ward Papers, Box 1, Folder 2. A.A. Phillips, Foreword, *The Australian Tradition*, Melbourne: Cheshire, 1966 (second edition). An iteration of this strange conformism might be William Lane’s ‘naïve’, almost apologetic, definition of socialism – ‘just being mates’ – mentioned in Chapter 1.

the name of gentility, and asked: ‘what kind of radicalism is it that gives such a prominent place to pianos?’<sup>70</sup> When Judith Wright’s ancestors struggled to make a life for themselves in Queensland, it was the decrepit state of the piano, symbol of civilisation, which underlined the difficulty of the task and their predicament:

He would clear the cockroaches out of May’s piano; when he looked inside the lid, they scuttled and hid everywhere. They had eaten the felt mufflers almost away and the notes sounded strange when he struck them, for wet weather had warped the keys a little.<sup>71</sup>

Perhaps Wright’s pastoralist forebears were not the ‘currency’ stock Ward’s theory relied upon; nevertheless, their travails at the nineteenth-century frontier were an inimitable part of the ‘noble’ Australian experience. Francis Adams, cited by Ward, had written in the 1890s that he found ‘all that is genuinely characteristic in Australia and Australians’, all ‘that is noblest, kindest and best’, came from the ‘heart of the land’. He made the comparison with America explicit, stating that if the West was ‘the heart of the country’, the ‘genuine America’, then ‘the Interior is the heart of the genuine Australia, and, if needs be, will do as much for the nation and the race’.<sup>72</sup> Even by the time Ward was writing, such ideas, explicitly racial, were problematic. A decade later the use of such pronouncements to back up his arguments made his Legend an easy target for his critics.

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<sup>70</sup> Humphrey McQueen, *A New Britannia: An Argument concerning the Social Origins of Australian Radicalism and Nationalism*, Ringwood, Vic: Penguin, 1986 (first published 1970), p. 117.

<sup>71</sup> Judith Wright, *The Generations of Men*, p. 97.

<sup>72</sup> Francis Adams, *The Australians, a social sketch*, 1893, cited in Russel Ward, ‘Two noble frontiersmen’, draft of essay, circa 1959, Russel Ward Papers, Box 50, Series 24, Folder 2.

iv) ‘Community of sentiment’ or ‘community of interest’?

The power of an idea, perhaps feared by the historians who had reviewed Ward’s doctoral thesis in the 1950s, proved very strong, and has been hard to shift ever since. Frank Bongiorno describes the ‘towering’, ‘brooding’ presence of *The Australian Legend*, as subsequent Australian historians have tried to carve out their own ideas and voices, always finding themselves having to respond to Ward’s resonant depiction of national self-image.<sup>73</sup> However, the monolithic nature of Ward’s idea made it an obvious target for his successors. In creating a myth, he created a stereotype: a masculine, racial stereotype that failed to take into account a plurality of ideas, or the complexity of Australian society, including the country’s indigenous heritage. Ward’s ‘community of sentiment’ was ultimately a political construction; Aristotle’s ‘political animal’ is defined as being one who lives in a community. Contemporaries such as Arendt and Thompson focussed on how communities could both include and exclude, be it classes or ethnic groups, and whilst Ward’s Legend was a communal vision built on human relationships, it was nevertheless a vision of a polity fundamentally designed not to be inclusive, but exclusive, and in particular to exclude the remainders, or reminders, of Britishness. Unfortunately, many others – Indigenous Australians, the Chinese, ‘kanakas’, just about every nationality not descended from the British Isles, women<sup>74</sup> – were excluded too.

Ward’s idea of the ‘legendary’ bushman was, in the words of Ian McLean, ‘a white Aborigine sprung from the land itself’.<sup>75</sup> Bridge says he ‘defined the white man’s dreaming’,<sup>76</sup> while Bongiorno argues that Ward’s text ‘registers the inherent instability of whiteness, so that under frontier conditions

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<sup>73</sup> Frank Bongiorno, ‘Two radical legends: Russel Ward, Humphrey McQueen and the New Left Challenge in Australian historiography’, *Journal of Australian Colonial History*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2008, p. 222.

<sup>74</sup> Ward’s own assertion that the growth of the cult of mateship owed much to ‘the dearth of white women in the outback’ underlines this point; ‘Collectivist notions of a nomad tribe’, p. 468.

<sup>75</sup> Ian McLean, *White Aborigines: Identity Politics in Australian Art*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 88–9; cited in Frank Bongiorno, ‘Russel Ward’s *The Australian Legend*: a reconsideration’, paper delivered at the University of Sydney, 30/4/2012.

<sup>76</sup> Carl Bridge, ‘Author defined the white man’s dreaming’, p. 25.

his bushmen come to resemble, physically and in their ethos and behaviour, Aboriginal people'.<sup>77</sup> There is some irony in the way writers such as Ward, describing the 'indigenous image' of his Legend, or Phillips, talking of his 'indigenous' Tradition,<sup>78</sup> laboured so hard to define a 'native' Australian culture, all the while ignoring the obvious one that had been there all along, from thousands of years before any white person had ever set foot on the continent. It was an irony they never seemingly grasped. When at a later stage Ward found himself dealing with accusations of racism, the treatment of Aborigines did not even seem to be a part of the debate. He had acknowledged their brutal treatment in his book, but not at length;<sup>79</sup> and ultimately he would not allow it to detract from what he saw as the overwhelmingly positive, democratic legacy of the Legend. This is an issue that recurs throughout the late-sixties and seventies as we see Ward defending his ideas, the ideas he had built his career on.

Bongiorno notes that Ward tried to push the existence of racism closer to 'the heart of the Legend' in the seventies, but did not deal 'fully' with its implications for the egalitarianism and mateship that, as he saw it, were the 'essence' of the idea.<sup>80</sup> In fact, he was dealing with these issues much earlier than that, in 1961 delivering a paper in which he explicitly discussed the racist element of his Legend. He quoted a *Bulletin* article from 1887, which reviled the Chinese and other ethnic groups. The article had also declared that 'those who leave their fatherland because they cannot swallow the worm-eaten lie of the divine right of kings to murder peasants are Australians by instinct', and Ward contended that 'even at this time of very strong racist prejudices the editor's emphasis was on the national feeling – the notion that to be an Australian you *must* be a leveller and a democrat'.<sup>81</sup> Ward's tactic is evident: he did not deny the racism inherent in the Legend, but he downplayed it, seeking to emphasise the democratic element, which he contended was more important. His other tactic, also apparent in this paper, was to claim that there was

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<sup>77</sup> Frank Bongiorno, 'Russel Ward's *The Australian Legend*: a reconsideration'.

<sup>78</sup> Russel Ward, 'Reply to Humphrey McQueen', p. 79; A.A. Phillips, Foreword, *The Australian Tradition*, 1966 (second edition), cited by Ward in same essay.

<sup>79</sup> Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend*, pp. 97–100.

<sup>80</sup> Frank Bongiorno, 'Russel Ward's *The Australian legend*: a reconsideration'.

<sup>81</sup> Russel Ward, 'An Australian Legend', *Royal Australian Historical Society Journal and Proceedings*, vol. 47, part 6, October 1961, paper delivered to the society 26/9/61, p. 338, Russel Ward Papers, Box 51, Folder 3; Ward's emphasis.

little evidence of racism in Australia before 1851. He said that the first bushranger, 'Caesar', was a West Indian reprieved from the gallows in 1789 because of his popularity and capacity for hard work; Billy Blue, Sydney Harbour ferryman who died with much mourning in 1834, was black; Alexander Harris' novel *Martin Beck's* titular hero was 'a Negro and a station overseer' – his villainy, says Ward, not associated with his skin colour, and no surprise evinced that he *was* a black man.<sup>82</sup> This argument was thoroughly disproved and discredited, and in 1978 Ward was forced to admit as much.<sup>83</sup> Under fire, in 1971 he bemoaned Australia's racist image abroad, saying that historians had 'averted their eyes' from the 'awkward fact of our history', racism. But was he not one of those historians? Whilst maintaining his idolatry of the Australia of 1901 – 'the most advanced social democracy in the world' – he was forced to concede that the 'impetus' for this achievement came from 'radical nationalist democrats' who were, unfortunately, 'the most bigoted racists in our society'.<sup>84</sup> In the seventies radical nationalists like Ward were forced to confront the more insalubrious facts inherent in their tradition, and it was an uncomfortable task.

The 'New Left', particularly in the shape of McQueen, was scathing in its dismissal of Ward's reliance on the racist, nativist and xenophobic ideas of the discredited 1890s. McQueen, says Bongiorno, was 'self-consciously assaulting a whole tradition', that of radical nationalism.<sup>85</sup> This assault was punishing. Henry Lawson, paragon of the cultural nationalists, the writer upon whose work Phillips had built his pivotal idea of the democratic Australian voice, recipient of a wildly subjective biography by Clark, and, according to Ward, possessor of a 'profound intuitive understanding of the ambivalence in the bushman's soul', the 'uncompromising and taciturn masculine hardness on the surface' in tension with the 'unavowed, almost feminine, love beneath it',<sup>86</sup> was, in fact, anti-intellectual, racist, anti-Semitic, an

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<sup>82</sup> Russel Ward, 'An Australian Legend', pp. 339–40.

<sup>83</sup> Russel Ward, 'The Australian Legend re-visited', *Historical Studies*, vol. 18, no. 17, p. 190. Ward also re-assessed his Legend in the inaugural Russel Ward Lecture at the University of New England on 25/9/1986, published as *The back side of the Australian Legend*, Armidale, N.S.W.: University of New England Union, 1987.

<sup>84</sup> Russel Ward, 'Home thoughts from abroad: Australia's racist image', *Meanjin*, vol. 30, no. 2, June 1971, p. 155.

<sup>85</sup> Frank Bongiorno, 'Two radical legends', p. 206.

<sup>86</sup> Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend*, p. 100.

idealiser of ‘manly virtues’ and ‘militaristic nationalism’, with an ‘elitist notion of leadership’, his political verse fuelled by ‘fear and detestation of Asians’. Meanwhile, the Australian Labor Party, rather than being socialist, was in fact, said McQueen, ‘the highest expression of a peculiarly Australian petit-bourgeoisie’ and ‘the custodian of White Australia’.<sup>87</sup> William Lane, celebrated by Vance Palmer as ‘outstanding among the Utopians’,<sup>88</sup> was in reality an ‘authoritarian racist who conceived of himself as a latter-day messiah’.<sup>89</sup> And the novels of Henry Handel Richardson, beloved of Phillips, to whom he compared Patrick White unfavourably,<sup>90</sup> contained lazy characterisation of Asians, a casual, unthinking racism that went unnoticed and unremarked:

Few Australians have been offended by her implicit account of their racist attitudes. Indeed, so widely accepted were these attitudes that it is highly likely that they were not even considered racist. They were just naturally White Australian.<sup>91</sup>

McQueen asserted that the ‘legend of a once radical and nationalist people’, which Ward had pinpointed as having its roots in the bush ethos, was misleading because it ‘misrepresented the substance of that radicalism and nationalism’, which had in fact been ‘individualistic and racist’, steeped in the so-called ‘Yellow Peril’, used as justification for the White Australia Policy, for ‘sub-imperialism in the Pacific’ and ‘militarism to keep Australia white’.<sup>92</sup> McQueen labels Lawson a ‘genuine fascist’; his conception of the nation ‘organic’.<sup>93</sup> Graeme Davison says that the roots of Ward’s thinking were in the ‘primordialism’ of nineteenth century German thinkers, who stressed the ‘most ancient and primitive ties to one’s native

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<sup>87</sup> Humphrey McQueen, *A New Britannia*, pp. 105/112 & 71.

<sup>88</sup> Vance Palmer, *The Legend of the Nineties*, p. 79. Palmer makes very brief reference to Lane’s hatred of the Chinese (p. 82) and he also mentions the development of a ‘messiah complex’ in response to the ‘devotion that almost amounted to piety’ in which he was held by shearers and bushworkers (p. 83). Overall, however, Palmer’s view of Lane is overwhelmingly positive.

<sup>89</sup> Humphrey McQueen, *A New Britannia*, p. 196.

<sup>90</sup> A.A. Phillips, ‘Patrick White and the Algebraic symbol’, 1965, in *Responses*, pp. 124–30.

<sup>91</sup> Humphrey McQueen, *A New Britannia*, pp. 41–2.

<sup>92</sup> Humphrey McQueen, *A New Britannia*, afterword to 1986 edition, p. 254; pp. 29 ff., 75 ff.

<sup>93</sup> Humphrey McQueen, letter to Henry Mayer, c. 1969, cited by Frank Bongiorno, ‘Two radical legends’, p. 206; Lawson’s ‘organic conception of the nation’: *A New Britannia*, p. 112.

soil': the idea of a nation is not about politicians and lawyers and their laws and constitutions, 'it is produced by something deeper, older, more spontaneous, closer to the earth, the ethos of the common people'.<sup>94</sup> These images appear emotional and intuitive, in stark contrast to rational Enlightenment ideas; they almost seem akin to 'blood and soil'. In *Overland*, Waters had quoted English composer and folk song collector Ralph Vaughan Williams, who spoke in similar terms about the 'art' of folk songs 'which grows straight out of the needs of people', 'indigenous' and owing 'nothing to anything outside itself'.<sup>95</sup> Davison says that this folklore 'movement' produced 'something of the communal character of an idealised folk community', and it also served to bring 'urban intellectuals into closer touch with working people'.<sup>96</sup> The intellectualisation of folk culture was a key factor in the establishment of a radical nationalist paradigm of Australian culture. Here was the exclusive Australian culture – supposedly 'indigenous' – demanded of those who believed in a 'national idea', an Australian Tradition.

The differing estimations of the 'doyen' of the cultural nationalists, Vance Palmer, attest to the conflicting ideas that divided the generations. Lauded in the pages of *Meanjin* upon his death, as we have seen, he was, said Ward, of 'lasting' importance for 'us in this continent', not as a result of 'technical skill or artistic power' (and the retrospective reputation of Palmer's books attests to the truth lurking in these words), but because his work was 'informed by a deep love and understanding of Australian attitudes':

He gives voice to the deepest and most inarticulate feelings of the common Australian man because he is just that, at its best, and raised to a higher power as it were. His greatest contribution has not been to letters as such but to giving form and voice to the essential nature of his country.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Graeme Davison, 'Rethinking the Australian Legend', pp. 434–5.

<sup>95</sup> Edgar Waters, 'Collecting our folksongs', *Overland*, no. 6, Summer 1955/6, pp. 23–25.

<sup>96</sup> Graeme Davison, 'Rethinking the Australian Legend', p. 442.

<sup>97</sup> Russel Ward to C.B. Christesen, 28/12/1958, C.B. Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 347.

But what exactly was this ‘essential nature’? It appeared to be nothing less than a British race idea: McQueen, as we have seen, cited Palmer’s defence of the White Australia Policy as ‘our chief assertion of character’.<sup>98</sup> Palmer’s apotheosis of the ‘legendary’ 1890s, in this context, was highly suspicious. What was so depressing for the cultural nationalists was that despite their monomaniacal fixation on making the cultural break from Britain they were in fact totally trapped in a British-Imperialist idea of race and culture that was ultimately their undoing. Much as Ward ‘would probably have denied it,’ says Carl Bridge, *The Australian Legend* ‘was quintessentially an expression and product of profound Anglo-Australian attitudes; attitudes whose historical moment, though long-lasting, has now passed’.<sup>99</sup> The cultural nationalists could not wash the colonial stain off themselves, and in the post-colonial world it resolutely stuck.

Meaney has argued that scholars have approached the issue of Australian identity with too much focus on culture; in fact, he says, there is another way of looking at it: political interests. A ‘new generation’, he says, view the old myths of cultural identity as ‘anachronistic’, and novelists and poets now treat them with ‘wry irony’ – ‘what then remains of the nationalism of sentiment and symbol is nothing but a brittle chrysalis’.<sup>100</sup> We might think that, as Britain’s world presence receded and ties to Australia were cut, Ward’s ideas would gain in currency. In fact, the reverse was the case, because they were associated with the ‘old’ Australia, tied to the colonial conception of the nation. ‘The imperial imagination’, says Stuart Ward, became ‘obsolete in Australian political discourse’, ushering in ‘new ways of thinking about an exclusively Australian culture’.<sup>101</sup> In striving so hard to end the colonial mindset, cultural nationalists such as Ward found themselves inextricably linked to it, and to that era. Once the political break was made the next generation of intellectuals found their ideas out-of-date, even embarrassing and distasteful. Ward

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<sup>98</sup> Vance Palmer, 1921, quoted in Humphrey McQueen, *A New Britannia*, p. 270. See Chapter 3.

<sup>99</sup> Carl Bridge, ‘Anglo-Australian attitudes’, p. 199.

<sup>100</sup> Neville Meaney, *The Search for Security in the Pacific, 1901–1914*, NSW: Sydney University Press, 2009, p. viii.

<sup>101</sup> Stuart Ward, *Australia and the British Embrace: The Demise of the Imperial Ideal*, Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2001; cited by James Curran, ‘Australian should be there’, p. 75.



and his friends had tried to change cultural ideas and norms; they had fought the cultural ‘battle’ invoked by Palmer – but, at its heart, it was simply built on the racial fear which for so long had obsessed Australia and was, indeed, an intrinsic part of Australia’s colonial heritage and mindset. Their community of sentiment became unacceptable in subsequent decades as colonialism collapsed and racism was destroyed as a valid or meaningful basis for a political entity. Meaney contends that this community of sentiment was powerless against the ‘community of interest’, represented most obviously in political and material progress.<sup>102</sup> The organic, ‘primordial’ idea of nationhood was anyway powerless against that old foe of Australian intellectuals: materialism.

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<sup>102</sup> Neville Meaney, ‘Britishness and Australian identity’, pp. 84 ff.

v) Conclusion

The historians we have looked at in the last three chapters saw Australia as a great canvas on which to paint ideal pictures and, in so doing, define a nation. As Bongiorno has noted, McQueen admired the target of his ire in one way, namely his ‘synthetic view of Australian society’ which was, at least, trying to create the grand narrative. The doctoral students of the twenty first century, he said, would never be allowed to ‘attempt the expanses of Russel Ward or Robin Gollan’.<sup>103</sup> Regardless of his distaste for Ward’s nationalism, McQueen admired his ambition, and the originality of *The Australian Legend* testifies to the scale of its achievement. We have compared him to E.P. Thompson, but it is worth remembering that Ward’s book was published five years before Thompson’s hugely influential work. In many ways, Ward exceeded Thompson in giving voice to the labouring class and showing us the world from their point-of-view. Thompson’s work often just shows us intellectuals, journalists, the educated and the land-owning making the ideas and leading ‘the mob’, but he is not necessarily so successful at getting inside the people’s minds; we struggle to see the gritty experience of their lives, but this is what Ward does.<sup>104</sup> He captures the perspective of the ordinary people, and for that reason Crawford, La Nauze and Clark’s finicky carping over his thesis betrayed, perhaps, their jealousy at the originality of his vision and methodology. The book remains in print and its influence, as we have noted, remains powerful, capturing as it does some of the ‘spirit’ ordinary Australians have often liked to ascribe to themselves. Perhaps this is most seen in popular culture: the resemblance between the Legend and *Crocodile Dundee* (the biggest grossing film in Australian cinematic history)<sup>105</sup> is obvious. John Howard understood the power of the idea, putting aside his distaste for the Endless Seminar and appropriating the Legend in his political language of the 2000s. Judith Brett argues that in so doing he co-opted the Australian Legend

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<sup>103</sup> Humphrey McQueen, cited in Frank Bongiorno, ‘Two radical legends’, p. 219. In Chapter 5 we noted R.W. Connell’s similar admiration for Fitzpatrick’s ‘synthesis’.

<sup>104</sup> Thompson is better at showing working class lives in his later work, *Customs in Common* (referred to in Chapter 10).

<sup>105</sup> See: ‘Top 100 Australian Feature Films of All Time’, *Screen Australia*, <https://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/fact-finders/cinema/australian-films/top-films-at-the-box-office>; accessed 16/10/2018. *Crocodile Dundee*, according to this website, grossed \$47,707,045 at the Australian box office.

for the Liberal Party – away from its traditional heartland, Labor.<sup>106</sup> After his election in 1996, ‘Akubras became de rigueur for Coalition politicians’.<sup>107</sup>

But the Australian Legend is an ideal – it idealises the colonial bushmen of the nineteenth century, the Australia of Lawson and Lane, a masculine, monocultural world based on fraternalism and egalitarianism. This ideal lacks nuance, it lacks the plurality of modern Australia, and, notwithstanding its influence on Howard and others, it still struggles for relevance in modern Australia. As Docker points out, Ward’s ‘typical Australian’ (evoked in the opening pages of his famous book) seems ‘very suspect now’ (the early-eighties): how could such a figure ‘speak to the women of Australian society’? And, Docker continues, ‘how can an ideal type forged in the nineteenth century act as an ideal type for postwar Australia’s ethnically diverse population?’ He points out that Ward may appear optimistic, but ‘it is a strange optimism that in *The Australian Legend* looks for a society’s vitality in a distant and elusive nineteenth-century legend’.<sup>108</sup> Ward’s Legend harks back to a golden era, a world of larrikins, cabbage tree hats and bullockies that is hard to square with (in Malcolm Turnbull’s words) ‘the most successful and harmonious multicultural nation in the world’.<sup>109</sup>

This is not to impute Ward with racism. Far from it: in fact, he tried to reappraise his work in light of the issue of racism (as we have seen). But he could go only so far, because admitting its importance to his historical ideal would serve only to diminish the achievement of its construction, and, as Bongiorno has pointed out, he had great ‘emotional and intellectual investment in the Legend’.<sup>110</sup> In 1978 he ‘revisited’ his magnum opus, trawling through the chapters in great detail one after the other, justifying his claims and assertions. At the end of this exhaustive exercise, he confidently concluded that his book

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<sup>106</sup> Judith Brett, ‘Relaxed & Comfortable: The Liberal Party’s Australia’, *Quarterly Essay*, Issue 19, August 2005.

<sup>107</sup> Judith Brett, ‘Fair Share: Country and City in Australia’, *Quarterly Essay*, Issue 42, June 2011, p. 58.

<sup>108</sup> John Docker, *In a Critical Condition*, pp. 16/37.

<sup>109</sup> Malcolm Turnbull, ‘The truth is our successful multicultural society is built on secure borders’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20/5/2016, found online at <https://www.smh.com.au/opinion/the-truth-is-our-successful-multicultural-society-is-built-on-secure-borders-20160519-goz3ro.html>; accessed 1/10/2018.

<sup>110</sup> Frank Bongiorno, ‘Russel Ward’s *The Australian Legend*: a reconsideration’.

had ‘two errors of detail’ – ‘Catholic priests were no more successful than Protestant pastors in ministering to bushmen during the squatting rush’, and ‘the Rev. J.D. Lang was a much more popular figure than I had thought possible’; and ‘one of substance’: as we have already noted, ‘it was wrong to state that the gold rush introduced racist passions among Australians for the first time’.<sup>111</sup>

Ward, in his own mind, had fought off his critics with a painstaking analysis of his own book, but in reality the problem of racism was about more than a few details or factual errors. The whole idea of the book was built on racism, and whilst he had acknowledged this (at least in part) he had not solved it. But in 1978 he was in many ways falling back on the empiricist nit-picking of his thesis markers, whilst it was the myth that was important: the social idea, the *mystique*. Such ideas or forces are difficult for historians to pin down; few in Australia had previously even contemplated it. Ward had grasped for it, and in so doing had had a huge impact on the shaping of a national self-image free from the shadow of the mother country. Perhaps he did not realise this at the time he wrote his famous book: he had not specifically mentioned ‘national identity’ in *The Australian Legend*, and James Curran and Stuart Ward, following K.S. Inglis, claim the term only came into use in the early 1960s, emerging first in Canada.<sup>112</sup> It is striking that it was in fact in a paper delivered in Canada that Ward (as already mentioned) began to use the term.<sup>113</sup> We can see a shift in his language as his idea began to become more and more successful.

However, while the power of what he had done became apparent, at the same time the ideas underpinning it began to be questioned, and ultimately he found it very difficult to acknowledge the problems inherent in his national idea. What this meant for his Legend was that, whilst it was

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<sup>111</sup> Russel Ward, ‘The Australian Legend re-visited’, p. 190.

<sup>112</sup> James Curran and Stuart Ward, *The Unknown Nation: Australia after Empire*, Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 2010, pp. 16–17. Inglis surmised (in a 1988 bicentennial lecture) that one of the first books to use ‘identity’ in its now familiar national guise was WL Morton’s *The Canadian Identity* in 1961.’ Curran and Ward say that the word ‘identity’ itself ‘only emerged’ in the 1950s: ‘propelled into the spotlight by the enormously influential psychoanalyst Erik H. Erikson.’ ‘Nationalism and ‘national character’ (and other such terms) had, of course, existed since the nineteenth century (and earlier in the French language).

<sup>113</sup> Russel Ward, ‘Frontierism’ and national stereotypes’, paper given to the Canadian Historical Association, Charlottetown, 10 – 13/6/1964.

demographically unbearable for some, in the seventies and beyond it became politically unbearable too, and in this way the vision of Australia presented by Ward, Phillips and the other cultural nationalists had failed, if not as a portrait of a past Australia, then as a blueprint for a modern nation.



## CHAPTER 7

### Bernard Smith: 'Imagining Australia'

*Correggio Jones an artist was  
Of pure Australian race,  
But native subjects scorned because  
They were too commonplace.*

*'In all these things there's no romance,'  
He muttered with a sneer;  
'They'd never give C. Jones a chance  
To make his genius clear!'*

*He yet is painting at full bat –  
You'll say, if him you see,  
His body dwells on Gander Flat,  
His soul's in Italy.'*

(Victor Daley, 'Correggio Jones', 1898)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Extracts from Victor Daley, 'Correggio Jones', *The Bulletin*, 11/6/1898; in Nicholas Jose (ed.), *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2009, p. 241.

i) Introduction

Bernard Smith, ‘Australia’s first art historian’,<sup>2</sup> sought to show the ways artists had ‘imagined Australia’.<sup>3</sup> In so doing, he argued, they had transformed the Western artistic tradition in an antipodean setting. He formulated the theory that Australian painting had ‘emerged gradually from the artistic traditions of Europe’, remaining ‘closely affiliated to those traditions’.<sup>4</sup> ‘Obsessed with origins’, he was influenced, according to Sheridan Palmer, by critic Herbert Reed, who argued that contemporary artists only ‘come to maturity’ by ‘subsuming’ themselves within tradition ‘in such a way that they become the end link in a long chain’.<sup>5</sup> The idea of Australia had been created, said Smith, by artists looking at this strange ‘new’ continent through European eyes, and the results, he believed, ultimately constituted a renaissance of Europe’s declining culture. Like Phillips in the world of letters, he set himself the task of producing a literature of Australian art history and criticism, hitherto lacking, which he hoped would be the catalyst for a vibrant Australian scene. Rather than being (as he saw it) an insipid imitation of foreign trends (most notably, abstraction), this scene would carve out its own distinctive vision of the world. It was an antipodean vision – ‘language and culture’ derived from the northern hemisphere; ‘life experience’ from ‘this place, this Australia’<sup>6</sup> – and it would reinvigorate international art.

Such vaulting ambitions did not proceed without opposition or debate, and his idea that Australian art could play a leading role in framing international critical discourse was not one that saw a great deal of success. Australian art *did* achieve recognition in London and Paris at the beginning of the 1960s, but not on Smith’s terms. Nevertheless, the newly elevated levels of domestic criticism and patronage, as well as the ever increasing acceptance within Australia of modern artistic preoccupations

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<sup>2</sup> Jaynie Anderson, ‘The multiple legacies of Bernard Smith’, in Jaynie Anderson, Christopher R. Marshall & Andrew Yip (eds), *The Legacies of Bernard Smith*, Sydney: Power Publications, 2016, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Bernard Smith, ‘Imagining Australia’, manuscript of lecture delivered at the Melbourne Writers’ Festival, 1997, Bernard Smith Papers, MS 8680, National Library of Australia (NLA), Canberra, Box 8, Folder 58.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Smith, ‘The Emergence of Australian Painting’, lecture given at the National Gallery of NSW, 1953, Bernard Smith Papers, NLA, Box 3, Folder 18.

<sup>5</sup> Sheridan Palmer, *Hegel’s Owl: The Life of Bernard Smith*, Sydney: Power Publications, 2016, pp. 18/44.

<sup>6</sup> Bernard Smith, ‘Imagining Australia’.



and trends, certainly contributed to Australian art's high point in the fifties and sixties. Smith did as much as anyone to win acceptance for art and artists in Australia, and to foster a climate of scholarly artistic debate. However, the idea of Australian art that was abroad after the early sixties was *not* Smith's idea, and having helped create a more self-confident Australian artistic scene, his vision was usurped by his successors. Like so many of the cultural nationalists – a group that Smith, a Marxist opposed to nationalism, was not really a part of, although he was an associate editor of *Meanjin* and from the early-forties a regular correspondent of Christesen's – he could take some credit for transforming the cultural debate in Australia and making the country a far better place for artists to operate in. But as Australia's self-confidence grew, his ideas, like those of so many of his peers from the post-war era, flagged, providing a tempting target for the next generation. More recently, the debate having come full circle in a way he, a connoisseur of origins, would have approved of, art historians once more endorse his ideas, finding themselves the latest link in a chain which, Smith would aver, had begun millennia ago in the caves of Lascaux.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Smith's early interest in the caves of Lascaux is attested to in Sheridan Palmer, *Hegel's Owl*, pp. 145/6. He visited them in 1950, ten years after their discovery. 'Years later, when he lectured on prehistoric cave art to his undergraduate students, Bernard approached the subject as a lesson in chronological dating as well as the earliest lessons in material evolution.' See discussion of Smith 'the facts man' later in chapter.

ii) 'The radical vision of hope'

Bernard Smith's radicalism was not the radicalism of the 1890s. When we have looked at the cultural nationalists, we have seen how they engaged with a tradition which was in hock to the legacy of radical nationalism stemming from that decade. But Smith's idea of what constituted Australian art was not one that saw it as being sprung from the soil of the continent itself. He admired Margaret Preston and said he was a friend of hers, recalling a wartime lecture she delivered on Aboriginal art, in which she contended that this was a tradition representing 'the natural heritage of the Australian artist who can, from the work, produce a National Art like none other in the world'.<sup>8</sup> But, besides Aboriginal art being, as one academic says, a 'blind spot' of Smith's,<sup>9</sup> he recoiled from both the nationalist message and, as we shall see, the abstraction towards which Preston's appropriation of Aboriginal motifs, like a painterly version of the nationalist Jindyworobaks, pointed.<sup>10</sup>

Whilst politics (Smith, like Ward, a communist) did have a heavy influence on his ideas, it was the 'process of the radicalisation of the tradition itself' which most interested him. 'In opposition to the corrupt present', he said, 'the radical invokes an image of a finer past that is being corrupted by more recent change'.<sup>11</sup> Or, as his hero Hegel had put it: 'only when actuality is mature does the ideal first appear'.<sup>12</sup> A radical, or new, concept of Australian art – or even of Australia itself – does not, and Smith was very specific about this, come through innovation. It comes through a recalibration of the past in a way that can change the present. Radicals were not, Smith scornfully averred, mere innovators, returned from abroad with new ideas that would only result in inferior copies of European fads. He contended

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<sup>8</sup> Bernard Smith, *A Pavane for Another Time*, Melbourne: Macmillan, 2002, p. 81.

<sup>9</sup> Ian McLean, 'Bernard Smith's blind spot: Aboriginal and Australian art', *The Legacies of Bernard Smith*, pp. 338–50.

<sup>10</sup> Carolyn Kastner says that Preston's goal 'was nothing less than to revitalise national landscape painting by introducing characteristics indigenous to the land and the people who inhabited it before colonial contact'; 'Abstraction and the creation of national identity', in Lesley Harding and Denise Mimmocchi (eds), *O'Keefe, Preston, Cossington Smith: Making Modernism*, Sydney: Art Gallery of NSW & Bulleen, Vic.: Heide Museum of Art, 2016, p. 87.

<sup>11</sup> Bernard Smith, 'Is there a radical tradition in Australian art?', lecture given at the Canberra School of Art, 4/4/1984, in *The Death of the Artist as Hero*, 1988, p. 233.

<sup>12</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox, London: Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 13; cited in Sheridan Palmer, *Hegel's Owl*, p. 5.

that art in Australia is a ‘lazy dialectic’ between ‘a slow-motion colonial and post-colonial tradition and its continuous assimilation of northern hemisphere innovations’, and this had been introduced to Australia by ‘successive generations of messenger boys and messenger girls’, returning from Europe with their newly discovered, fashionable ideas.<sup>13</sup>

Smith, though, did mirror Phillips’ democratic ideals; believing, in the words of Richard Haese, that ‘Australian art and culture possessed a native democratic tradition’;<sup>14</sup> that Australian cultural identity lay in what Sheridan Palmer terms its ‘democratic difference’.<sup>15</sup> It was in figurative art that this could be found, but it was not an organic concept. Rather, Australian art had been born out of a European tradition transplanted to an antipodean – in the most literal sense of that term – setting, and there transformed into something particularly and peculiarly Australian. It was radical because of its engagement *with* that European tradition, not because of its disavowal of it. This is why, says Palmer, the allegory of Minerva’s owl, adopted by Hegel as a way of illustrating the benefit of retrospect in understanding history (‘the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk’), is a metaphor for Smith the historian: ‘one who tries to see the complete picture’ and, in looking back, ‘understands tradition better than it understands itself’.<sup>16</sup> Catherine Speck says Smith’s ‘antipodal perspective’ represented the adoption of a ‘Hegelian methodology’: he saw in Australian art ‘links to a deeper European heritage’.<sup>17</sup> Australian art had not developed in an isolated bubble – it was part of the stream of Western civilisation; it was not exotic or other-worldly – it was, in reality, the representation of a strange world through familiar eyes; and it was a vital take on the European tradition, one that could challenge some of mid-twentieth century modernism’s follies (especially abstraction). As he tried to make a case for Australian art on the

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<sup>13</sup> Bernard Smith, ‘Is there a radical tradition in Australian art?’, p. 233.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Haese, *Rebels and Precursors: The Revolutionary Years of Australian Art*, Melbourne: Allen Lane, 1981, p. 162.

<sup>15</sup> Sheridan Palmer, *Hegel’s Owl*, p. 188

<sup>16</sup> Incorporating quotation from James Robert Goetsch, *Vico’s Axioms: The Geometry of the Human World*, New Haven, CT, USA: Yale University Press, 1995, p. 7; in Sheridan Palmer, *Hegel’s Owl*, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Catherine Speck, ‘Re-reading Bernard Smith on what constitutes Australian art’, *The Legacies of Bernard Smith*, p. 150.

international scene, this was the crux of his position, and the alternative reading of an exotic or naïve art was anathema.

Smith came from lowly origins, the child of a single mother, fostered by a family in Burwood in the western suburbs of Sydney. He counted himself a ‘lucky young bastard’, as his first volume of memoirs, a vivid recollection of his childhood years in which his story is told in the third person, puts it.<sup>18</sup> Unable to afford a university education, he trained as a teacher, spending the last years of the thirties in the bush, working in a one-teacher school. When he returned to Sydney he threw himself into the wartime art scene, as well as socialist political activism. He met and married English émigré Kate Challis, and the couple lived in a tiny flat in Potts Point. Smith had briefly flirted with being an artist, but his metier was theory. He loved inventing new terms and formulating ideas. He was the perfect person, therefore, to articulate a theory of Australian art, and it was through the forties that his position began to take shape and he commenced the process of setting out his pattern of Australian art.<sup>19</sup> His ideas remained remarkably constant throughout his career – as we shall see, he espoused the same strong views on the origins of Australian art in the 1990s as he had done in the 1950s, and he was always an advocate of the figurative over the abstract. He was quite happy, at the end of his career, to rake over perceived slights and mis-readings going back decades.<sup>20</sup>

Originally, he had applied Marx’s theory of historical materialism to the development of Australian art. In a 1943 essay he quoted Engels’ statement that ‘Marx discovered the simple fact... that mankind must first of all eat and drink, have shelter and clothing, before it can pursue politics, science, religion and art’. Australian culture, said Smith, proved this: it was a ‘recapitulation of the origins of human culture’; the early settlers ‘of necessity were mainly concerned with the material realities of life’

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<sup>18</sup> Bernard Smith, *The Boy Adeodatus: The Portrait of a Lucky Young Bastard*, Melbourne: Allen Lane, 1984.

<sup>19</sup> The next section, ‘Cultural Activist’, gives more detail on his activities in the Sydney art scene through the forties.

<sup>20</sup> He never got over the failure of the London art scene to take his ‘Antipodeans’ group seriously in the early-sixties, for example – see ‘Antipodeans’ section later in chapter.

which ‘form the pre-conditions for the existence of art itself’.<sup>21</sup> He described the stages, or ‘situations’, by which Australian art developed: from ‘colonial primitivism’ (Conrad Martens or Louis Buvelot), to the ‘aggressive expansion of the dominant style’ (the Australian impressionists), to a ‘period of cosmopolitanism and eclecticism’ (the importation of ideas such as symbolism or ‘the cult of Cezanne’), before finally arriving at the ‘development of a vital art among the colonial peoples’, a ‘new art of social protest on a new plane’: the contemporary ‘situation’ of 1943.<sup>22</sup>

Notwithstanding his youthful enthusiasm for socialism in the crisis years of the war, Smith was already identifying the growing pains of an art that, he said, ‘although predominantly a class art, the art of the squatter and the merchant’, was nevertheless ‘an emergent national art’. Smith saw the Australian Impressionists as being in a radical ‘revolt against the narrow English tradition which had dominated painting in Australia up to that time’.<sup>23</sup> Paradoxically enabled by the patronage of Squatters whose visual dictionary was English, this art nevertheless aspired to be Australian. The strange hybrid of conservatism and radicalism, which Ward was also to identify in *The Australian Legend*, was a trait of Smith’s tradition, articulated, as the title suggests, in *Place, Taste and Tradition* (1945).<sup>24</sup> He later claimed that this book ‘has a good claim to being the first Marxist art history of a nation state’, although it was not in fact written in such pugnaciously Marxist terms as we see in his essays and notes of the era, because he needed to find a publisher.<sup>25</sup>

When he travelled to England in 1949 to study at the Warburg Institute, Smith’s primary concern was the influence of British painting on Australia’s artistic development.<sup>26</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald* art critic

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<sup>21</sup> Bernard Smith, ‘A summary of the development of Australian painting’, manuscript, circa 1943, Bernard Smith Papers, NLA, Box 1, Folder 7.

<sup>22</sup> Bernard Smith, ‘Art and Imperialism’, lecture notes, circa 1945, Bernard Smith Papers, NLA, Box 1, Folder 9.

<sup>23</sup> Bernard Smith, ‘A summary of the development of Australian painting’.

<sup>24</sup> Bernard Smith, *Place, Taste and Tradition: A Study of Australian Art since 1788*, Sydney: Ure Smith, 1945.

<sup>25</sup> Bernard Smith, *A Pavane for Another Time*, pp. 124–5. Smith’s assertion of the pioneering Marxist nature of his first book is backed-up by later academics: see Jaynie Anderson, ‘The multiple legacies of Bernard Smith’, who cites John O’Brian, ‘Bernard Smith’s Early Marxist History’, *Thesis Eleven*, vol. 87, August 2005, pp. 29–37.

<sup>26</sup> Smith’s time at the Warburg is recounted in *A Pavane for Another Time*, chapters 5 to 7; see also Sheridan Palmer, *Hegel’s Owl*, chapter 4: ‘The Black Swan’. It should be noted that the casual reader of *Pavane* might almost believe Smith was

Paul Haefliger, Smith's rival in the forties and fifties, said that the subject matter of nineteenth-century art may have been Australian, but 'the eyes which gaze upon the scene are mostly those of strangers but newly arrived at these shores'.<sup>27</sup> However, Smith countered that they were not mere transplanted Europeans, crash-landed in Australia and gazing upon the continent with alien eyes: most of them were in fact born in Australia. Nearly all artistic cultures throughout history, he contended, borrowed and assimilated from other cultures, with the few seeming exceptions being 'abnormal'.<sup>28</sup> He often quoted Victor Daley's late-nineteenth century satirical poem 'Correggio Jones', in which the titular hero, an artist, suffers the dilemma commonplace to Australian artists, that of finding oneself in a place far removed from the tradition of which you believe you are a part. This, said Smith, was the painful way Australian art 'emerged'. However ghastly it may seem to the artist, the reality of the 'situation' could not be ignored, but must be confronted. Australian art, said Smith, 'emerges every time an Australian artist is able to resolve in an actual work of art the dilemma which has faced the Australian artist ever since the time when Thomas Watling, the convict, grumbled about the nature of the Australian landscape, the dilemma that his body dwells in Gander Flat while his soul is in Italy'.<sup>29</sup> The paradox is that the artist does not want to ignore his tradition, but nor does he wish to ignore the reality of his situation. This is not a comfortable place for any artist, but it *is* still the principal fact of his or her existence, and the tension is the key to Australian art. Watling, a Scottish convict who arrived in New South Wales in 1792, complained that 'the landscape painter may in vain seek here for that kind of beauty which arrives from happy-opposed off-scapes'.<sup>30</sup> He yearned for a European view, but he only got an Australian one. The efforts

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studying at the Courtauld Institute, rather than the Warburg. In fact, he was not able to undertake post-graduate study at the Courtauld because he did not possess a degree.

<sup>27</sup> Cited in Bernard Smith, 'The Emergence of Australian Painting', manuscript of lecture given at the National Gallery of NSW, 1953, Bernard Smith Papers, NLA, Box 3, Folder 18.

<sup>28</sup> Bernard Smith, 'The Emergence of Australian Painting'.

<sup>29</sup> Bernard Smith, 'The Emergence of Australian Painting'.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Watling, *Letters from an Exile*, 1794; cited in Bernard Smith and Terry Smith, *Australian Painting: 1788 to 1990*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1991, pp. 12/3.

to resolve this dislocation became the very tradition itself. Australian art, said Smith, ‘is the story of an endeavour to reconcile two worlds’:

The Australian artist, we might say, is a migratory bird who owns not one home but two – the new world of Australia and the old world of Europe. The attempt to live entirely in either world is for him a spiritual death, and he draws his strength and whatever wisdom he has from a kind of perpetual flight.<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, the colonial situation could be exploited to create something new and interesting and worthwhile. The vision of the migratory bird in perpetual flight is, after all, a poetic one that owes little to a sense of cultural insecurity or inferiority. In fact, at this very time (1956) Smith, researching the cultural impact of European exploration of the Pacific, had written an essay on the influence of astronomer William Wales on Coleridge’s ‘The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner’. He circulated the essay to his contacts in London, but did not get the credit he believed (and continued to believe for the rest of his life) he deserved. Charles Mitchell, his old Warburg supervisor, ‘captured the crux of Bernard’s character’ (says Palmer) when observing that Smith ‘fails to note the way Coleridge lifts the whole thing from marine curiosity to that of mental experience. But that’s not in Smith’s line. He’s a facts man’.<sup>32</sup> Smith’s ideas, and his manner in promoting them, had an element of pedantry about them. He was inflexible and, as Mitchell suggests, his objectifying of art history left no space for the poetry or genius of art itself. One can read the whole 500-plus pages of his biography of Noel Counihan and struggle to get a sense of the artist’s skill, technique or talent.<sup>33</sup> He exaggerated the importance of his own brief foray as an artist – describing his two art works from the early-forties as ‘far too radical even for the political

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<sup>31</sup> Bernard Smith, ‘Introduction to exhibition of painting and drawing’, Olympic Games Fine Arts Exhibition, manuscript, published in *The Arts Festival of the Olympic Games*, August 1956, Bernard Smith Papers, NLA, Box 3, Folder 19.

<sup>32</sup> Sheridan Palmer, *Hegel’s Owl*, p. 165.

<sup>33</sup> Bernard Smith, *Noel Counihan*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1993.

left to accept'; one of them containing, he said pompously, 'my premonition of Auschwitz'<sup>34</sup> – but his analysis was theoretical and intellectual, not expressive or aesthetic.

He certainly believed it to be a fact that Australian art had not grown from the soil as an indigenous product. This was a 'myth', said Smith, and a 'great nuisance' – and it is noticeable how he did not stop to consider Aboriginal art. A painstaking researcher, he declared that 'when we begin to examine the record we find that the earlier colonial painters of Australia said much of truth and interest about the local scene, and that Australian impressionism is much more closely connected with European habits of vision than the myth would have us believe'.<sup>35</sup> His consuming academic mission, from which he never deviated, was to show the ways in which the 'antipodean' situation had carved out a distinctive variant of the Western artistic heritage. He examined the way artists, from those on board the *Endeavour* onwards, had reacted to this circumstance, and his most famous book, *European Vision and the South Pacific* (1961), was the fruit of these labours.<sup>36</sup>

Smith, not shy of magnifying the originality of his own ideas and disparaging failure to acknowledge this, claimed that that book's thesis had been underappreciated because of the ongoing European predilection for looking at Australian art as 'primitive' and isolated. The 'predominant mode', however, of nineteenth-century landscape painting 'arose from the need to discover and evoke what was typical'. What this meant was that 'the European control of the world required a landscape practice that could first survey and describe, then evoke in new settlers an emotional engagement with the land that

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<sup>34</sup> Smith's two paintings from 1940 were called *The Advance of Lot and his Brethren* and *Pompeii*. His description appears in 'Is there a radical tradition in Australian art?', pp. 238–9.

<sup>35</sup> Bernard Smith, 'The Genesis of Australian Art', manuscript of lecture given to the History Association, University of Melbourne, July 1956, Bernard Smith Papers, NLA, Box 3, Folder 19.

<sup>36</sup> Bernard Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1984 (first published 1960). Some examples of Smith's lectures and essays on topics pertaining to the art of Australasian voyages and of the first settlers: 'William Westall's drawings and paintings on Flinders' Voyage', published in *Drawings by William Westall*, ed. Donald Simpson and T.M. Perry, London: Royal Commonwealth Society, 1962; 'Cook's Voyage: vision of the South Pacific', lecture given to the Library Society, State Library of New South Wales, 11/6/1989; 'Style, information and image in the art of Cook's voyages', the Harkness Lecture, Christchurch, New Zealand, September 1987; 'The functions of art on Cook's voyages', given as the Dulcie Stretton Lecture, March 1985; 'Who was the Port Jackson Painter?', talk at the Canberra School of Art, 1986 and the Library Society of New South Wales, 26/4/1988; all manuscripts in the Bernard Smith Papers, NLA, Boxes 3, 5, 6 & 7.



they had alienated from its aboriginal inhabitants'.<sup>37</sup> He was concerned to show how the Pacific had been primarily viewed through a European lens; furthermore, ever the 'facts man', he stressed the role of 'art as information'; that is, he posited that the beginnings of Australian art lay in its function as part of the 'steady, relentless and continuing triumph of empirical naturalism over classical naturalism' which had been the story of art's development from 1750 to 1890.<sup>38</sup> It was from these origins that Australian art was born, and claims that the Australian Impressionists, for example, had 'invented' a distinctive Australian idiom were false. In fact, the distinctiveness of Australian art came from its continued status as information, which, while it may sound prosaic, Smith dressed up as a 'humanist' ideal, as seen in the work of one of his favourite artists, Counihan, who, 'though he had always seen himself as working within the traditions of Roberts and an Australian realism', was 'even more strongly' a 'universalist' and a 'humanist'. The 'peasants of Opoul' (in southern France, where Counihan worked for a time) were 'as much his concern', said Smith, as the 'miners of Wonthaggi' (whom he also depicted).<sup>39</sup>

Counihan was a staunch communist – stauncher than Smith, keeping the red flag flying until his death.<sup>40</sup> Like Smith, Counihan's radicalism, in plastic form, was wedded to the traditions of figurative representation, an affirmative answer, as Smith saw it, to the question he posed: 'Is there a radical tradition in Australian art?' He saw radicalism as being the Classical world's transformative influence on the Renaissance, or primitive Christianity's on the Reformation.<sup>41</sup> Thus we return to his 'Hegelian methodology': the 'antipodal relationship in Australian art' as 'a process determined by a continuous dialectic, a persistent interrogation of the dominant by the subdominant and the suppressed'.<sup>42</sup> Artists, continually questioning their own practice in light of what they knew as opposed to what they saw, came,

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<sup>37</sup> Bernard Smith, preface to second edition of *European Vision and the South Pacific*, 1984, p. ix.

<sup>38</sup> Bernard Smith, 'Art as Information', lecture manuscript, 1978, Bernard Smith Papers, NLA, Box 4, Folder 31.

<sup>39</sup> Bernard Smith, *Noel Counihan*, p. 519.

<sup>40</sup> 'It does not surprise me that Counihan was singled out (for attack)', said Smith, 'and not because he was a communist, but because he died one' – 'Angry Penguins and Realist Painting in Melbourne during the 1940s', lecture given at the National Gallery of Victoria, 1989, later published in *The Independent*, Sydney, Bernard Smith Papers, NLA, Box 7, File 49.

<sup>41</sup> Bernard Smith, 'Is there a radical tradition in Australian art?', p. 234.

<sup>42</sup> Bernard Smith, *Modernism's History*, Sydney: UNSW Press, 1998, p. 8; cited in Catherine Speck, 'Re-reading Bernard Smith on what constitutes Australian art', *Legacies*, p. 147.

over time, to question and ‘interrogate’ their existence as colonials, as Australians, as artists in some way inferior to their imperial ‘betters’. In finding answers to these questions they could assert their independence and worth, even as they used the ‘typical’ tropes of the mother country’s culture to do so. Smith described Norman Lindsay viewing a post-impressionism show in Paris in 1910, and seeing it as a sign of the decline in the aesthetic standards of Europe. In the mould of ‘Correggio Jones’ or Thomas Watling, Lindsay revered the European artistic heritage, but he also believed, like the Yeats-inspired Louis Esson, that he could revitalise it in the young society of Australia.<sup>43</sup> By the 1920s, said Smith, Lindsay’s ‘aggressive’ radicalism had ‘taken the form of a vision: a vision of an Australian renaissance of Europe’s declining culture’. He relates this ‘radical vision of hope’ to that of the ‘left-wing radicals’ of the 1890s, quoting Bernard O’Dowd’s poem ‘The Bush’:

She is a temple that we are to build:

For her the ages have been long preparing:

She is a prophecy to be fulfilled.<sup>44</sup>

Attacking ‘organic’ or nationalist ideas of art,<sup>45</sup> Smith did not believe that Australia was ‘isolated’ from the Western tradition. In fact, Australian art was nourished by it in radical ways. How he disseminated these ideas, within and without Australia, is what we shall now explore.

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<sup>43</sup> We saw Esson’s debt to Yeats in Chapter 3.

<sup>44</sup> Bernard O’Dowd, extract from ‘The Bush’, 1912, cited in Bernard Smith, ‘Is there a radical tradition in Australian art?’, pp. 235/6.

<sup>45</sup> Bernard Smith, *A Pavane for Another Time*, pp. 129/30. Smith labelled Paul Haefliger’s ‘organic’ ideas ‘geographical determinism’, comparing them to the ‘racist position’ of J.S. MacDonald, controversial Director of the National Galleries of first New South Wales and then Victoria in the 1930s, who had said of Arthur Streeton’s work that ‘for long it and its overtones will vibrate in our national being’, because ‘we are not only a nation but also a race, and both occupy a specific territory and spring from a specific soil’.

iii) 'Cultural Activist'

The First World War's legacy of 'fear, hardship and conformity', says Haese, had a harsh impact on Australian artists in the 1920s and 30s.<sup>46</sup> Artist Roland Wakelin said in 1938 that 'no one seriously interested in art can regard the situation with complacency';<sup>47</sup> Angry Penguin-in-chief Max Harris has described a 'petrified culture'.<sup>48</sup> Looking back, Bernard Smith believed it was the Pacific War – a 'people's war'<sup>49</sup> – providing the impetus behind a much needed cultural awakening. It was a view, as we have seen, shared by Clem Christesen and many others at the time, and it was in this era, Smith tells us, that he decided to give up being an artist to become an academic and critic. Forty years later he identified the belief that Australia lacked 'not artists' but 'an informed audience for art' as his chief motivation; it was the complete absence of 'intelligent criticism' or interest in the 'theory of criticism', and 'an abysmal ignorance of the history and development of art within Australia', that set him on his course. His mission, he said, was to help to create 'an educated audience for art in Australia'.<sup>50</sup> We see him retrospectively painting a self-portrait of the critic as a sort of pied piper, leading his fellow Australians out of their cultural wilderness, and, looking back complaisantly, congratulating himself on objectives accomplished. His autobiographical writing, as well as placing a heavy emphasis on this proselytising mission, stresses his own contribution as the one person who was thinking in this way.<sup>51</sup> We have already seen his propensity for self-regard, and some who knew him well describe a narcissist (although others, it should

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<sup>46</sup> Richard Haese, *Rebels and Precursors*, p. 37.

<sup>47</sup> Roland Wakelin to Sydney Ure Smith, 2/11/1938, Ure Smith papers, Mitchell Library, MLMSS 1042; quoted in Richard Haese, *Rebels and Precursors*, pp. 37–8.

<sup>48</sup> Max Harris, 'Introduction', *Angry Penguins and Realist Painting in Melbourne in the 1940s* (catalogue of Hayward Gallery exhibition, 19 May –14 August 1988), London: South Bank Centre, 1988, p. 15.

<sup>49</sup> Bernard Smith, *A Pavane for Another Time*, p. 123.

<sup>50</sup> Bernard Smith, *The Boy Adeodatus*, p. 297.

<sup>51</sup> See in particular his second volume of autobiography, *A Pavane for Another Time*.

be noted, praise his ‘modesty’).<sup>52</sup> Haese shows that there were other ‘rebels and precursors’ in the period, turning their gaze beyond Australia’s shores, although Smith doubted some of his interpretations.<sup>53</sup>

Smith tells us that in the early-forties he had been delivering art history lectures for the Teachers’ Federation Art Society (an organisation he helped set up) when he was asked: ‘but what are you doing for Australian art?’ At the next meeting of the Society council, populated by artists, Smith brought up the idea of delivering a series of lectures on Australian art:

No-one felt capable of taking it on. None of us knew much about the *history* of Australian art. Other nations, Italy, France, Britain, and so forth, possessed *histories* of their art, but could it be said that Australian art possessed a *history*? ‘Well then,’ I said, ‘I’ll have a shot at it and see what I can do’. I shall never forget the look of extreme displeasure in Rah Fizelle’s eyes. Here was a young man who was not, to his knowledge, a serious practising artist setting himself up to talk about its history. To talk about art in those days you were expected to be known as a practitioner.<sup>54</sup>

The fact that even artists did not value the critic’s role illustrated the philistinism of the era: ‘if our art is not to remain provincial’, Smith said in 1953, ‘a greater effort should be made... not to allow the practising artist to imagine that he is the only one entitled to hold opinions on questions of value’.<sup>55</sup> In the same year he attacked Haefliger for his view that ‘Australia has produced nothing of national

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<sup>52</sup> Smith was described as a ‘narcissist’ by artist Helen Brack (née Maudsley), interview, Surry Hills, Victoria, 30/6/2011. Peter Beilharz, meanwhile, mentions his ‘modesty’ in *Imagining the Antipodes: Culture, Theory and the Visual in the Work of Bernard Smith*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 2.

<sup>53</sup> Some of the figures discussed by Haese include Max Harris, John and Sunday Reed, James Gleeson, James Cant, Joy Hester, Paul Haefliger, Arthur Boyd, amongst a host of others. For doubts cast by Smith (and Noel Counihan) on Haese’s reading of the 1940s, see *Noel Counihan*, pp. 522–4. Smith quotes Counihan: ‘Books like that (*Rebels and Precursors*) are never very ‘historical’. But he did give the atmosphere of the times.’

<sup>54</sup> Bernard Smith, *A Pavane for Another Time*, pp. 123–4; Smith’s own emphases. Rah Fizelle was an artist.

<sup>55</sup> Bernard Smith, manuscript for ‘The Australian Scene’, lecture delivered at the University of Sydney, 26/3/1953, Bernard Smith Papers, NLA, Box 3, Folder 19.

character in the arts'.<sup>56</sup> Later, Haefliger recounted how, in the fifties, he had tried to write a history of Australian art, but asking himself whether Australian art actually existed, 'answered with an emphatic "No!"'<sup>57</sup> Smith challenged such assumptions. He baulked at those Australians 'of taste and wide cultural experience' who responded to home-grown art with 'amused superiority'.<sup>58</sup> Chapter titles in his autobiography illustrate the role he took on for himself in response to this cringe: he was 'the cultural activist'; he was 'promoting a popular approach to art and literature'.<sup>59</sup> Haese describes Smith's role as going 'deeper than that of mere public apologist', as he engaged in a prolonged campaign to fulfil his aim of a more culturally aware and less philistine Australian population.<sup>60</sup> 'A truly advanced art, a committed art,' he said later, 'could not possibly exist in... a cultural vacuum'.<sup>61</sup>

In the latter years of the war Smith and his wife Kate held fortnightly writers' meetings at their flat.<sup>62</sup> The atmosphere was a vibrant one – Smith later commented on the sudden success of the CPA, membership swelling to over 20,000 by the end of 1944, the Party aiming 'to fuse its traditional internationalism with a radical nationalism'.<sup>63</sup> Smith was a founder of 'little magazine' *Australian New Writing*, bankrolled by the CPA, and seeking to exploit the new interest in Australian culture and left-wing politics. The magazine was the reason Smith first came into contact with Christesen, a recipient of a 1942 circular letter seeking support for the proposed journal, which was then to be called *The New Boomerang*, a title borrowed from William Lane's Brisbane journal of the same name, published in the late

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<sup>56</sup> Bernard Smith, 'The Emergence of Australian Painting', lecture given at the National Gallery of NSW, 1953, Bernard Smith Papers, NLA, Box 3, Folder 18.

<sup>57</sup> Paul Haefliger, *Duet for Dulcimer and Dunce*, Sydney: Bay Books, 1979, p. 51. He did mention the exception of Aboriginal art.

<sup>58</sup> Bernard Smith, 'The Emergence of Australian Painting'.

<sup>59</sup> Bernard Smith, *A Pavane for Another Time*, chapters 2 and 3.

<sup>60</sup> Richard Haese, *Rebels and Precursors*, p. 227.

<sup>61</sup> Bernard Smith, *The Boy Adeodatus*, p. 297.

<sup>62</sup> Bernard Smith, *A Pavane for Another Time*, pp. 96–7. 'Then there was the more informal night that Walter Bunning, the architect, and Gillian his young wife, came dressed to the nines, assuming a more social do than a room full of informal, left-wing, literary bohemians.'

<sup>63</sup> Bernard Smith, *A Pavane for Another Time*, p. 123. Stuart Macintyre endorses the figures and echoes Smith's assertion that the war catalysed a 'fusion' of internationalism with 'an Australian radical nationalism that communist intellectuals of the period helped to define'; 'Communism', in Davison, Hirst and Macintyre (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Australian History*, p. 144.

1880s. The ‘urgent need’ to ‘develop the best and most progressive thought in contemporary Australian culture’ was the magazine’s stated aim. It talked of a ‘new spirit abroad’ and solicited material from ‘all those who are sincerely interested in advancing Australian culture’. ‘Since the government is already planning for national reconstruction after the war,’ concluded the letter, ‘there is a pressing need to look also for ways and means of rebuilding in the cultural sphere’.<sup>64</sup>

The magazine lasted only a few issues, but many years later Smith proudly quoted the ‘laudatory puff’ received from an American serviceman stationed in Australia, who, writing to the US literary magazine *Directions*, proclaimed that *Australian New Writing* was produced by ‘writers, artists and poets who are for the most part workers and soldiers’, and that Australia, ‘by its own admission culturally backward’, was showing America the way forward.<sup>65</sup> The correspondent was disingenuous, because Smith’s magazine was partly inspired by the Americans’ own cultural self-confidence and dynamism which had rubbed off on Australians in the war years: Richard White refers to the American promotion of nationalist trends as part of their anti-colonial interest, promoting the ‘Australian’ as opposed to ‘British’, and siding with those Australians ‘who think as Australians’ as opposed to those ‘who still think colonially’. C. Hartley Grattan, says White, was one of those Americans who ‘exhorted intellectuals to take a more decisive role in forming public opinion’.<sup>66</sup>

According to Smith, *Australian New Writing* ‘owed its success to the new self-confidence that began to prevail in the services and industry as the fortune of war gradually turned’: ‘the Australian psyche’ became ‘less dependent upon its British colonial past’.<sup>67</sup> He said that this trend was reflected, for example, in the changing image of Ned Kelly as a cultural hero. References to Kelly do not spring from the pages of his writing of the forties, but Phillips’ friend Douglas Stewart published his play *Ned Kelly* in 1943,

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<sup>64</sup> Circular letter, signed Bernard Smith, George Farwell and Katharine Susannah Prichard, 18/11/1942, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 306, File 2. Christesen pointed out in his reply, dated simply ‘1942’, that the aims were much the same as *Meanjin*’s, ‘and please do not misinterpret me when I say that we have gone far beyond your proposals’.

<sup>65</sup> Letter from ‘Charles Striber’, *Directions*, Fall 1945; quoted in Bernard Smith, *A Pavane for Another Time*, p. 103.

<sup>66</sup> Richard White, *Inventing Australia*, p. 150.

<sup>67</sup> Bernard Smith, *A Pavane for Another Time*, p. 104.

Harry Kippax later arguing that it saw, ‘for the first time’, an Australian playwright ‘rising to the challenge’ of presenting the ‘Australianist legend’ in ‘authentic’ and ‘articulate’ fashion.<sup>68</sup>

Smith believed that the popularity of *Australian New Writing* was ‘paralleled’ by the ‘sudden new growth’ in ‘community interest in the visual arts in industry, harnessed as it was so closely to wartime production’, a view endorsed by Grattan, who thought the future of Australia lay not in its pastoral heritage, but in manufacturing.<sup>69</sup> For Grattan this break with the old pastoral tradition, so reliant on trade with the mother country, would see the assertion of Australian self-confidence and self-awareness. Smith became secretary of the War Art Council, an organisation set up under the guidance of arts patron Sydney Ure Smith, which aimed to ‘bring art to the Australian people’ – he describes his near-namesake as broadcasting on ABC radio and sounding ‘like Eric Gill or William Morris’.<sup>70</sup> Smith was also involved in the War Art Council’s setting up of the ‘Encouragement of Art Movement’ (EAM), which sent exhibitions out into country towns, with the aim of taking Australian art to the people and encouraging the establishment of regional galleries. Seconded to the Art Gallery of New South Wales as an education officer, he spent much of 1944/5 travelling around country New South Wales, installing exhibitions and delivering lectures. He describes speaking to Rotary and Apex clubs, branches of the Country Women’s Association and on local broadcasting stations. He recalls telling them to ‘stop pulling down your charming nineteenth century verandahs’ or ‘every town will look like every other town’, but admits that this advice was ignored by country councils wishing to look ‘progressive’ – another iteration of the cringe.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Harry Kippax, introduction to Hal Porter, Alan Seymour and Douglas Stewart, *Three Australian Plays* (‘The Tower’, ‘The One Day of the Year’, ‘Ned Kelly’), Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1963, pp. 15–6. As we have seen, Dolia Ribush’s production of this play was a major influence on Phillips (see Chapter 3).

<sup>69</sup> Richard White, *Inventing Australia*, p. 150.

<sup>70</sup> Bernard Smith, *A Pavane for Another Time*, p. 106.

<sup>71</sup> Bernard Smith, *A Pavane for Another Time*, p. 116. The EAM became the CEMA, ‘The Council for Encouragement of Music and the Arts’, which was an idea imported from the United Kingdom by singer Dorothy Helmrich. Smith noted that the ‘imported English model had triumphed over the local grass-roots one’.

A further example of artistic and political activism can be seen when, in March 1945, Smith founded with Hal Missingham, Director of the Art Gallery of NSW, the Studio of Realist Art (SORA), an organisation which, according to Smith, ‘played a major role in popularising art in Sydney during the early post-war years’.<sup>72</sup> It advocated a politically engaged, socialist art, promoting realistic art for the people. The idea for SORA originated with the artist James Cant, who conceived of it as a challenge to the Contemporary Art Society and its lack of sympathy for figurative art. According to Haese, Cant’s ‘conception of a radical culture embodying both an aesthetic and a politically radical dimension set the tone for SORA’.<sup>73</sup> In November 1945 Smith says he was asked to announce SORA’s policy: ‘to bring art into closer relationship with contemporary life’ through a ‘realist outlook’.<sup>74</sup> This was his first manifesto: Australian art needed to be politically committed, involved in the experience of being Australian, and figurative. Smith, in Haese’s words, was part of ‘the revival of left-wing Australianism’, and he promoted a realistic art commensurate with this vision.<sup>75</sup> Artists such as Counihan, Yosl Bergner, V.G. O’Connor and Arthur Boyd were producing work which, he believed, could develop into ‘a fully-fledged national art based upon working class sympathies’.<sup>76</sup>

But this conception of what art was and should be did not go unchallenged. Almost all of these artists were, like Smith, communists, engaged in a battle with the Angry Penguins, the Max Harris-led troupe of modernists, over Australian art’s direction. Smith’s political position reflected the schism that was developing within the Contemporary Art Society, which had been formed by George Bell in 1938 to challenge the authority of the conservative art establishment. Haese says that *Place, Taste and Tradition* was two books in one: the first, a ‘sharp and incisive’ review of the history of Australia; the second, a ‘partisan reflection’ of the politics which were ‘tearing apart’ the Contemporary Art Society.<sup>77</sup> Harris wrote to

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<sup>72</sup> Bernard Smith, *A Pavane for Another Time*, p. 149.

<sup>73</sup> Richard Haese, *Rebels and Precursors*, p. 171.

<sup>74</sup> Bernard Smith, *A Pavane for Another Time*, pp. 149–50.

<sup>75</sup> Richard Haese, *Rebels and Precursors*, p. 164.

<sup>76</sup> Bernard Smith, ‘A summary of the development of Australian painting’.

<sup>77</sup> Richard Haese, *Rebels and Precursors*, p. 162.



Smith, taking exception to *Australian New Writing's* 'exclusive and dogmatic (editorial) line' promoted by 'those claiming to represent the only true art in Australia'. He protested against a 'noisy' rhetoric which aimed to 'coerce' intellectuals 'into one type of activity' and almost encourage them to 'blindly destroy one another'.<sup>78</sup> Such accusations could be levelled at Smith throughout his career: viewpoints opposed to his own were dismissed as a 'nuisance'.<sup>79</sup> In the pages of *Meanjin* he argued that the Contemporary Art Society needed to embrace a 'new realism' which would reflect society's progress and 'take whatever was of value in modernism and put it in the service of humanism'.<sup>80</sup> Realistic art, 'the Image', could depict the life of the Australian people, and this 'humanism', not other modernist iterations, would see Australian art gain maturity. In the forties this was also a political task, but by the fifties his militancy had dimmed.

In January 1951, on his return from London, Smith was fired with the commitment to promote Australian art at home and further afield. He wished to see Australia take part in the Venice Biennale, and he began a campaign to this effect, declaring in a letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald* that whilst 'an English friend' was startled that countries such as South Africa, Ireland, Egypt, Colombia and Israel were represented, not Australia. 'But I was not surprised,' said Smith. He wondered whether Australia had ever been invited, 'or is it that we have not been interested?'<sup>81</sup> He engaged in much correspondence promoting Australia's participation. At the end of January he received a letter from the Director of the Biennale, Giovanni Ponti, who told him that 'the road for Australia's participation is open'; three weeks later the *Herald* wrote to him requesting a copy of the article he had told them he had written on the subject.<sup>82</sup> The article does not appear to have been published, though, and Smith's influence in finally seeing

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<sup>78</sup> Max Harris to Bernard Smith, undated (probably June 1943), quoted in Richard Haese, *Rebels and Precursors*, p. 136.

<sup>79</sup> We saw an earlier example when he dismissed the idea of an 'indigenous' art created without external influence.

<sup>80</sup> Bernard Smith, 'The New Realism in Australian Art', *Meanjin*, vol. 3, no. 1, Autumn 1944, pp. 20–25.

<sup>81</sup> Bernard Smith, Letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16/1/1951, Bernard Smith Papers 1910 – 83, Mitchell Library, Sydney, MSS 5202, Box 2, File: '1951 General Correspondence'.

<sup>82</sup> Giovanni Ponti to Bernard Smith, 30/1/1951; Letter from *Sydney Morning Herald* to Bernard Smith, 21/2/51, Bernard Smith Papers, Mitchell Library, Box 2, File: '1951 General Correspondence'.

Australian participation in the Biennale, which did not materialise in 1952 as he had hoped but in 1954, appears to have been minimal.

He also began a campaign to promote Australian art in London. In a letter to arts patron Sir Charles Lloyd Jones, written five days after his return from Europe, Smith mulled the potential of an Australian exhibition in London. He said he had had wide-ranging discussions about Australian art whilst in London, but ‘found that there is almost complete ignorance of our artists among all but a very few’. He talked about a show held ‘some years previously’ which had ‘misfired badly’, the use of Australia House as venue serving to undermine its credibility. The Royal Academy would be ‘an excellent place’ for an Australian exhibition, Smith asserted, however even that would have its pitfalls if the exhibition was not properly curated and of a sufficiently high standard. He noted an exhibition ‘the South Africans’ had held at the Tate Gallery in 1949 which was ‘a bad show and the critics said so in no uncertain terms’. Such reviews would reinforce stereotypes of colonialism and the English reluctance to accept art from the erstwhile colonies. But Smith thought contemporary Australian painting to be in possession of ‘considerably more vitality’ than its English equivalent, and that ‘everything should be done to see that it is better known abroad’. A critical tradition needed to be created; something he was, as we have seen, trying to do, and he did not believe an exhibition in London should be rushed into, a view he said had been backed in discussion with eminent English art historian Sir Kenneth Clark. Smith argued that Australia must be regularly represented in the Biennale, and that artists needed to be helped to hold exhibitions in private London galleries, ‘where opinions about the quality of Australian art are being formed’, citing a recent Russell Drysdale show which had created a ‘simmering of interest’.<sup>83</sup> There must be a gradual building of artistic capital before Australian art could storm London.

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<sup>83</sup> Bernard Smith to Sir Charles Lloyd Jones, 5/1/1951, Bernard Smith Papers, Mitchell Library, Box 2, File: ‘1951 General Correspondence’.

Smith also sought help from the political establishment. He wrote to ‘Doc’ Evatt, then leader of the opposition. Evatt’s wife, Mary Alice, had trained as a painter and was trustee of the National Gallery of New South Wales, where she had supported Smith.<sup>84</sup> The Evatts hosted the first Sydney meeting of the Contemporary Art Society in 1940,<sup>85</sup> and they ‘may have been the first Australians to own a Modigliani’.<sup>86</sup> In 1952, on the eve of Evatt’s trip to England for the Queen’s coronation, Smith wrote to him asking if he and his wife might help push two ideas for Australian art books whilst abroad. He hoped they could persuade Phaidon, the premier English art book publisher, to commission the books from him.<sup>87</sup> The Evatts certainly made inquiries in New York on their way home. Grattan, writing to Smith in early 1954, mentioned that Mary Alice discussed Smith’s ideas with him; he said he had tried to place the book, but ‘we cannot rely on a very large sale in America, for Australian art is not well-known here’.<sup>88</sup>

Smith continued to lament the lack of research into, and academic focus on, Australian art. Artists were isolated, he said, but he did not mean in the geographical sense; rather they were remote from the society around them – far more so than their American or British counterparts.<sup>89</sup> This was exactly the point Phillips was making at this time.<sup>90</sup> Smith also noted a litany of other inadequacies: Australians were distrustful of innovations in the arts, with a lack of regard for artistic achievement, and it was thus hard to maintain a ‘lively tradition’; poor private patronage was ‘not articulate’, playing ‘little part in the formation of taste’; art galleries had poor buying policies, with too much focus on ‘popular’ contemporary art; Australian art education was ‘excessively technical’, failing to see art as a humanity; and art criticism

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<sup>84</sup> For Mary Alice Evatt’s support and patronage of Smith at the Gallery, see Bernard Smith, *A Pavane for Another Time*, p. 147 and Sheridan Palmer, *Hegel’s Owl*, p. 85.

<sup>85</sup> Richard Haese, *Rebels and Precursors*, p. 69.

<sup>86</sup> Geoffrey Bolton, ‘Evatt, Herbert Vere (Bert) (1894–1965)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/evatt-herbert-vere-ber-10131/text17885>, first published in hardcopy 1996; accessed online 23/7/2011.

<sup>87</sup> Bernard Smith to Dr H.V. Evatt, 16/5/1951, Bernard Smith Papers, Mitchell Library, Box 2, File: ‘1952 General Correspondence’.

<sup>88</sup> C. Hartley Grattan to Bernard Smith, 6/1/1954, Bernard Smith Papers, Mitchell Library, Box 2, File: ‘1954 General Correspondence’.

<sup>89</sup> Bernard Smith, ‘The Australian Scene’, manuscript of lecture delivered at the University of Sydney, 26/3/1953, Bernard Smith Papers, NLA, Box 3, Folder 19.

<sup>90</sup> See Phillips’ *Meanjin* editorial ‘The Writer in Isolation’, published in Spring 1952, and cited in Chapter 1.

was 'immature', lacking the 'influence of the universities'. In such an environment young artists 'reacted vigorously' against popular distrust of experiment, and therefore had undue faith in artistic 'progress', which they saw as coming, inevitably, from abroad. His bugbear was reheated: artists looked to Europe for training and inspiration 'as much now as ever before', but this only served to undermine the originality of their work.<sup>91</sup> Like Christesen, he felt the excitement of the war years had dissipated, and the direction for Australian art which he had signalled was in danger of being superseded.

Smith contended that Australian painting 'awaits the time when Australians are more fully conscious of themselves as Australians': when this happens, he said, Australian art 'is likely to become less like rather than more like art abroad'.<sup>92</sup> The indebtedness to 'fashionable tyrannies' could be jettisoned;<sup>93</sup> an Australian path adopted. It angered him that Australian painters, as he saw it, had been criticised for 'not keeping sufficiently in touch with new developments in art abroad': a 'curious opinion', suggestive of the idea that 'the latest fashion is the best fashion'.<sup>94</sup> Figurative art was the embodiment of the tradition he had articulated, the next link in the chain, and if it could gain an overseas audience Australian self-confidence could be built, seeing off snide claims of mediocrity and parochialism, from within or without. Although one academic has said that Smith did not wish to 'disparage abstract expressionism',<sup>95</sup> in 1949 he had visited the Venice Biennale and, viewing the Jackson Pollocks there, hated what he saw: 'what crimes are committed in the name of liberty!'<sup>96</sup> The American's drips and flicks of paint constituted the 'wallpaper of his alienation'.<sup>97</sup> Alienation equals isolation, estrangement,

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<sup>91</sup> Bernard Smith, 'The Australian Scene'.

<sup>92</sup> Bernard Smith, 'Australian Sculpture', manuscript for the New and Information Bureau, June 1953, Bernard Smith Papers, NLA, Box 3, Folder 18.

<sup>93</sup> Bernard Smith, Letter to the Editor, *The Observer* (Sydney), 16/6/59, Bernard Smith Papers, Mitchell Library, Box 4, File: '1959 Antipodean Correspondence'.

<sup>94</sup> Bernard Smith, 'Australian Sculpture'.

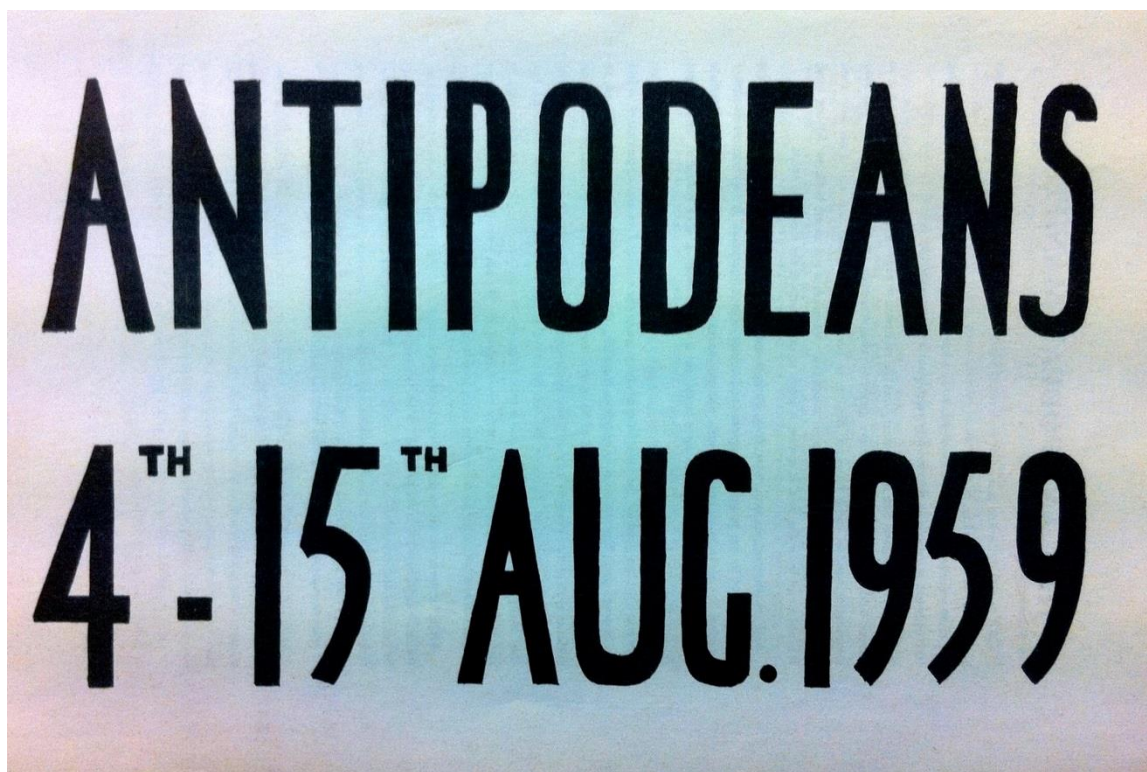
<sup>95</sup> Paul Giles, 'The Antipodean Manifesto' fifty years later', *Legacies*, p. 155.

<sup>96</sup> Bernard Smith, *A Pavane for Another Time*, p. 351.

<sup>97</sup> Smith's annotations of the 1949 Venice Biennale catalogue, p. 395, in the Bernard Smith Papers, Mitchell Library; cited in Sheridan Palmer *Hegel's Owl*, p. 145.

disaffection – not, Smith believed, problems afflicting Australian artists. Their democratic work could present an optimistic alternative to this American malaise.

iv) 'Antipodean'



Cover of 'Antipodeans' exhibition catalogue, Victorian Artists' Society, Melbourne, August 1959.

Bernard Smith, his critics contend, 'contrived a history, a culture, a tradition. He built a brand'.<sup>98</sup> In 1955 he went to Melbourne as the university's first Australian Fine Arts professor. It was there, in a city which had not embraced abstraction as Sydney had (David Boyd histrionically described Melbourne as 'the last bastion of the romantic spirit and the human image in the western world'),<sup>99</sup> that he sought to create a movement – a 'brand' – which would promote modern figurative painting as part of the tradition he had outlined. In 1959 he formed the Antipodeans, a group consisting of artists Charles Blackman, Arthur and David Boyd, John Brack, Bob Dickerson, John Perceval and Clifton Pugh, plus the one critic, himself. The professed aim of the Antipodeans was to promote 'the image' in opposition to the challenge

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<sup>98</sup> Helen Brack, interview, 30/6/2011.

<sup>99</sup> David Boyd, 'Notes on the Antipodeans', manuscript, dated 14/2/1967, Bernard Smith Papers, Mitchell Library, Box 4, File: 'Additional Antipodean material'.

of abstraction. 'I think these artists together pin-point... what is most vital and individual in Australian art today', he said; a largely Melbourne crew (Dickerson the exception) they had come together as a result of unease 'at the increased fashionableness of abstract expressionism in Sydney'.<sup>100</sup> The group's manifesto, penned by Smith, stressed this defence of 'the image', attacking 'Tachistes, Action Painters, Geometric Abstractionists, Abstractionists and their innumerable band of camp followers' who produced an art that was not 'for living men' but 'reveals a death of the mind and spirit'.<sup>101</sup> Smith had ambitions for the Antipodeans: he aimed to use the group to stamp his authority on the Australian tradition and export it to the world. Helen Brack, wife of John and herself an artist, says that he thought the Antipodeans were 'going to conquer England'.<sup>102</sup>

Smith certainly had plans for a London exhibition – 'to make Australian art known abroad'. He said the Antipodeans were 'a group small enough and coherent enough to make a single impact on British opinion', developing 'the impression created by artists such as Nolan, Tucker and Drysdale', and contending that 'the overseas public will not be very interested in the work of our local non-representational painters', because they 'simply cannot compare with the best work of this kind done in England and America'. British audiences were 'looking for something original from the Antipodes anyway', not 'pale reflections' of art they were already familiar with.<sup>103</sup> He asserted that Nolan's art, for example, pointed 'one way forward from the solipsism of non-figurative painting', and this gave him significance, not his Australian subject matter.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Bernard Smith to Kym Bonython, 21/2/1959, Bernard Smith Papers, Mitchell Library, Sydney, Box 4, File: '1959 Antipodean Correspondence'.

<sup>101</sup> Charles Blackman, Arthur Boyd, David Boyd, John Brack, Robert Dickerson, John Perceval, Clifton Pugh, Bernard Smith, 'The Antipodean Manifesto', August 1959, in Bernard Smith, *The Antipodean Manifesto – Essays in Art and History*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1976, p. 165.

<sup>102</sup> Helen Brack, interview, 30/6/2011.

<sup>103</sup> Bernard Smith to Kym Bonython, 21/2/1959, Bernard Smith Papers, Mitchell Library, Box 4, File: '1959 Antipodean Correspondence'.

<sup>104</sup> Bernard Smith, manuscript for 'Nolan's Image', published in *The London Magazine*, September 1962, Bernard Smith Papers, NLA, Box 3, Folder 21.

Nolan's champion in England was Sir Kenneth Clark, and Smith sought to gain his support for the Antipodeans, writing in early 1959 to tell him about the group and ask for help in securing a London show. He said that 'they do not see themselves as nationalists seeking to create a national style', but, 'to my mind, they do represent what is most characteristic of Australian art at the moment'.<sup>105</sup> Clark told him he was 'most interested' to hear of the Antipodeans, and that the best place for Smith to seek an exhibition would be the Whitechapel Art Gallery in East London.<sup>106</sup> Smith proceeded to write to the Whitechapel's Director Bryan Robertson, mentioning the 'vaguely projected' Tate Gallery show of Australian art (which would eventually materialise in 1963) but said that the Whitechapel would be a better venue as 'the Antipodeans would be lost among a lot of lesser mortals sedulously following current modes'. He went on to tell Robertson that 'the Antipodeans in their work extend and elaborate traditions and attitudes discussed in considerable detail in my book' (*European Vision in the South Pacific*).<sup>107</sup> He wished for the Antipodeans' figurative style to be presented to the world as the archetypal Australian art. This was a fulfilment of *his* vision of what the Australian tradition was: *he* was the standard bearer and advocate for this new movement of international import, and years later he was, indeed, celebrated as 'more than somebody who writes about art', but as someone who 'was the heart of it... like Clement Greenberg, like Herbert Reed'.<sup>108</sup>

His contention that the Antipodeans were 'not interested in the creation or promotion of a national style',<sup>109</sup> reflected both Smith's antipathy to nationalism and his desire for this movement not to be parochial, provincial or isolated. Sheridan Palmer stresses the point that Smith was 'fiercely

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<sup>105</sup> Bernard Smith to Sir Kenneth Clark, 28/2/1959, Bernard Smith Papers, Mitchell Library, Box 4, File: '1959 Antipodean Correspondence'.

<sup>106</sup> Sir Kenneth Clark to Bernard Smith, 28/3/1959, Bernard Smith Papers, Mitchell Library, Box 4, File: '1959 Antipodean Correspondence'.

<sup>107</sup> Bernard Smith to Bryan Robertson, 4/4/1959, Bernard Smith Papers, Mitchell Library, Box 4, File: '1959 Antipodean Correspondence'.

<sup>108</sup> English art historian Martin Kemp, introducing Bernard Smith at the Tate Gallery, 23/8/1997, quoted in Sheridan Palmer, *Hegel's Owl*, p. 305. Greenberg was the New York advocate of abstract expressionism; Read the standard bearer of British modernism.

<sup>109</sup> Bernard Smith, manuscript for 'A New Art Group – The Antipodeans', undated (most probably mid-1959), Bernard Smith Papers, Mitchell Library, Box 4, File: '1959 Antipodean Correspondence'.



antipodean’, as opposed, one presumes, to fiercely Australian.<sup>110</sup> ‘The epistemology of being Antipodean is relational’, he said much later, and ‘it is a relationship that is global... any place on the globe can be antipodal to the other’.<sup>111</sup> Australia is not isolated or out on its own – it is just antipodal to Europe; as Europe, of course, is antipodal to Australia. Smith did not, says Paul Giles, ‘intend simply to abjure the northern hemisphere’; instead he wished to ‘rotate the intellectual axis so that Australian figurative art could be amalgamated into the modernist spectrum’.<sup>112</sup> Thus, according to Smith, ‘to be Antipodean... is to accept the continuity of Australian and European culture. The name avoids the egocentric and isolationist position of nationalist art’. He said he chose the name Antipodeans ‘to fix a position in both place and time’:

Australia is not the centre of the civilised world, not even the centre of our civilised world as artists... We are Europeans in an antipodean situation, and because we are placed differently so we must see differently. We do not believe that we can add anything of value to art by imitating the fashions prevalent in Europe, America or the Soviet Union... We must learn to be ourselves.

Smith, once again, sounds very like Phillips. For all his avowal of distrust of nationalism, his words are those of a cultural nationalist. He contended that Australian artists were more severely afflicted by the cultural cringe than writers: ‘the writers are learning to be themselves’, he said, but because of ‘immature and superficial criticism’, artists still tried to ‘ape fashions’ from abroad.<sup>113</sup> Australian artists must be their *Australian* selves, confident in their own cultural identity. ‘It is natural’, the manifesto stated, ‘that we should see and experience nature differently in some degree from the artists of the northern hemisphere’.<sup>114</sup> Smith’s qualification (‘in some degree’) is ascribed by Giles not to the ‘infamous cultural

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<sup>110</sup> Sheridan Palmer, *Hegel's Owl*, p. 105.

<sup>111</sup> Bernard Smith, ‘On being Antipodean’, manuscript for talk to a literary group in Western Australia, March 1996, Bernard Smith Papers, NLA, Box 7, Folder 54.

<sup>112</sup> Paul Giles, ‘The Antipodean Manifesto fifty years on’, p. 155.

<sup>113</sup> Bernard Smith, ‘A New Art Group – The Antipodeans’.

<sup>114</sup> Bernard Smith, *The Antipodean Manifesto*, p. 166.

cringe’, but ‘to a sense of irony as something like an ontological condition, where no condition could remain unchallenged by its opposite’.<sup>115</sup> Far from lacking in self-confidence, the Antipodeans had something to say which, Smith believed, could resound in London, and even ‘the great citadel of abstraction’, New York.<sup>116</sup> Figurative art could be promoted as a modernist movement revitalised in Australia, at a stroke dispelling the cringe. He said that ‘what must be impressed upon the international art world is that this vitality which has already been revealed in the work of Nolan and Drysdale arises from a common situation’, the antipodean situation, and this was why a ‘coherent group’ with ‘a definite point of view’ – defending the figurative image, but *not*, he stressed, a ‘nationalistic slogan’ – was so important.<sup>117</sup>

Thus the importance of securing a show in London. But his hopes in this direction were gazumped, the famous 1961 exhibition of Australian art at the Whitechapel Gallery far from endorsing his theories.<sup>118</sup> Robertson did not reply to Smith’s original letter, and after the Antipodeans’ show at the Victorian Artists’ Society in August 1959 Smith wrote again to Kenneth Clark, sending him a copy of the manifesto, looking for help to get it published in England, and commenting that he had not yet heard back from Robertson.<sup>119</sup> Meanwhile, Smith’s friend art historian Ursula Hoff was in London conducting research, and she was charged with chasing up Robertson. She wrote to say she had made ‘several’ attempts at getting in touch with him, to no avail: she was, she said, ‘always told that he is a) away, b) will come in later, c) has not come in after all, d) is ill, f) is involved in a book’. However, eventually she was

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<sup>115</sup> Paul Giles, ‘The Antipodean Manifesto fifty years on’, p. 155.

<sup>116</sup> Bernard Smith to Rudy Komon, 12/8/1960, Bernard Smith Papers, Mitchell Library, Box 4, File: ‘1959 Antipodean Correspondence’.

<sup>117</sup> Bernard Smith to Rudy Komon, 12/8/1960.

<sup>118</sup> ‘Recent Australian Painting’, curated by Bryan Robertson, 2 June – 23 July 1961, Whitechapel Gallery, London. For a detailed account of the Whitechapel show, as well as the lives of Australian artists in London at that time see: Simon Pierse, *Australian Art and Artists in London, 1950–1965: An Antipodean Summer*, Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2012. Pierse also gives an excellent account of the mercurial Robertson’s close affiliation with Kenneth Clark, ambitious leadership of the Whitechapel and keen interest in Australian art. ‘Contemporary Australian painting became part of Robertson’s exhibition strategy at the Whitechapel’, says Pierse, ‘reflecting one facet of his very broad-ranging artistic sensibilities.’ Robertson championed young artists and took them under his wing – including the Australian artists Charles Blackman, Brett Whiteley and Lawrence Daws (pp. 68/71)

<sup>119</sup> Bernard Smith to Kenneth Clark, 14/8/1959, Bernard Smith Papers, Mitchell Library, Box 4, File: ‘1959 Antipodean Correspondence’.

told that ‘no decision had as yet been arrived at, re: Mr Robertson going to Australia in connection with an Australian exhibition’.<sup>120</sup>

And so it was that Smith found out about Robertson’s nascent plans to put on an Australian exhibition. But what form would this show take? And why had Robertson not replied to Smith and, indeed, been so slippery? Hoff was finally put in touch with Robertson by Clark, and in November 1959 relayed his comments: he said that he was planning on travelling to Australia early the following year to give some lectures for the British Council, but also to ‘see as much work as possible by the younger Australian artists and to make a selection for a large exhibition of their work’. He hoped to meet some of the Antipodean artists and, ‘if the artists are agreeable... see if there is a possibility of including this work in the general exhibition’.<sup>121</sup> In other words, he wanted to put on an Australian show, but *not* an Antipodean one. Eventually, in December, Robertson wrote to Smith, to the same effect.<sup>122</sup> This was not what Smith had in mind. He told Clark that it ‘cuts across our plans in a rather unfortunate way’:

I am sure that the group will be delighted to assist a general Australian show in any way possible. At the same time, we are keen to present our work, not so much as the work of an Australian group, but as a group with the specific point of view outlined in the Manifesto.<sup>123</sup>

But Robertson had no desire to promote a solitary artistic world-view, belonging to one art critic and a loose conglomeration of artists which had, in fact, started to fall apart almost immediately. The day after the opening of the Antipodeans show Bob Dickerson left the group.<sup>124</sup> Many of the artists had been

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<sup>120</sup> Ursula Hoff to Bernard Smith, 21/10/1959, Bernard Smith Papers, Mitchell Library, Box 4, File: ‘1959 Antipodean Correspondence’.

<sup>121</sup> Ursula Hoff to Bernard Smith, 27/11/1959, Bernard Smith Papers, Mitchell Library, Box 4, File: ‘1959 Antipodean Correspondence’.

<sup>122</sup> Bryan Robertson to Bernard Smith, 14/12/1959, Bernard Smith Papers, Mitchell Library, Box 4, File: ‘1959 Antipodean Correspondence’.

<sup>123</sup> Bernard Smith to Sir Kenneth Clark, 9/12/1959, Bernard Smith Papers, Mitchell Library, Box 4, File: ‘1959 Antipodean Correspondence’.

<sup>124</sup> According to Helen Brack, who says Dickerson was staying with the Bracks at the time; interview, 30/6/2011.

embarrassed by the manifesto when they had heard it read out by Smith at the opening.<sup>125</sup> David Boyd described the ‘business-like’ meetings of the group – an ‘odd bunch’, ‘diverse’ – and, whilst he said he ‘enjoyed every moment of it’ (‘I think we all did with the exception of John Brack’, who ‘always looked sad’) after the ‘impressive’ opening of the exhibition the artists began to worry about the effects of the group on their careers, with Pugh ‘publicly repudiating’ some of his role, and Brack ‘quietly resigning’. Smith and he, he said, were ‘likened to evil persuaders’ leading the other ‘gentle souls’ astray.<sup>126</sup> Much later Brack told an interviewer that he became increasingly uneasy with the ‘unmistakable note of nationalism’ creeping into the manifesto, suggesting a misinterpretation of Smith’s aims, perhaps an easy one to make.<sup>127</sup>

Robertson, meanwhile, wanted to ‘show the English public what is happening in Australia, right now, in painting’, and this would include the breadth of Australian artistic production beyond a Melbourne-based figurative clique.<sup>128</sup> And he was a much more powerful figure than Smith: he could offer artists their name in London lights. To say that the Antipodean artists would be ‘delighted’ to help with the Whitechapel show was true indeed: this would be a coup for Australian art. Most of the artists who joined the Antipodeans probably did so because they saw it as a vehicle for their art to be talked about and seen: ‘artists saw it as a promotion’, says Helen Brack – ‘which it was’.<sup>129</sup> In an impassioned letter to Smith at the time, she criticised his ‘dictatorship’ and undue influence over artists, lamenting that it is ‘so *hard*... for little people to find and formulate and touch and set-down anything that is not cliché or borrowed or boring’.<sup>130</sup> She felt Nolan’s success also led to excessive influence – and her husband,

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<sup>125</sup> Deborah Haycraft, ‘The making of a manifesto’, essay draft sent to Smith for comments, later published in *Art & Australia*, vol. 26, no. 2, Summer 1988, pp. 284–9; Bernard Smith Papers, Mitchell Library, Box 4, File: ‘Additional Antipodean material’.

<sup>126</sup> David Boyd, ‘Notes on the Antipodeans’. Helen Brack, otherwise antipathetic to the Antipodean concept, attests to the ‘huge success’ of the Antipodeans’ show; interview, 30/6/2011.

<sup>127</sup> John Brack, interviewed by Deborah Haycraft, 21/1/1980, in ‘The making of a manifesto’.

<sup>128</sup> Bryan Robertson to Bernard Smith, 14/12/1959, Bernard Smith Papers, Mitchell Library, Box 4, File: ‘1959 Antipodean Correspondence’.

<sup>129</sup> Helen Brack, interview, 30/6/2011.

<sup>130</sup> Helen Brack to Bernard Smith, ‘early 1959’, Bernard Smith Papers, Mitchell Library, Box 4, File: ‘1959 Antipodean Correspondence’; her emphasis.

much later, concurred, saying that at the time he had felt Australian painting ‘was in more danger from romantic myths and legends than from abstraction’.<sup>131</sup> Helen believed that artists such as her husband were pulled into ‘the Brotherhood’ (the original name of the group being the Antipodean Brotherhood)<sup>132</sup> despite themselves. ‘But perhaps the manifesto is just for advertisement’, she concluded, ‘in which case it’s quite excellent’.<sup>133</sup> Strangely, the most passionate advocate of a realistic vision in tune with Smith’s, Counihan, was not even invited to join the group; Smith says because, despite Perceval’s recommendation that he be included, it was ‘essential’ that the group ‘not be dismissed as a covert attempt to justify socialist realism’.<sup>134</sup>

Meanwhile, in late 1959 Smith wrote to Clark again, now in desperation, trying to get a suggestion for another London gallery. But Clark could only recommend private ones, which was not what Smith had in mind at all; and anyway, he wanted to see reproductions of the Antipodeans’ work before he started promoting them himself.<sup>135</sup> Smith then tried writing to Nolan and Albert Tucker, in the hope that they might join the group, bringing ‘the prestige you have gained since 1953’ (as he said to Nolan) and thus helping secure a London show. He discussed the proposed show at the Whitechapel, saying that ‘such a show may well be what is needed’, but that ‘I cannot help thinking that a show which is based on genuine artistic principle of issue is of more moment in the end than one which is based on national lines’. He said that no-one remembers the Futurists because they were Italian or the Impressionists because they were French, and that ‘if a group of Australian painters are prepared to stand up for the image’ then ‘that is not nationalism but something that every artist in the Western world can understand and agree with or disagree with’. He summed up:

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<sup>131</sup> John Brack, interviewed by Deborah Haycraft, 21/1/1980.

<sup>132</sup> ‘Some idiotic name’, she later called it; interview, 30/6/2011. Said Clifton Pugh: ‘Bernard wanted ‘Brotherhood’ – can you imagine! Something like the Pre-Raphaelites! None of us were going to let him get away with that’. Interviewed by Deborah Haycraft, 18/11/1980, quoted in ‘The making of a manifesto’.

<sup>133</sup> Helen Brack to Bernard Smith, ‘early 1959’.

<sup>134</sup> Bernard Smith, *Noel Counihan*, p. 334.

<sup>135</sup> Sir Kenneth Clark to Bernard Smith, 16/12/59, Bernard Smith Papers, Mitchell Library, Box 4, File: ‘1959 Antipodean Correspondence’.

It is time that a group of Australian artists were able to make a general contribution to art, and one which was not so much based upon national idiosyncrasies, though these might well appear in the paintings, but upon an issue which is of international importance.<sup>136</sup>

But Nolan and Tucker did not join Smith's group. He wrote one final letter to Robertson, in which he outlined the same points, and he hoped that 'it might be possible' for the Whitechapel show to, 'in some way', accentuate the figurative versus abstractionist debate which was 'a real issue' in 'our contemporary situation'.<sup>137</sup> The problem, however, was that London's public and curators were not interested in the Australian slant on this issue: it was the national theme castigated by Smith which most appealed to an international audience. There was to be no London Antipodeans exhibition, and in fact there was never to be another one in Australia, either. On forming the Antipodeans he had declared that he wished it to last for ten years, but this was to prove optimistic.<sup>138</sup> His ideas were powerfully expressed, but the reality was that they were his ideas alone, and they did not have resonance in the wider art world.

In fact, Australian art was presented as exotic and other-worldly at the Whitechapel, and this proved more alluring to Londoners than the articulation of a dry theory. Gushing at his show's 'phenomenal, overwhelming success', Robertson described its 'great spectacle': 'we have got tropical plants and trees in the Gallery' and 'the place blazes with light and colour'.<sup>139</sup> The originality of Australian art was ascribed to 'the remoteness from Europe, the lack of any aesthetic tradition with deep roots, and the life spent in a fairly tough, materialistic society'.<sup>140</sup> Smith's theories thus repudiated, his credentials as

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<sup>136</sup> Bernard Smith to Sidney Nolan, 2/2/1960, Bernard Smith Papers, Mitchell Library, Box 4, File: '1959 Antipodean Correspondence'; see also, letter to Albert Tucker, 1/2/1960, same file.

<sup>137</sup> Bernard Smith to Bryan Robertson, 8/2/1960, Bernard Smith Papers, Mitchell Library, Box 4, File: '1959 Antipodean Correspondence'.

<sup>138</sup> Smith told Kym Bonython (21/2/1959) that 'at our first meeting we all agreed that if we were to do any good we should have to stick together for ten years', optimistically adding: 'I believe we will'.

<sup>139</sup> Bryan Robertson to Hal Missingham, 22/6/1961, 'Recent Australian Painting' collection, Whitechapel Gallery Archive, Foyle Reading Room, WAG/EXH/2/78/1-3-8/1961.

<sup>140</sup> Bryan Robertson, draft of article for *The Sunday Telegraph*, London, 5/6/1961, Whitechapel Gallery Archive, WAG/EXH/2/78/4.

a critic were ignored: ‘there is really no interesting published literature of modern Australian painting’, said Robertson.<sup>141</sup> The Whitechapel’s Director had become the cheerleader for Australian art. He was receiving thanks from the Australian ambassador in Paris for getting Australian artists a show there;<sup>142</sup> he was pushing for their inclusion at the Paris Biennale.<sup>143</sup> Smith’s hopes of such a facilitating role, evident when he first returned to Sydney from England, had gone the way of his hopes for an Antipodean storming of London. To accentuate his defeat, the introduction to the Whitechapel catalogue was written by Smith’s young rival Robert Hughes – whom Robertson described as ‘a sort of young Orson Welles of Australian painting, writing, architecture and poetry’<sup>144</sup> – who dutifully emphasised Australian art’s exoticism. Hughes discussed the lack of Renaissance art (and much more besides) in Australian public collections, and the difficulty in getting major touring exhibitions to Australia. This had ‘distorted the perspectives of overseas art and rendered intelligent discussion of cultural values difficult’. The ‘narrowing’ of ‘experience and minds’ served one good purpose:

Australian artists are confronted, virtually, with a *tabula rasa*... They have to make a cultural pattern, which is, under the circumstances of isolation, a more stimulating and productive task than adding to one.<sup>145</sup>

Hughes’ diagnosis was ratified by Clark who, in his own catalogue essay, described the ‘myth-making’ carried out by Australian artists inspired by ‘the light’ and ‘dead white trees’, painting the landscape ‘not for its own sake’, but ‘as the background of a legend’.<sup>146</sup> The London critics loved the Whitechapel show,<sup>147</sup> and a ‘formidable list’ of one-man shows for Australian artists (many of them

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<sup>141</sup> Bryan Robertson to Madame d’Orniel (Biennale de Paris organiser), 26/9/1961, Whitechapel Gallery Archive, WAG/EXH/2/78/3.

<sup>142</sup> E. Ronald Walker (Australian Ambassador in Paris) to Bryan Robertson, 28/10/1961, Whitechapel Gallery Archive, WAG/EXH/2/78/3.

<sup>143</sup> Bryan Robertson to Madame d’Orniel, 26/9/1961 – ‘It is only because my sympathies have been aroused by the plight of young Australian artists that I was anxious to get a reasonable representation in the Biennale’.

<sup>144</sup> Bryan Robertson to Sir Colin Anderson, 3/3/1961, Whitechapel Gallery Archive, WAG/EXH/2/78/1-3-8/1961.

<sup>145</sup> Robert Hughes, ‘Introduction’, *Recent Australian Painting* (catalogue), London: Whitechapel Gallery, 1961, p. 14.

<sup>146</sup> Sir Kenneth Clark, in *Recent Australian Painting*, p. 4.

<sup>147</sup> ‘Watch out for the Australians’, cried *The Evening Standard* (7/6/1961); ‘Aussie art makes the grade’, said *The Daily Mail* (3/6/1961); *The Evening News* described the show as ‘fantastic’ (3/6/1961), *The Daily Telegraph* hailed its ‘great impact’

Antipodeans) followed – ‘Dickerson, Olsen, Hessing, Pugh, Blackman, Whiteley, and various others’, as Robertson said.<sup>148</sup> In 1962 Brett Whiteley won the prestigious International Prize at the Paris Biennale, where he exhibited with Blackman and Lawrence Daws in the Australian pavilion.<sup>149</sup> Australian art was taking its place on the world stage, but not on Smith’s terms.

It was, anyway, a short-lived glory. The Tate show of 1963 – which had begun life at the Art Gallery of South Australia, before travelling to Western Australia, London and Canada<sup>150</sup> – was not a great success. An idea driven largely by Sir Colin Anderson, Chairman of P&O, trustee of the Tate and supporter of Australian art, it was bedevilled by the perception that the Prime Minister, Robert Menzies, had had too much of a hand in the selection of works, a claim fanned by his own words on the matter, declaring that the exhibition had been initiated in talks between himself and Anderson: ‘he is an exponent of the modern, I am a reactionary, a traditionalist – but we managed to meet from opposite poles’.<sup>151</sup> Tucker, angered by the historical and traditional emphasis of the show, publicly repudiated it, symptomatic of contemporary artists who felt side-lined.<sup>152</sup> Robertson had strongly recommended this focus to the Tate’s Director, John Rothenstein, and clearly it was meant to be different in its aims to the Whitechapel show.<sup>153</sup> But the involvement of the government – and Smith had always worried about such things<sup>154</sup> – undermined the show’s credibility. Critics were disparaging, both at home – ‘it looks fine in Adelaide but is not really good enough for the standards of a famous taste-maker like the Tate’, said a

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(6/6/1961), and *The Yorkshire Post* declared: ‘Australian art arrives’ (13/6/1961); clippings found in Whitechapel Gallery Archive, WAG/EXH/2/78, Box 4. Robertson told Missingham that ‘the press reaction has been extremely generous and positive’, 22/6/1961.

<sup>148</sup> Bryan Robertson to Hal Missingham, 22/6/1961.

<sup>149</sup> Brett Whiteley Studio archives, found at: [http://www.brettwhiteley.org/whats\\_on/archives/paris](http://www.brettwhiteley.org/whats_on/archives/paris); accessed 22/10/2011.

<sup>150</sup> ‘Australian Paintings – Colonial, Impressionist, Contemporary’, National Gallery of South Australia, 1 March – 1 April 1962; Western Australian Art Gallery, 24 September – 24 October 1962; Tate Gallery, London, 23 January – 3 March 1963; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 11 April – 5 May 1963; Vancouver Art Gallery, 6 June – 22 June 1963.

<sup>151</sup> ‘Rare chance to see paintings’, *The Sunday Mail*, Adelaide, 17/3/1962, found in ‘Australian Paintings – Colonial, Impressionist, Contemporary’, 24 January – 3 March 1963, ‘Organisation Part 1’, Tate Gallery Archives and Special Collections, TG 92/172/1.

<sup>152</sup> Albert Tucker to *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 28/3/1962, Tate Gallery Archives and Special Collections, TG 92/172/1.

<sup>153</sup> Bryan Robertson to John Rothenstein, 5/12/1961, Tate Gallery Archives and Special Collections, TG 92/172/1.

<sup>154</sup> Note Smith’s misgivings, seen earlier in chapter, regarding Australia House as a venue for an exhibition.



cringing Alan McCulloch<sup>155</sup> – and in London – ‘artists should not be criticised for adopting international styles, if national ones seem meaningless to them’, said *The Sunday Telegraph*; whilst *The Observer* observed that ‘Australianism’ had become a ‘nasty word’.<sup>156</sup> Australian art’s individuality and difference were being questioned. To Smith, still angry many years later, Australian art’s London fling had been just another example of British cultural condescension:

There lingered a strong belief in Britain that since Australia was only a cultural colony of Britain we could not, as critics of our own art, represent ourselves, so we had to be represented. But the British representation of Australian art, as masterminded by Mr Bryan Robertson... was a myopic vision that disastrously misrepresented modern Australian artists. They were presented as white noble savages who possessed no knowledge whatever of the Renaissance tradition from which in fact our art had sprung.<sup>157</sup>

Isolation was a ‘myth’, ‘nurtured’ by critics motivated by ‘a deep sense of inferiority in our own values’; it was a ‘way of maintaining imperial distance and cultural elitism’.<sup>158</sup> He lambasted the British press, which, he said, ‘has never taken Australian artists seriously’ unless, like Nolan or Boyd, they decided to live in the mother country: ‘what they invariably seek from others,’ he said, ‘are simplistic images readily associated without much thought to British concepts of Australia – such as Drysdale’s desert scenes and “primitivising” Aboriginal groups’.<sup>159</sup> The Whitechapel approach ‘infantilised’ Australians;<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Alan McCulloch, ‘Shake out is needed at the Tate show’, *The Herald*, 28/3/1962, Tate Gallery Archives and Special Collections, TG 92/172/1.

<sup>156</sup> Edwin Mullins, ‘Portrait of a nation’, *The Sunday Telegraph*, 27/1/1963 and Nigel Gosling, ‘The struggle for Australianism’, *The Observer*, undated (probably January 1963), ‘Australian Paintings – Colonial, Impressionist, Contemporary’, ‘Organisation Part 2’, Tate Gallery Archives and Special Collections, TG 92/172/2.

<sup>157</sup> Bernard Smith, ‘Sir Russel Drysdale (1912–1981): a memoir’, *Art Monthly*, no. 110, June 1998, quoted in Sheridan Palmer, *Hegel’s Owl*, p. 188

<sup>158</sup> Bernard Smith, manuscript of ‘The Myth of Isolation’, John Murtagh Macrossan Lectures, Brisbane, 1961, Bernard Smith Papers, NLA, Box 3, Folder 23.

<sup>159</sup> Bernard Smith, *Noel Conihban*, p. 454.

<sup>160</sup> Peter Beilharz, *Imagining the Antipodes*, p. 125.

the British attitude to Australian art and artists was characterised by ‘arrogance’.<sup>161</sup> Smith, like Phillips or Ward, had worked hard over two decades to abolish such manifestations of condescension, but the artists he promoted, such as Counihan, were dismissed by Hughes as ‘flypaper for whatever emotions we may have about breadlines or dole victims’.<sup>162</sup> Smith’s hopes for an opportunity to carry his ideas onto the international stage had been dashed by an uninterested phalanx of curators, critics and public for whom the rival idea of an exotic Australian art held much more currency.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Bernard Smith, ‘Australian art and British arrogance’, manuscript for article published in *Modern Painters*, undated (circa 1989), Bernard Smith Papers, NLA, Box 7, File 50.

<sup>162</sup> Robert Hughes, *The Art of Australia*, 1970, quoted in Bernard Smith, *Noel Counihan*, p. 443.

<sup>163</sup> Simon Pierse says that ‘Recent Australian Painting’ was ‘the first major exhibition of its kind in London that attempted to dispel the myth of single Australian school of contemporary painting’ – but in so doing, he ‘merely replaced it with another in which Australian art was the product of the “exotic”’, thus affirming the European prejudice of the exotic and unsophisticated Antipodes; *Australian Art and Artists in London*, p. 124.

v) Conclusion

Although Robert Hughes went on to carve out his glorious career in the international art scene, Smith's pre-eminence at home was secure as he was appointed foundation head of the richly endowed Power Institute of Fine Arts at Sydney University in 1967. He cleaved to his pro-figurative stance for the rest of his long career, deriding those who would present any alternative. As he had attacked Haefliger in the fifties and Hughes in the sixties, in the eighties it was Haese's ideas that were excoriated: the lauded (by most) *Rebels and Precursors* had, according to Smith, 'given an air of historical legitimacy to an implicit attitude that has marginalized realist art from the contemporary art market and the curatorial art world since the late 1940s'.<sup>164</sup> By the late-sixties the articulator of such attitudes represented a stultifying monolith against which the next generation of art historians chafed, his time at the Power viewed as difficult and divisive.<sup>165</sup>

Still, like Ward's Legend, Smith's ideas were a shadow from which it was hard to escape. This was the case not just for art historians: for many 'anthropologists, ethnologists, visual cultural theorists and mainstream intellectuals' too, says Palmer, Smith was 'an inescapable presence whose footsteps were always ahead of them'.<sup>166</sup> The approbation he has received from contemporary academics, enthralled in particular by his analysis of 'European Vision' in the southern hemisphere, illustrates the recent revival of his fortunes.<sup>167</sup> Another area of continued influence is in the way he encouraged his students to invent terms or concepts as a way of making them think in new ways about intellectual and art history.<sup>168</sup> His

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<sup>164</sup> Bernard Smith, 'Realist art in wartime Australia', *Angry Penguins and Realist Painting in Melbourne in the 1940s*, p. 56.

<sup>165</sup> See Sheridan Palmer, *Hegel's Owl*, pp. 237–47.

<sup>166</sup> Sheridan Palmer, *Hegel's Owl*, p. 247. This point is also made by Peter Beilharz, *Imagining the Antipodes*, p. xii.

<sup>167</sup> Most obviously seen in 2016's *The Legacies of Bernard Smith* and Peter Beilharz's *Imagining the Antipodes* (1997).

<sup>168</sup> Jaynie Anderson, 'The multiple legacies of Bernard Smith', p. 6. Smith himself invented the term 'formalesque' as an alternative to 'modernism' – see *Modernism's History* (1998).

theoretical bent is suited to a contemporary academic environment in which revisionism is potent. ‘Is this not what we ask of a teacher’, asks Umberto Eco: ‘to provoke us to invent ideas?’<sup>169</sup>

But despite Smith’s seeming continued relevance, it is worth noting William Hannan’s contention in 1960, that ‘the most striking feature of the Antipodean Manifesto is its conservatism: it is possibly the only manifesto in history which virulently defends the existing order’.<sup>170</sup> Smith’s ideas were firmly focussed on the past, obsessed with tradition. Whilst this rendered an original and powerful history – books like *European Vision and the South Pacific* ‘were not being written at that time’<sup>171</sup> – it did not offer much for the present or the future. Humphrey McQueen, Ward’s nemesis, rebuked Counihan, saying that he ‘pictured what was without hinting at what could be’.<sup>172</sup> The same accusation could be levelled at Smith: through the Antipodeans he tried to make figurative painting the art of the future, but his vision was in reality a reconstitution of the past. It is the problem of all the cultural nationalists: their ideas, locked in the past, have not been deemed fit for the future.

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<sup>169</sup> Umberto Eco, *How to Write a Thesis*, translated by Caterina Mongiat Farina and Geoff Farina, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2015 (originally published in Italian, 1977), p. xxvi.

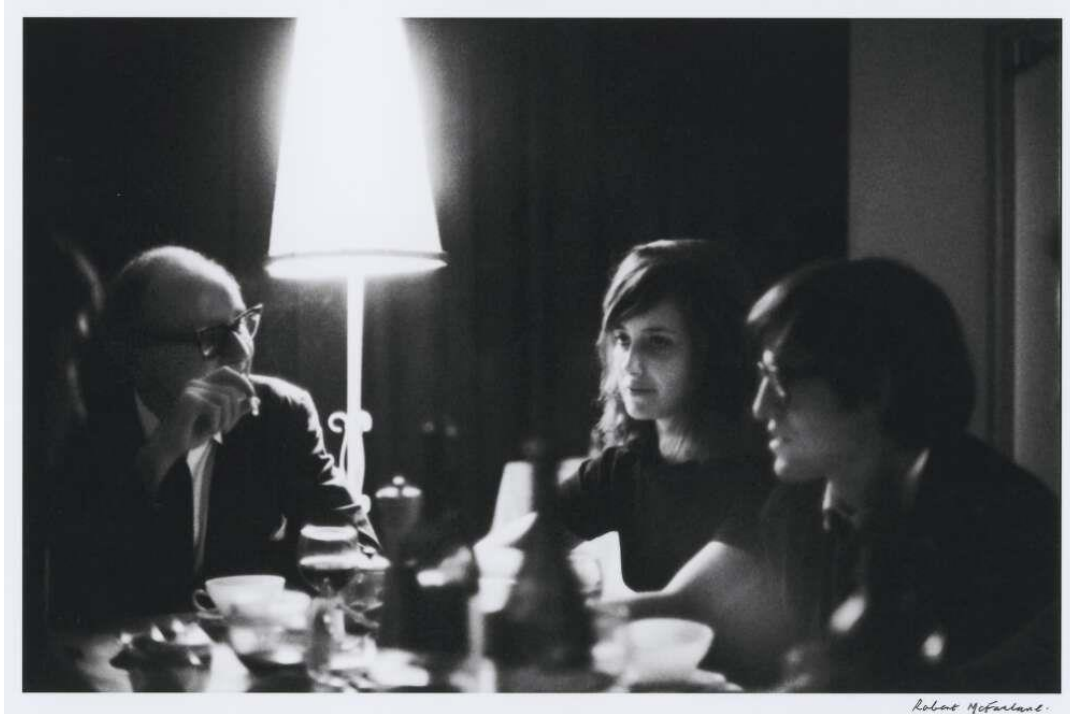
<sup>170</sup> William Hannan, ‘Why not’, *Prospect*, no. 1, 1960, p. 22, in Bernard Smith Papers, Mitchell Library, Box 4, Folder: ‘Additional Antipodean Exhibition Material’.

<sup>171</sup> Helen Brack, interview, 30/6/2011.

<sup>172</sup> Humphrey McQueen, *The Black Swan of Trespass*, Sydney: Sydney Alternative Publishing Cooperative, 1979, cited by Bernard Smith, *Noel Counihan*, p. 529. It should be noted that McQueen may not have thought much of Counihan, but he referred to Smith as ‘Australia’s greatest living historian’; cited in Peter Beilharz, *Imagining the Antipodes*, p. xi.

## CHAPTER 8

### Donald Horne's Sceptical Voice: Towards a New 'National Self-Definition'



Donald Horne in his element, having dinner with (unknown) friends, circa 1965.

i) Introduction: 'An urbane approach to a sophisticated Australia'

Australian life was 'so thin and insubstantial', said Donald Horne of the 1940s, that 'even the soil was blowing away'.<sup>1</sup> Sometime journalist, editor, novelist, advertising executive, cultural commentator and academic, Horne spread his net wide as he sought to transform this desiccated landscape. Irony, scepticism and detachment were the main instruments he used to do this. His early writing (from the forties and fifties) has been described as 'ironic self-detachment',<sup>2</sup> and in fact this term could readily be applied to his work beyond that period, too, even as his early polemic gave way to a more understated

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Horne, *Confessions of a New Boy*, p. 345.

<sup>2</sup> Paul White, manuscript of 'Donald Horne: towards an intellectual biography', Government III (Honours) Research Essay, 1979, p. 9; in Donald Horne Papers, Mitchell Library, Sydney, MLMSS 352, Add-on 1871, Box 11.

style. As his career expanded beyond the confines of journalism and political comment in the sixties, his longstanding addiction to literature and the viewing of life through its prism, portrayed in his works of autobiography<sup>3</sup>, gave him the means to approach the theme of national identity in a self-consciously literary fashion. The ironical gaze he turned on his own country brought a sophisticated analysis hitherto absent. The ‘lucky’ politicians who had blighted the domestic scene, as well as the lacklustre intellectuals who let them get away with it, could, therefore, be routed in intellectual battle as an intelligent ‘national self-definition’ was promulgated.<sup>4</sup> This, at least, was the idea.

Along with others he identified as being part of an intellectual vanguard – for example, Robin Boyd, Manning Clark and Geoffrey Dutton – Horne developed a new voice not just as a tool to critique Australia, but also as a representation of what he wanted *from* Australia, namely a more sophisticated and intelligent self-awareness. Australia must *not* be parochial, chauvinist or British – the self-image must not be one of race; Australia *should* be cosmopolitan, interested in the world and in ideas, and, indeed, interesting in itself. Horne could not bear a *boring* country. Furthermore, this was not a bleeding-heart idea of Australia, either: Horne would not, like Clark, publicly exhume inner demons. His was a hard-headed and sceptical vision. In this way, Australia could develop a maturity which, as he said, had been the object of intellectuals and commentators since the twenties.<sup>5</sup>

The pluralist cult of Sydney Professor of Philosophy John Anderson, to which Horne, a student of Anderson, strongly subscribed in the forties and fifties, was the starting point for this search for a new Australia. However, by the early sixties its limitations – an aversion to planning, a dogma that seemingly precluded action – had become apparent to Horne. He became an advocate of practical solutions. He steered his own course as a self-styled ‘reformed Andersonian’, never committing himself to the didactic

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<sup>3</sup> The first two volumes of Horne’s autobiography are *The Education of Young Donald*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1967 and *Confessions of a New Boy*, 1985.

<sup>4</sup> Donald Horne, ‘South-East Asia – the Australian view’, draft of article published in *The Straits Times*, Singapore, circa 1966/7, Donald Horne Papers, Box MLK 2177.

<sup>5</sup> Donald Horne, *The Story of the Australian People*, Sydney: Reader’s Digest, 1985 (first published 1972), p. 235.

ways of Melbourne's despised 'meliorists' and 'monists', but developing a laconic voice, best seen in his first volume of autobiography, which was at once peculiarly Australian and of an obviously literary sensibility. He hoped to 'diagnose' Australia's cultural ills, and show that an Australian life could be one rich with inner meaning, the likes of which thinkers and novelists had previously deemed notable only for its absence.<sup>6</sup>

He was unsuccessful, however, in shaking off all of his Andersonian cynicism, as, despite his best efforts to see a new and sophisticated Australia in the arrival of Gough Whitlam's government, in the end he still betrayed no trust in politicians and the political process. Early on in his career he had argued that artists and intellectuals should have nothing to do with politics, and events of the seventies, as Whitlam's government collapsed, only confirmed him in this belief.<sup>7</sup> Irony and scepticism were still, as far as he was concerned, the only ways to deal with the absurdity of politics and human action. He applied his scepticism with a wit and rigour wholly lacking among Melbourne's 'Meanjineers', and therefore his nationalism – if indeed he was a nationalist, a term he admitted to more than a few doubts about<sup>8</sup> – was of a very different stripe. His ultimate loyalty was to Anderson and the 'Sydney' conception of culture; he despised gum trees and wattle blossom and the hoary clichés of the bush, and he embraced the pluralism of the modern nation. As Mark Thomas says, he 'always tried to fulfil the aspiration which he set for his *Observer* magazine in 1958': to take 'a more urbane approach to a more sophisticated Australia'.<sup>9</sup> His career was basically a decades-long rumination on Australian culture: what it was, what it meant, and what it could be. Later, when he had become an academic at the University of New South Wales, he asked his students to discuss a quotation from Jim Cairns: 'The only kind of revolution possible is a

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example: D.H. Lawrence, *Kangaroo*, Camberwell, Vic.: Penguin, 2009 (first published 1923). See later in chapter for discussion of Lawrence. For 'cultural diagnosis', see Donald Horne to Frank Knopfelmacher, 12/2/1967, Donald Horne Papers, Box MLK 2135.

<sup>7</sup> Donald Horne, 'Some Cultural Elites in Australia', *Angry Penguins*, no. 8, 1945, in Donald Horne, edited by Nick Horne, *Selected Writings*, Carlton, Vic.: La Trobe University Press, 2017, p. 77; 'Who called us the Lucky Country?', *The Bulletin*, 12/7/1975, p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> Donald Horne, *Into the Open*, p. 160.

<sup>9</sup> Mark Thomas, 'Australian thinkers: Donald Horne', *Canberra Bulletin of Public Administration*, vol. 12, no. 3. Spring 1985, pp. 172–7; in Donald Horne Papers, Add-on 1871.

cultural one. Simply to change the people in control of parliament or of the means of production is no revolution. It's a *coup d'état*.<sup>10</sup> Students probably knew better than to disagree. As far as Horne was concerned, if you wanted to understand or change things, there was only one answer: 'it's the culture, stupid'.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Donald Horne, examination question, 1980, cited in Glyn Davis, 'The endless seminar', *Griffith Review*, no. 28, March 2010, p. 131.

<sup>11</sup> Donald Horne and Myfanwy Horne, 'It's the culture, stupid', in *Dying: A Memoir*, Camberwell, Vic.: Penguin, 2007; *Selected Writings*, p. 246.



ii) Andersonianism: 'A thirst for the acerbic'

'A critical approach to everything': the world of John Anderson, where nothing was above criticism and nothing must suppress it. Censorship, patriotism, religion and social conventions such as 'good taste' stifled criticism and must be attacked.<sup>12</sup> Such was the combative philosophy that had a significant and lasting impact on Donald Horne. Arriving at the University of Sydney in 1939, a naïve if precocious youth fired with a love of literature and the desire to make an impression, Horne became a devotee of Anderson, the charismatic philosopher offering an exciting alternative to 1930s suburban conformism. He explained the value and attraction of Anderson's thinking as lying in the philosopher's 'complete lack of compromise'; for a bright young man interested in ideas but living in a city where 'the intellectual attitude does not grow on trees', this had the force of revelation.<sup>13</sup> The mind, according to Horne's reading of Anderson, was 'a vast complication of Passions, struggling for supremacy with each other and with the objects of their striving', and this view was reflected in the idea of society as 'an arena of tension and struggle'. There was no 'community of interest', but rather 'Social Forces' engaged in 'unceasing conflict, in which all that seemed certain was uncertainty':

To expect immunity from risk, to demand safety, was simply to engage in Phantasy [sic]. Worse, such demands threatened the very existence of a high culture, which was generated from incessant struggle. When society became secure liberty and culture declined. Adversity was the very stimulant of culture.

If there were no evils in society life might not be worth living.<sup>14</sup>

Anderson himself declared the 'pursuit of security and sufficiency' to be a 'low aim': high culture depended 'on the plurality of movements which take their chance in the social struggle, instead of having

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<sup>12</sup> W.M. O'Neil, 'Anderson, John (1893–1962)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/anderson-john-5017/text8345>, published in hardcopy 1979; accessed online 25/6/2014.

<sup>13</sup> Donald Horne, 'John Anderson and the Andersonians', *The Observer*, 29/11/1958, pp. 652–3, in *Selected Writings*, p. 65.

<sup>14</sup> Donald Horne, *The Education of Young Donald*, pp. 239–40.

their place and their resources assigned to them from a supposedly all-embracing point of view'.<sup>15</sup> The idea that cultural policy could be planned was anathema to Anderson. Horne said his mentor largely ignored the intellectual world outside Sydney, 'apart from sometimes sneering at what was going on in Melbourne'.<sup>16</sup> His pluralism taught Horne that 'there was no one single 'Australia''.<sup>17</sup> Lambasting the likes of Christesen and Max Harris as 'literary populists', Horne held no truck with state support for the arts, and believed the creative process had to be free of government interference: 'intellectuals and artists', he said, 'have nothing to do with governments, except in very rare moments of history'.<sup>18</sup> Writing for *The Daily Telegraph*, a paper he had idolised as a boy,<sup>19</sup> he published a series of satirical articles under the general title 'The Golden Age' (an ironic reference to a Chifley speech) lampooning unions, the government and bureaucrats. His voice at this time was scabrous, witty and polemical – Anderson's attraction, says Clive James, was chiefly for those 'thirsting' for the 'acerbic'.<sup>20</sup> Paul White says that at this time Horne 'was writing for two different audiences': the public, and John Anderson.<sup>21</sup> Horne ridiculed the goals of planning by extending them to areas such as Shakespeare ('Hamlet democratised'), the arts ('Music: the big clean-up') and love ('Well-regulated Romance'). The Labor government, he declared, was involved in a 'big grab for extra power'.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> John Anderson, 'The Servile State', 1943, in *Studies in Empirical Philosophy*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1962, p. 335.

<sup>16</sup> Donald Horne, *The Education of Young Donald*, p. 239.

<sup>17</sup> Donald Horne, *Into the Open*, pp. 4/5.

<sup>18</sup> Donald Horne, 'Some Cultural Elites in Australia', p. 76. A different view to that of the cultural nationalists (see Chapter 2) but one shared by Judith Wright (see Chapter 10). Horne's son, Nick (*Selected Writings*, p. 75) points out the irony of 'the future chairman of Australia's main government-funded arts body' launching such an attack. Certainly, it illustrates how his views changed across his long career. Horne was Chairman of the Australia Council for six years from 1985. Horne wrote a novel satirizing bureaucracy – *The Permit*, Melbourne: Sun Books, 1965.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, *The Education of Young Donald*, pp. 131/2: 'The reading that influenced me most now came from the newspapers, in particular a new newspaper called the *Daily Telegraph*, which was launched in March (1936) with a publicity campaign saying that it had ten editors. I persuaded Dad to spend an extra penny-ha'penny a day by ordering the *Daily Telegraph* as well as the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and I fell in love with it from the first issue. Its contemporaneity made it part of the age that could produce the Electrical and Radio Exhibitions.'

<sup>20</sup> Clive James, 'Renegade at the lectern – Australia's national philosopher: John Anderson', *The Monthly*, July 2005; found at <http://www.clivejames.com/articles/clive/anderson>, accessed 24/6/2014.

<sup>21</sup> Paul White, 'Donald Horne: towards an intellectual biography'. Horne scrawled 'and others' in the margin of White's manuscript, by which we might assume he meant his fellow Andersonians.

<sup>22</sup> Donald Horne, 'Hamlet democratised', 8/1/1949; 'Music: the big clean-up', 22/1/1949; 'Well-regulated Romance', 23/10/1949, all in *Daily Telegraph*; cited in Paul White, 'Donald Horne: towards an intellectual biography', p. 8. 'A big grab...', *Daily Telegraph*, 12/6/1948, cited by White, p. 8.

In those early years Horne did not believe politics could accomplish meaningful change; if it got close, it invariably led to what he called (after Anderson) ‘the paradox of unintended consequences’. Anderson had attacked the desire for stability in society as detrimental to the most important thing, namely freedom: ‘to aim at a stable society,’ he said, ‘is to attempt to do away with the conditions under which free activities are possible, and the well-intentioned reformer *always* produces results which he did not anticipate, helps on tendencies to which he is avowedly opposed’.<sup>23</sup> Whilst living in an English village in the early-fifties, Horne edited the local Conservative Party newsletter, filling it with examples of this paradox, ‘as shown in the blunders of the Attlee Labour government’. Carrying on Anderson’s ‘good work’, skewering ‘errors of meliorism and planning’,<sup>24</sup> he later said that ‘irony was essential to the way I wrote: it was a way out of recognition of the necessity of human folly and in particular the paradox of unintended consequences’.<sup>25</sup>

Anderson’s style is dry and lugubrious – hard work. Horne took his ideas and sharpened them for public consumption. He wrote easily digestible tabloid journalism; he picked fights; he was offensive, winding up the earnest brigades of cultural planners. Christesen, bemoaning his lot (as ever) in a letter to Vance Palmer, grumbled about the ghastly ‘phenomenon’ of Horne’s *Observer*<sup>26</sup> – a journal which had been ‘given’ him in 1958 by Sir Frank Packer as a reward for successful editorships of pulpy magazines *Everyday* and *Weekend*.<sup>27</sup> By the late-fifties, however, Horne was also beginning to criticise the Andersonians themselves. He said they did nothing ‘with their intellectual approach except to bully people with it’; they were ‘swots’; ‘narrow’; too theoretical, and lacking practicality. Horne still felt the need to dismiss it all as ‘a game’, but, as White notes, by this stage his conception of pluralism was ‘quite

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<sup>23</sup> John Anderson, ‘The Servile State’, p. 332; Anderson’s emphasis.

<sup>24</sup> Donald Horne, ‘1954: a lot of old rubbish in the bin’, *Overland*, no. 62, 1975, p. 29; cited in Paul White, ‘Donald Horne: towards an intellectual biography’, pp. 8/9.

<sup>25</sup> Donald Horne to ‘Mark Pierce’, 20/6/1985, Donald Horne Papers, Add-on 1871; note: ‘Mark Thomas’ sent a draft of the article he wrote on Horne to his subject on 28/5/1985, although he signed himself ‘Mark Pierce’, and Horne’s reply is to the same name.

<sup>26</sup> C.B. Christesen to Vance Palmer, 28/11/1958, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 259.

<sup>27</sup> Donald Horne, *Into the Open*, p. 1.

different' to that of other Andersonians.<sup>28</sup> He admired them for their tolerance of 'difference and liberty', but he dismissed theirs as a 'messy and intellectually unexciting view of life'.<sup>29</sup> He had outgrown a conservative and static worldview. The Andersonians were not improving Australia; they were merely partaking in what he described as their Sydney trait of 'destructive analysis of virtually everything'.<sup>30</sup> Happy to throw stones, their lack of any ambition to actually change the prevailing climate was depressing. Horne could not stomach the Australian milieu of anti-intellectualism; nor could he any longer abide those who would let it stay this way, who might be 'privately amused by the beliefs of others', but who 'may not want to change those beliefs because they provide a social order' in which their own conduct becomes possible, and they 'prefer this to the kind of disorder in which someone may hit (them) in the head'.<sup>31</sup> Andersonians were happy for things to stay as they were because they were *comfortable*. Their ideas lacked any sort of challenge that could create a response; they only led to a state of inertia. How could anyone be happy with that? Australia was second-rate and needed to be changed.

However, Anderson's ideas were swingeing, leaving his adherents little room for manoeuvre. He argued that the planned state, seeing education 'as a commodity', led to the erosion of the 'maintenance of a tradition of learning, the continuance of a learned way of life' and thus a 'deplorably low level of culture'. Any sort of intervention saw culture diminished, and the state's fingerprints were always a sign of philistinism. Not only did Anderson blame the state, he also blamed science, cultural decline being 'closely correlated with the encroachments of 'Science' on education'. Anderson said that 'the contemporary scientist is the typical exponent of a servile ideology', with especial blame laid on 'the psychologist', who had 'introduced a facetious 'exactness' into the field of 'humane' studies', and thus 'the propagation of 'scientific methods' has gone hand in hand with the overlaying of freedom and culture

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<sup>28</sup> Donald Horne, 'The Andersonians – on the fringe', *The Observer*, no. 21, 29/11/1958, p. 652; quoted in Paul White, 'Donald Horne: towards an intellectual biography', p. 11.

<sup>29</sup> Donald Horne, 'A plimsoll line for intellectuals', *The Observer*, vol. 3, no. 1, 9/1/1960, p. 23.

<sup>30</sup> Donald Horne, *The Lucky Country*, Camberwell, Vic.: Penguin, 2009 (first published 1964), p. 231.

<sup>31</sup> Donald Horne, 'A plimsoll line for intellectuals', p. 23.

by Philistinism'.<sup>32</sup> Such views trapped Anderson's followers, if they were faithfully to carry out their prophet's work, in a condition of impotence. As Clive James says, 'if learning wasn't pursued for its own sake then it could not be learning'. However, Anderson's 'best pupils hadn't listened': they *did* plan for the Australian future, and that planning 'succeeded in almost all departments, including that of culture'.<sup>33</sup>

Horne was one of these pupils: 'scepticism, irony etc.', he said, had meant that 'I could accommodate myself to some of the Andersonians' absurdities', but he 'ceased to be anti-planning' as his ideas developed. He clung on to his scepticism and 'in *that* sense' remained conservative – 'but then hardly any Australian conservatives are sceptical', another peculiarly Australian problem. It dawned on him that 'the paradox of unintended consequences applied to non-action as much as to action', and thus 'sometimes one might give action "a go"'.<sup>34</sup> He harked back to his 'earlier heritage of optimism' (his childhood) and 'produced a theory that made it possible for pessimists to be active: there is a dynamic and really progressive pessimism as well as a resigned pessimism'.<sup>35</sup> Horne was subscribing to the Nietzschean idea of a 'pessimism of strength': 'is pessimism inevitably the sign of decline, decadence, waywardness, of wearied, enfeebled instinct?'<sup>36</sup> It need not be. The current crop of intellectuals was insipid and uninspiring, but why should this be the status quo? Horne decided he could become a 'public intellectual' – a role he had hitherto affected to despise.

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<sup>32</sup> John Anderson, 'The Servile State', p. 336–7.

<sup>33</sup> Clive James, 'Renegade at the lectern'.

<sup>34</sup> Donald Horne to 'Mark Pierce', 20/6/1985; emphasis Horne's.

<sup>35</sup> Donald Horne, *Into the Open*, p. 28.

<sup>36</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Shaun Whiteside, London: Penguin, 1993 (first published 1872), p. 1.

iii) Public intellectuals: The need for an ‘articulate intellectual opposition’

The sudden profusion of ‘little magazines’; increased scientific and technological research; theatres and satirical reviews; more book and coffee shops; Dame Edna Everage – these were ‘intermittent signals’, said Donald Horne, that the intellectual climate was changing by the early-sixties. He also noted the appearance of books ‘a hundred years ahead’ of Russel Ward’s *The Australian Legend* (which he deplored) such as John Pringle’s *Australian Accent*, Robin Boyd’s *The Australian Ugliness*, Bernard Smith’s *Australian Painting*, and Manning Clark’s work, opening up ‘new visions of scholarly imagination’ and presenting Australia ‘as part of the European experience’. The value lay in the fact that this was what ‘only intellectuals’ could do: ‘good, bad or indifferent, they were providing new concepts of what was going on and new concepts of what could go on’. This was just what Australia needed, and Horne realised he should be part of it, not a sniping spectator: ‘despite myself, I was an intellectual, if not in quotation marks’.<sup>37</sup>

Thus emboldened, Horne hoped to push Australian intellectual life into a more prominent position. He believed its ‘inadequacies’ lay in ‘the sense of frustration, meaninglessness and alienation’ of the intellectuals themselves. Divesting himself of cynicism, he believed that intellectual life needed to be encouraged, that it must ‘express itself with confidence’, its ‘enemies’ challenged.<sup>38</sup> Becoming editor of *Quadrant* in 1963, he hoped his ‘special flair’ could help facilitate ‘the beginnings of an intellectual breakthrough’.<sup>39</sup> Historian Mark McKenna, an MA student of Horne’s in 1987, explains that Horne came from a class of people who believed in the European idea of an ‘intellectual vanguard’, a traditional view of how a national culture is led, shaped and formed. A constant critic, especially in later life, of academic writing, no doubt influenced by an Andersonian disdain for obscurantism, Horne was fond of declaring

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<sup>37</sup> Donald Horne, *Into the Open*, pp. 34–5. See Chapter 4 for more on Horne’s support for Clark.

<sup>38</sup> Donald Horne to Richard Krygier, 28/6/1964, Donald Horne Papers, Box MLK 2143.

<sup>39</sup> Horne told Krygier that he felt frustrated at *Quadrant*, however, believing his editorial partner, James McAuley, was not pulling his weight, that his talents were being wasted; Donald Horne to Richard Krygier, 28/6/1964.

that he ‘was not an academic’, even though, by this stage, he was a Professor of Political Science at the University of New South Wales.<sup>40</sup> He had come to see himself as part of a distinctly European tradition which saw a need for intellectual leadership of the people; this was especially required in the Australian context, where politicians were so ineffectual.

Horne was vituperative in his condemnation of politicians. Neither Prime Minister Menzies nor Labor leader Arthur Calwell were ‘capable of engaging in the discourse of the 1960s. Their minds often seem to be engaged in the problems of the 1930s’.<sup>41</sup> He attacked Menzies as ‘long-winded and dull’, ‘timid’, and lacking ideas, caring only about London – ‘if one did not live there, then the best one could do was to keep one’s lesser countrymen in some kind of order, teach them to behave so that they did not bring too much disgrace to the Empire’.<sup>42</sup> Menzies was the foremost of the ‘second-rate people’ profiting from Australia’s luck at whom he took aim in his most famous book.<sup>43</sup> Despising his subservience to Britain, Horne rejoiced in Menzies’ end: ‘A generation has been buried with him!’ But Calwell clung on: ‘out-of-date in a different way’, there was ‘something about him of the bushwhackery of the 1890s’.<sup>44</sup>

Intellectuals had lagged behind too. The intellectual life of the country, ‘still fugitive’,<sup>45</sup> had been slow in rising to the task of filling the void created by the politicians. Perhaps this was something Horne could change. ‘God knows that intellectuals can drive a country to ruin,’ he said, ‘but in the broadest sense of the word it is also true that it is only an intellectual class that can contemplate the out-of-the-ordinary’. He decried a ‘nation without ideas’, a ‘mindless society’, a place where intellectuals ‘must swim, largely in isolation even from each other, against the tides of an almost completely anti-intellectual

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<sup>40</sup> Interview with Mark McKenna, 14/5/2014.

<sup>41</sup> Donald Horne, manuscript of ‘Nation without ideas’, published in *Der Monat*, West Berlin, 1963, Donald Horne Papers, Box MLK 2177.

<sup>42</sup> Donald Horne, ‘The Passing of Sir Robert: Generational changes in Australian politics’, draft of article contributed to Canadian magazine *Parallel*, circa 1966/7, Donald Horne Papers, Box MLK 2177.

<sup>43</sup> Donald Horne, *The Lucky Country*, p. 233.

<sup>44</sup> Donald Horne, ‘The Passing of Sir Robert: Generational changes in Australian politics’. It seems the distrust of politicians stretched way back: from his earliest memories they had been disparaged in the Horne household – ‘none of the buggers was any good’ was the considered opinion, he tells us, of every Horne; *The Education of Young Donald*, p. 78.

<sup>45</sup> Donald Horne, *The Lucky Country*, p. 11.

environment with an emotional distrust of cleverness'. Horne believed Australia's democratic nature, beloved of cultural nationalists, 'stifled perception of the non-ordinary'. Such blandness, in which new ideas or different perspectives were deemed 'irrelevant and absurd and even threatening', meant that Australia itself became 'irrelevant, absurd and threatened'. Society's 'outcasts', the intellectuals, now needed to become 'its prophets' in order to save the nation. Horne was not the only one to invoke prophets, as we have seen: Hope's desert-born prophets; Clark's prophet of the great emptiness. Like them, Horne wanted someone to give the nation ideas and direction. This 'may lead to some dangerous improvisations', he said – perhaps a degree of critical thought and analysis with which Australia was hitherto unaccustomed.<sup>46</sup> Australian intellectuals, previously impractical and isolated, needed to take part in political thought. They needed to forego 'stolid bureaucratic conservatism', the parochial and the provincial:

Parochial in the sense that ... they take only the narrowest interest in their environment. Provincial in the sense that even those of them who are familiar with the history of western thought and see their connection with it cannot imagine that Australia is part of human destiny or that the major challenges and ideas of the twentieth century are those of the history of Australia.<sup>47</sup>

These twin spectres of parochialism and provincialism haunted every subject of this thesis. Horne admired Clark, as we have seen, because he was able to place Australia in the context of western thought, avoiding the 'congealed gentility' of 'official' historians.<sup>48</sup> He admired the Sydney Opera House, then under construction, for the same reasons, noting its site: an old fort, 'intended to defend Sydney from all

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<sup>46</sup> Donald Horne, 'Nation without ideas'.

<sup>47</sup> Donald Horne, 'The Future of *Quadrant* – some observations by Donald Horne', hand-written memorandum, undated (circa 1962/3), Donald Horne Papers, Box MLK 2143.

<sup>48</sup> Patrick White's *Voss* was praised along with Clark's work: Australian history 'may have been much more of an explosion of power and craziness than the historians allow for'; *The Lucky Country*, p. 99. Horne had helped organise the Australian Association for Cultural Freedom's 'New interpretations of Australian history' seminar in August 1963, at which Clark faced off with his critics. See Chapter 4.



threats', amongst which he included those to the arts, now protected 'against the prejudices of the inhabitants of Sydney'. He saw the Opera House as a victory against the 'oppressive Philistinism' that had always been the 'blight' of Australian society. Far from being 'humdrum', like so much of Australian provenance, it was in fact exotic, cultured and forward-thinking.<sup>49</sup> The cultural nationalists were on the other hand as hoary as the politicians: their antiquated solutions to the nation's cultural problems were merely parochial, and he attacked them as peddlers of 'full-scale literary fraud'.<sup>50</sup>

However, he believed that antediluvian intellectuals were going the way of their imperialist or bushwhacking political contemporaries: the 'Old Immutables', peddlers of 'the old narrow vision', were being overthrown. Horne cited various writers and thinkers he admired other than Clark, among them Geoffrey Dutton and Robin Boyd.<sup>51</sup> In later life he conferred an honorary degree on Dutton, who, in his capacity as an editor at Penguin Australia, had suggested the title for *The Lucky Country*.<sup>52</sup> Horne extolled him as 'one of the generation of Australians who helped lead us out of a post-colonial period of intellectual and cultural timidity into a period of acceptance that we are Australians and that we must explore our own potential'.<sup>53</sup> Dutton, with Horne, was a leading light of republicanism, causing a stir with his 1963 article in *Nation*, written after he returned from a sojourn in the USA, in which he attacked cringing attitudes and argued that 'British' needed to be replaced with 'Australian'.<sup>54</sup> Such a stance foreshadowed Horne's tone in *The Lucky Country*. Of patrician birth and cosmopolitan tendencies, a friend

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<sup>49</sup> Donald Horne, 'Australia's search for identity', published in *The World Year Book*, 1970, Donald Horne Papers, Box MLK 2177.

<sup>50</sup> Donald Horne, 'The Great Australian Fraud', *The Observer*, 31/5/1958. See Chapter 1.

<sup>51</sup> Donald Horne, 'The Manning Clark debate – how Manning made his enemies', *The Australian*, 31/8/1996, p. 18. Others he cited included Peter Coleman on Australian attitudes (Coleman was another notable supporter of Clark and critic of radical nationalism, as we saw in Chapter 5), Bernard Smith on art, Bruce Grant on foreign policy, Roger Covell on music, Eric Rolls on the bush, Hugh Stretton on cities, Charles Rowley on Aborigines, and Beverley Kingston on women in Australian history.

<sup>52</sup> Geoffrey Dutton to Donald Horne, 14/4/1964, Donald Horne Papers, Box MLK 2135.

<sup>53</sup> Donald Horne, *Into the Open*, p. 128.

<sup>54</sup> Geoffrey Dutton, 'British Subject', *Nation*, 6/4/1963, pp. 15–16.

of Patrick White, in Horne's opinion Dutton possessed the style and substance he hoped would gain wide acceptance in a mature Australia.<sup>55</sup>

Boyd's ideas, meanwhile, mirrored Horne's. He believed an 'articulate intellectual opposition' was taking shape.<sup>56</sup> 'The product that the world is craving,' said Boyd, is no longer wool or natural gas or iron or bauxite, but 'brains', and 'the one precious thing in this old world is the new idea'. By ideas he meant, not 'half-baked notions and gimmicks', but 'the real stuff of creative progression which will give us eventually a real Australian civilization'; a civilization, it need hardly be added, that was not 'second-hand British, second-hand American, or second-hand, second-rate, second-best anything else'.<sup>57</sup> He declared that 'we have no real civilization unless we express the realities of our own life in this unique place': it should be a modern expression and 'an architecture of ideas'.<sup>58</sup> Groping towards something uniquely Australian was not in itself unique, as we have clearly seen. However, Boyd had no interest in grounding his idea of the nation in a sentimentalized, hackneyed past viewed by too many as a joke. It had to be of itself and of its time. Judith Wright was another who understood this, as we shall see – she was less of a modernist than Boyd, more of a naturalist, but she had her eyes firmly fixed on the same aspirations.<sup>59</sup>

In *The Australian Ugliness* (1960), Boyd lamented that 'there can be few other nations which are less certain than Australia as to what they are and where they are'.<sup>60</sup> Horne described Boyd's book as an 'onslaught on the Australian condition'.<sup>61</sup> Barry Humphries, meanwhile, satirised it as *Robin Boyd's Ugliness*, describing it as an example of a raft of new books forcing Australians to 'accept their intrinsic worthlessness'.<sup>62</sup> Denigrating what he termed 'featurism' – 'the subordination of the essential whole and

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<sup>55</sup> For more on Dutton and White, see Chapter 9.

<sup>56</sup> Robin Boyd, *Artificial Australia*, Boyer Lectures, Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1967, p. 2. Boyd had designed Manning Clark's house in Canberra in 1953, the architect being chosen by Clark's wife Dymphna, who admired his modernist style; Mark McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity*, pp. 309–11.

<sup>57</sup> Robin Boyd, *Artificial Australia*, p. 9.

<sup>58</sup> Robin Boyd, *Artificial Australia*, pp. 9–11.

<sup>59</sup> See Chapter 10.

<sup>60</sup> Robin Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness*, Melbourne, Vic.: Text Publishing Company, 2010 (first published 1960), p. 71

<sup>61</sup> Donald Horne, *The Story of the Australian People*, p. 289.

<sup>62</sup> Barry Humphries, *The Australian*, 4/6/1966, p. 22; cited in Anne Pender, *One Man Show*, p. 147.

the accentuation of selected separate features' – Boyd saw the basis of the Australian Ugliness to be 'an unwillingness to be committed on the level of ideas'. When an Australian adds a kitsch, decorative element to his or her house, an element lacking function and boldly inappropriate to the context of the Australian environment, we see how featurism fails at the level of ideas and leads to an ugly and soulless architectural landscape. 'Shuffling about vigorously' in the middle of the road, Australia, said Boyd, needed to start 'valuing her own ideas more highly, encouraging more of them and gradually building up a climate of confidence and self-respect' if she wanted to 'build up her mental development to match her muscles'. As it was, Australia was stuck in an anti-intellectual rut that not only precluded the development of ideas but, even worse, a national soul: 'the universal visual art, the art of shaping the human environment, is an intellectual, ethical and emotional exercise as well as a means of expression'. The Australian ugliness, he said, began with 'the fear of reality' and 'satisfaction with veneer and cosmetic effects'; it ended 'in betrayal of the element of love and a chill near the root of national self-respect'.<sup>63</sup>

Boyd yearned for an Australian architectural vernacular that responded to the specific Australian environment and expressed, without recourse to fake effects, what it meant to be Australian. In this way, he was expressing a Platonic ideal: a 'realistic' and 'natural' expression of a place or an idea. Whilst a Melburnian – whom Horne might term a 'social improver', an 'Australianist', a believer 'in the perfectibility of mankind'<sup>64</sup> – nevertheless Boyd here was showing 'Sydney' traits, emphasising high culture, cosmopolitanism and Platonic reason. James says that for Anderson, 'networking mainly with Plato', 'realism was the bedrock and idealism the aberration'.<sup>65</sup> Realism, said Anderson, 'presupposes as the formal solution of any problem the interaction of complex things'.<sup>66</sup> Boyd was in agreement: he

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<sup>63</sup> Robin Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness*, pp. 19/189/265.

<sup>64</sup> Donald Horne, *The Lucky Country*, p. 231.

<sup>65</sup> Clive James, 'Renegade at the lectern'.

<sup>66</sup> John Anderson, cited in Clive James, 'Renegade at the lectern'.

declared that Plato had made ‘what must be the first recorded attack on Featurism when he explained the need in every work of art for unity: the cohesion and interrelation of all elements, as in nature’.<sup>67</sup>

Boyd took Australia to task in a manner suggesting a country which could take the criticism and learn from it. His argument was not sweetened for public consumption: he was subjecting Australia to close critical scrutiny, just as Anderson had prescribed. Most Australian intellectuals, Horne argued, spent their time bemoaning the Australian people’s ‘unadventurousness’, but ‘considering the quite preposterous nature’ of many of their ideas, the people’s antipathy towards them was ‘not necessarily stupid’. In general, he thought, one could agree with ordinary Australians’ opinion that ‘most of what is pumped out of the word factories is ‘bullshit’.<sup>68</sup> But not in the case of Boyd, who challenged orthodoxy. Why *should* the nation be ugly? We can do better, he argued.

It was typical of Horne to remove blame from the Australian people: the people would *like* to think, but were let down by the failure of intellectuals and politicians to present them with ideas worth thinking about. Berating the ‘mindlessness triumphant’ evident in the upper levels of society, he said that ‘whatever intellectual excitement there might be down below, at the top the tone is so banal that to a sophisticated observer the flavour of democratic life in Australia might seem depraved, a victory of the anti-mind’.<sup>69</sup> In 1975 he published a pamphlet, following the dismissal of the Whitlam government, entitled ‘Let the people think’, and Mark Thomas argues this is ‘one of the most compelling and consistent themes in all his books’, calling Horne’s view of the Australian people ‘romantic populism’.<sup>70</sup> Australia had ‘become one of the few countries in the world’, said Horne, ‘in which one could get away with blaming the ordinary people (for) the inadequacy of the elites’.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Robin Boyd, *The Australian Ugliness*, p. 149.

<sup>68</sup> Donald Horne, *The Lucky Country*, pp. 34–5.

<sup>69</sup> Donald Horne, *The Lucky Country*, p. 11.

<sup>70</sup> Mark Thomas, ‘Australian thinkers: Donald Horne’, pp. 172–7.

<sup>71</sup> Donald Horne, *The Next Australia*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1970, p. 21.

Thomas argues that this angle ‘sits uneasily with the ironic, sardonic, sceptical, quizzical elements in the rest of his thinking’.<sup>72</sup> A tension can thus be seen between Horne’s criticism of Australia and his praise for Australians. Horne said that he did not have ‘a belief in the necessary wisdom of the people’, as such, but that he sought to ‘counter Australian elite views of the necessary *un*wisdom of the people’.<sup>73</sup> He pointed out that Frenchmen who were critical of de Gaulle ‘didn’t excuse him by saying: ‘but what can you expect in a country like ours?’” Likewise, critics of the President of the United States did not shrug and suggest that ‘he is what he is because that’s all such a lousy country deserves’.<sup>74</sup> It was up to politicians to serve the Australian people in a manner suitable to their situation. Likewise, intellectuals had to present ideas worthy of consideration to the Australian people. Horne said of Billy Hughes, of whom he wrote a biography, that at his ‘centre’ was ‘electrical turbulence in an empty space’. He depicted Hughes as an energetic and dynamic character, obsessed with ‘continually making, and re-making, his own legend’. But at the centre of this was, basically, nothing: no worthwhile ideas, no intellectual heft.<sup>75</sup> For Hughes, we might read Australia: the space at the heart of Australia, which lacked any substance, needed to be filled with ideas, and it was this Horne set out to do.

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<sup>72</sup> Mark Thomas, ‘Australian thinkers: Donald Horne’, pp. 172–7.

<sup>73</sup> Donald Horne to ‘Mark Pierce’; Horne’s emphasis.

<sup>74</sup> Donald Horne, *The Next Australia*, p. 22.

<sup>75</sup> Donald Horne, *In Search of Billy Hughes*, Melbourne: Macmillan, 1979; cited in Mark Thomas, ‘Australian thinkers: Donald Horne’, pp. 172–7.

iv) Asia and the 'New Nationalism': 'Australia's great opportunity'

Horne was hunting for ideas unburdened by the crippling intellectual baggage of Britishness and imperial loyalism. His friend Douglas McCallum, evacuated from Singapore in the debacle of 1942, had subsequently penned a withering appraisal of British military bungling; tearing into 'myopic fools' and 'hollow men' who displayed 'blockheaded refusal to revise strategy' and an 'antiquated Victorian imperialist outlook', all the while insisting, '*ad nauseam*', on 'the servile status of the Malay'. The British had failed 'to appreciate the hostility borne their alien rule', and their unfair system's 'only justification', 'faith in the celestial mission and the destiny of the chosen British few', was a fraud.<sup>76</sup> Faith in Britain thus undermined, the wholesale importation and replication of its culture and traditions seemed no longer to be the answer. Horne dismissed contemporary British culture, with the honourable exception of Evelyn Waugh, as offering little to the Australian: 'where England shone brightest,' he said, recalling his time as an expatriate in the early fifties, 'was as a splendid living museum where I would be able to feel part of a continuing "tradition"'.<sup>77</sup> However, none of this glorious tradition could actually forge much of an exemplary future, either for Britain itself, or, of course, for Australia.

Others, as we have seen, used the war as a metaphor for Australia's fight for cultural independence; but Horne had no time for the Melbourne meliorists' dreams of post-war reconstruction: 'hot with culture', they wanted to foist it on the masses. He was withering in his disdain for Christesen's 1945 declaration in *Meanjin* that 'proposals had been placed before the Prime Minister' and 'the public spirit... aroused' – 'who', Horne asked contemptuously, 'really thinks you can plan a literary movement?'<sup>78</sup> He said that he and his Andersonian friends wasted little space 'even bothering' with attacks on mateship, the bush and the other accoutrements of cultural nationalism, although 'when we did have a go we didn't spare the adjectives', declaring 'Australian folk roots' to be 'amongst the most

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<sup>76</sup> Douglas McCallum in the pages of *Honi Soit*, cited in Donald Horne, *Confessions of a New Boy*, p. 30.

<sup>77</sup> Donald Horne, *Confessions of a New Boy*, p. 355.

<sup>78</sup> Donald Horne, 'Some cultural elites in Australia', pp. 77–8.

reactionary and racially bigoted in the world'.<sup>79</sup> He argued that 'the rhetoric of the old rural and mateship nationalism' had 'collapsed': 'no one convincingly retranslated the rhetoric of mateship' into an acceptable modern version.<sup>80</sup> Certainly not Ward. But even as the editor who removed the infamous slogan 'Australia for the White Man' from *The Bulletin's* masthead,<sup>81</sup> he struggled with the conceptualization of a replacement for the 'tyranny of the bush'.<sup>82</sup> He later claimed that at the time he wrote his essay 'The New Nationalism', he 'had never seriously thought' about what the term 'nationalism' might mean, and thus took himself off to the State Library to look it up.<sup>83</sup>

The answer lay in Asia. Mads Clausen has written about Horne's 'finding' Asia, and this discovery 'has come to exemplify political and intellectual currents of the late 1950s and 1960s, especially where the Australian-Asian nexus is concerned'.<sup>84</sup> His published essays of the time concentrated on the erosion of British influence, on the one hand, and its replacement with an Asian focus, on the other, as their titles suggest: 'Living with Asia' (also the title of a chapter in *The Lucky Country*); 'Australia looks around'; 'South East Asia – the Australian view'; 'The New Nationalism'; 'A new foreign policy role for Australia'.<sup>85</sup> He maintained that for most of the twentieth century 'Australians did not think about Asia', except 'in their submerged catastrophic moods'. Now, however, they were being forced to do so, with the future of China being of 'crucial importance' to Australia's own future.<sup>86</sup> Australia's traditional view of Asia, he said, 'has been either to ignore it, to hate it or to fear it'. The latter two emotions stemmed from the (real or perceived) threat of Asia, but the former was enabled by Australians 'imagining themselves as 'British''. Now, however, Australians could unburden themselves of this fallacy, and they needed to be bold in the

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<sup>79</sup> Donald Horne, *Into the Open*, p. 23.

<sup>80</sup> Donald Horne, 'The New Nationalism', *The Bulletin*, 5/10/1968, p. 36.

<sup>81</sup> 'The compositor pulled that line out with tweezers, held it up like an extracted tooth, and then threw it onto the waste metal box for remelting'; Donald Horne, *Into the Open*, p. 46. Horne edited *The Bulletin* in 1961/2 and again 1967–72.

<sup>82</sup> Donald Horne, *The Story of the Australian People*, p. 217.

<sup>83</sup> Donald Horne, *Into the Open*, p. 160.

<sup>84</sup> Mads Clausen, 'Donald Horne finds Asia', in David Walker and Agnieszka Sobocinska (eds), *Australia's Asia: From Yellow Peril to Asian Century*, Crawley, WA: University of Western Australia Publishing, 2012, p. 315.

<sup>85</sup> Articles not referenced previously: Donald Horne, 'Living with Asia', *Observer*, 7/3/1959; 'Australia looks around', *Foreign Affairs*, 1966, pp. 447–8/451; 'A new foreign policy role for Australia', *Life*, 15/4/1968, pp. 16–18; Donald Horne Papers, Box MLK 2177.

<sup>86</sup> Donald Horne, 'Australia looks around', pp. 447–8/451.

manner of their doing so. What was required was the ‘destruction of those remaining symbols of ‘Britishry’ which still foster illusions about what matters in life, or even about where we are on the map’. The key issue created by this reliance on a British self-image was that it kept Australia in a state of provincialism, ‘not fully formed’ and ‘not fully caring who we are’. ‘If we haven’t decided who we are’, he asked, ‘how can we tell other people about ourselves?’<sup>87</sup>

Horne believed that Australia must become a Republic: the shock ‘shaking away’ provincialism and replacing it with ‘greater self-confidence’. The whites-only immigration policy should be reformed, and Australia have its own flag, honours system and anthem.<sup>88</sup> He also argued that ‘the aspirations of fraternalism’, Australia’s strongest tradition, should become central to her foreign policy. Australia’s ‘national self-definition’ would be transformed by a more ‘fraternal’ role played among Asian neighbours, and the country should ‘proclaim itself as one of the entrepreneurs of egalitarian social and economic revolution in Southeast Asia’.<sup>89</sup> He quoted a Filipino senator in support of his case: ‘there must be something in this booming economy and this restless society, in the very sense of being young and being important, that can be a lesson for Asians and that can help them speed their social revolution’.<sup>90</sup> He proposed that a ‘conscripted Australian peace Corps’ of 10,000 young Australians should be sent out to Asia every year to work in ‘well-organized training expeditions, working on the same rates as our servicemen’ and having their own homecoming parades at the end of their tours.<sup>91</sup> He was jettisoning the passive cynicism of Andersonianism and replacing it with an active generation of ideas.<sup>92</sup>

Horne was proud that he had argued for the benefits of an ‘Asian future’ from as far back as his editorship of *The Observer*. The ‘cocky pundits’ of the eighties and nineties, he said, ‘had thought it was

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<sup>87</sup> Donald Horne, ‘A new foreign policy role for Australia’, p. 16.

<sup>88</sup> Donald Horne, ‘What makes Australia tick?’, draft of article, publication unknown, 1966/7, Donald Horne Papers, Box MLK 2174; and ‘Everybody’s turn to be a nationalist’, *The Bulletin*, 30/12/1972, p. 31.

<sup>89</sup> Donald Horne, ‘A new foreign policy role for Australia’, pp. 16–7.

<sup>90</sup> Senator Raul S. Manglapus, quoted in Donald Horne, ‘A new foreign policy role for Australia’, p. 17.

<sup>91</sup> Donald Horne, ‘A new foreign policy role for Australia’, p. 18.

<sup>92</sup> The generation of new ideas of this kind became a feature of Horne’s late writings – see for example *Ideas for a Nation*, Sydney: Pan Books, 1989 and *Ten Steps to a More Tolerant Australia*, Camberwell, Vic.: Penguin, 2003.



they who had discovered ‘Asia’, but back in 1958 ‘the idea of Asia’ had become one of *The Observer’s* ‘special lines’. He claimed his essay ‘Living with Asia’ (1959) was a ‘bold attempt to make the idea of Asia seem normal for Australians, as something they had to think about for themselves’.<sup>93</sup> A century or more of distrust and fear of Asia was not easy to overcome. At *The Bulletin* the focus on ‘normalisation’ continued; it is clearly visible in *The Lucky Country*, too, and he filled *Quadrant*, he said, with ‘lashings of Asia’.<sup>94</sup> He was not, though, alone in his emphasis on Asia at this time.<sup>95</sup> Australia’s ‘Asian future’ had also been spruiked in the pages of *Meanjin* as far back as during the war. R. Ormsby Martin published two 1943 articles on Chinese culture and ‘Australia’s opportunity’ in China; he argued that the war had ‘begun to make Australians realize that they are a Pacific people’; geographically ‘Australia belongs to the world of East Asia’ – the Pacific was where ‘Australia’s destiny must lie’.<sup>96</sup> Ormsby Martin was thinking about ways to define and understand Australia in the post-Singapore world; ‘looking around’, as Horne later advocated,<sup>97</sup> he wanted Australia to turn its gaze outwards and search for ways to ‘rise above a colonial and parochial version of European civilization, and to transcend the barriers of a narrow nationalism’.<sup>98</sup> In keeping with *Meanjin’s* stance, he believed the Pacific War provided the opportunity. And it is notable that meliorist *Meanjin* would push this view.

Talking about change, however, did not make it happen. Australians during the war years were certainly not of a mind to embrace Asia. Two decades later, and the message was still a hard one to sell. ‘Our first need in Australia may be to have our own social revolution’, said Horne, ‘a revolution of the generations’, so that ‘we can again confront ourselves, and Asia, confident in new ideals’.<sup>99</sup> Clausen argues that he ‘invoked an embryonic national culture with characteristics still to be defined and symbols waiting

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<sup>93</sup> Donald Horne, *Into the Open*, pp. 25/6; emphasis Horne’s.

<sup>94</sup> Donald Horne, *Into the Open*, p. 115.

<sup>95</sup> See James Curran and Stuart Ward, ‘Into Asia’, in *The Unknown Nation*, pp. 154–60.

<sup>96</sup> R. Ormsby Martin, ‘China, past and present: Australia’s opportunity’, *Meanjin*, vol. 2, no. 1, Autumn 1943, p. 46; see also: R. Ormsby Martin, ‘An introduction to Chinese Culture: China’s Unity’, *Meanjin*, vol. 2, no. 2, Winter 1943, pp. 46–8.

<sup>97</sup> Donald Horne, ‘Australia looks around’.

<sup>98</sup> R. Ormsby Martin, ‘China, past and present: Australia’s opportunity’, p. 46.

<sup>99</sup> Donald Horne, ‘A new foreign policy role for Australia’, p. 18.

to made'.<sup>100</sup> In 'The New Nationalism' he had a go at imparting these characteristics, but said that there still existed a 'great emptiness' at the heart of Australia. Australians, as Horne saw it, were filled with a 'great yearning' to be led by politicians who could help them find the new self-definition required,<sup>101</sup> but he himself struggled to adapt such a definition he could be happy with. 'New' nationalism suggested a foregoing of previous iterations: nationalism having been a dirty word, pertaining to xenophobia and parochialism, not to mention wattles and wallabies. 'New' nationalism had to be outward-looking and cosmopolitan: a 'modest' nationalism, he called it, or a 'nationalism of internationalism'.<sup>102</sup> 'Prejudices of race and nation' must be jettisoned; the nation needed to be made to 'seem good' by looking 'out to other peoples'.<sup>103</sup> He got in a bit of a muddle: 'there is no *the* new nationalism', he said, merely 'a number of ways of looking at events each of which has elements of something you might describe as nationalism'.<sup>104</sup>

Horne was not very close to solving the riddle of the 'unknown nation', as Curran and Ward term it: in 'New Nationalism', they write, he had formulated a 'nationalism without a nationalist history'. He pinpointed the need for identity, but at heart the very concept of a collective identity was repellent to him as a pluralist. But something needed to replace the pervasive influence of Britain and British symbols, which (Curran and Ward again) 'for so long' had 'answered Australia's need for a racial and cultural identity'.<sup>105</sup> Australia was now being *forced* to 'look around' as this influence waned, and for this reason Horne found himself a nationalist; a role, like that of the public intellectual, he had previously disdained.

But not much seemed to be happening. The Liberals stayed in power and Horne was disappointed with Menzies' heirs, Holt, Gorton and McMahon, even if Gorton had co-opted the idea of 'New

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<sup>100</sup> Mads Clausen, 'Donald Horne finds Asia', p. 314.

<sup>101</sup> Donald Horne, 'The New Nationalism', p. 38.

<sup>102</sup> Such a definition recalls the hopes of Nettie and Vance Palmer – see Chapter 3.

<sup>103</sup> Donald Horne, 'Everybody's turn to be a nationalist', *The Bulletin*, 30/12/1972, p. 31.

<sup>104</sup> Donald Horne, 'Which New Nationalism?' *Nation Review*, 8-14/6/1973, p. 1047.

<sup>105</sup> James Curran and Stuart Ward, *The Unknown Nation*, pp. 71–2.

Nationalism'.<sup>106</sup> Indeed, it seems like Gorton was one of the few to actually take up Horne's slogan: his big idea seemed to gain little cultural or political currency, seldom used or discussed.<sup>107</sup> Casting for alternatives, as early as 1968 Horne was praising Whitlam for his 'right belief' in 'modern styles, involvement with Asia and the other characteristics of those who walk soberly down the centre of the path of progress'.<sup>108</sup> He argued that the idea of 'Improvement' was the central theme of Australian history, leading to change and progress since the 1830s. The 'Improvers' came from 'the liberal-radical centre' (the centre, not the left, 'is the place where progress happens')<sup>109</sup> which had been stifled by the emergence of the two-party system, leading to the victory of 'Authority' and the Menzies era.<sup>110</sup> Whitlam, though, was the 'great articulator of Improvement':<sup>111</sup> like Christesen and so many other intellectuals, Horne believed his victory in 1972 heralded the change they had been waiting for.

For Horne, it was especially the engagement with Asia that could be the transformative aspect of the new era. Always keen to give credit to the Australian people, he argued that it had not been politicians who had sparked change, but the people themselves, who, in regaining the long-lost 'initiative' of the 1890s, allowed protest to once more take its place as an important part of the democratic process.<sup>112</sup> Horne's embrace of a Labor government was the culmination of his slow Leftwards shift since university days.<sup>113</sup> It was his desire to see Australia connected to the wider world that pushed this change. He recalled a meeting at a 1965 seminar in Kuala Lumpur with a British diplomat, who told him that

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<sup>106</sup> See, for example: Horne's critique of Holt in 'Holt – an Australian tragedy', *The Bulletin*, 23/12/1967; criticism of Gorton in 'O Captain! Our Captain!', *The Bulletin*, 7/8/1971; and of McMahon in 'The end of the era of Menzies', *Bulletin*, 9/12/1972.

<sup>107</sup> It is hard to gauge just how much the term 'New Nationalism' was used, but a search on Trove comes up with very few instances of its usage in newspapers and periodicals.

<sup>108</sup> Donald Horne, 'What's left of Whitlam?', *The Bulletin*, 11/5/1968, p. 23.

<sup>109</sup> Donald Horne, 'The End of the Age of Menzies', *The Bulletin*, 9/12/1972, p. 18. The theme of 'Improvement' continued until the end of Horne's life: in 2003 he was talking, in classic Horne fashion, about the 'New Improvement'; *Ten Steps to a More Tolerant Australia*, 2003, in *Selected Writings*, pp. 268 ff.

<sup>110</sup> Donald Horne, *The Story of the Australian People*, pp. 41–2/217.

<sup>111</sup> Donald Horne, *The Story of the Australian People*, p. 274.

<sup>112</sup> Donald Horne, *The Story of the Australian People*, p. 274.

<sup>113</sup> Donald Horne to 'Mark Pierce', 20/6/1985; in this letter he outlined his shifting political affiliations, describing his early position as 'liberal-conservative'. In *Selected Writings* Nick Horne labels his father's politics 'radical conservative' in these early years, whilst he described himself at the end of his life as a 'secular, liberal humanist'; *Dying: A Memoir*, in *Selected Writings*, p. 286.

Australians might perhaps be ‘the only true Asians’, being ‘committed to the area, but still maintaining some detachment’ from its rivalries and perils.<sup>114</sup>

Impressed with the idea of political or regional ‘detachment’, Horne believed this could work in a literary sense as well. For too long blighted by ‘humdrum language’, Australians were stuck in a rut without the imaginative means to escape, lacking ‘the confidence to define themselves in some new way when they look outside their continent’.<sup>115</sup> This absence of self-confidence, a corollary of the nation’s lack of maturity, was fundamental in holding Australia back, and intellectuals needed to find ways to express a modern Australian reality, resisting the temptation to resort to the old, discredited tropes. In other words, a more sophisticated language needed to be developed.

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<sup>114</sup> Donald Horne, ‘A new foreign policy role for Australia’, p. 17.

<sup>115</sup> Donald Horne, ‘Australia’s search for identity’.

v) 'The laconic courage of experience': An Australian literary voice

Most Australian children loved their sport; Donald Horne loved his books and using his wits: 'to be myself was to be clever', he said of his youth in the Hunter Valley. But he also loved having a 'Good Time': surfing and frolicking with family on the beach at Cronulla every January, 'getting out of last year's skin' (peeling off the sunburnt skin 'with delight'), bearing witness to 'a truth that was self-evident to us every day of the year: the most important part of human destiny was to have a good time'. At school he preferred the girls and boys 'who liked to have fun'; he 'detested all serious people' – 'sobersides with nothing to say' – and it dawned on him as a child that 'to talk about the things one respected most it was sometimes necessary to make fun of them'. The milieu of the Muswellbrook District Rural School was 'optimistic, progressive and radical'.<sup>116</sup> Anderson might have shaped his ideas at university, but just as lasting and perhaps even more powerful was the legacy of an Australian youth in which intellectual endeavour embraced the spirit of having fun and of bringing an amused scepticism to bear on the world. As the vituperation of his early writings gave way to a quieter, more considered approach following the publication of *The Lucky Country*, his politics liberalising at the same time, he returned to the optimistic spirit of his childhood both to investigate those formative years and to find an idea of Australia that could sit more comfortably and confidently in the modern world.

He found this voice to lasting effect in the first volume of his autobiography, *The Education of Young Donald* (1967). Pleased that puritanism in Australian life was beginning to lose out, in *The Lucky Country* he had noted that 'the desire for simple pleasure, so strong in Australians' had had little impact on the 'official view of life', accounting for the 'spuriousness and boredom of official statements'.<sup>117</sup> *Education*, conceived as a *Bildungsroman*, an 'Education Novel', sought to rectify this; he described the book as a search for a 'way to live' and a 'philosophy of life'.<sup>118</sup> In many ways it served as a far greater

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<sup>116</sup> Donald Horne, *The Education of Young Donald*, pp. 74/12/81/76.

<sup>117</sup> Donald Horne, *The Lucky Country*, p. 32.

<sup>118</sup> Donald Horne to 'Mark Pierce', 20/6/1985.

fulfilment of Horne's goals than *The Lucky Country*. In portraying the 'education' of the artfully confected 'Young Donald' he was, said Vincent Buckley, 'not primarily recalling, but composing': 'patching facts together in what was really a *literary way*', creating 'the composition of a personal past which, if successful, may compare also the society in which it happened'.<sup>119</sup> Horne, 'delighted' with Buckley's comments, said that 'one reason I am so pleased with myself about this book is that it shows how literary techniques can still be used for serious intellectual purposes'; he was aiming for 'cultural diagnosis', or a 'sociological-psychological' document, as he termed it. Professing 'the reformed Andersonian's concern' with a 'real theme', Horne continued to lean on his formative years to build, not just an intellectual, but a literary treatment of Australia.<sup>120</sup> If, as we have seen, he extolled the virtues of Australia taking an engaged but 'detached' role in world affairs (and especially Asia) he also applied the idea to Australians' appraisal of *themselves*. Buckley said of the writing in *Education* that 'the love he expresses goes with the deliberate detachment which he uses as the very means of its expression'.<sup>121</sup> In this way, the memoirist could eschew sentiment and nationalism. Adamant that he would avoid 'literature-as-emotion', he said that this desire was, 'in the present state of Australian creative writing, un-Australian'.<sup>122</sup>

Horne's recollections were not those of a bleeding-heart. Nor did he use his memoirs as an exercise in self-justification. His still-sceptical voice, honed since boyhood, could be used to cut out unseemly sensitivity, focussing on intellectual and cultural development, illustrating a 'sentimental education' in the Flaubertian, rather than the Australian, sense. Buckley said that Horne was 'not interested in past depravation or resentments', but rather 'the shape of the past self'. He strived for an objective and austere gaze at his past, 'and if the result has sometimes the flatness of reportage, that too is a feature of its honesty'.<sup>123</sup> This style was designed to give Australians an idea of themselves via the

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<sup>119</sup> Vincent Buckley, review of *The Education of Young Donald* in *The Bulletin*, quoted by Brian Stonier, Sun Books publisher, in list of quotations for marketing purposes sent to Donald Horne, 27/8/1968, Donald Horne Papers, Box MLK 3525.

<sup>120</sup> Donald Horne to Frank Knopfelmacher, 12/2/1967; emphasis Horne's.

<sup>121</sup> Vincent Buckley, *Bulletin* review of *The Education of Young Donald*.

<sup>122</sup> Donald Horne to Geoffrey Dutton, 21/11/1967, Donald Horne Papers, Box MLK 2135.

<sup>123</sup> Vincent Buckley, quoted in Donald Horne, manuscript for educational broadcast on *The Education of Young Donald*, ABC Queensland, 19/4/1971, Donald Horne Papers, Box MLK 2135.

portrayal of his own formative years. He said he aimed ‘to show what social history can look like when told through people’.<sup>124</sup> He called his book a ‘sociography’, and John Colmer notes his preoccupation with ‘creating the life of a past society as well as the past of a single personality’, thus setting him apart from other Australian autobiographers. He was, as Colmer says, ‘fascinated with social change’, studding his memoirs with accounts of the growing popularity of the cinema in the 1930s, changes in language and idioms, and other ‘transformations of Australian society’. The ‘landmarks’ of Horne’s life, says Colmer, were not personal, but ‘public and social’.<sup>125</sup> In this way he seemed to be fulfilling what Mark Thomas said of him: ‘we may be left suspecting of Horne what D.H. Lawrence suggested of his hero in *Kangaroo*, that he has wrestled with the problem of himself and called it Australia’.<sup>126</sup> In the same passage in that novel Lawrence remarks that, while you may ‘feel free’ in Australia, the problem is that underneath this sense of democratic freedom is, well, not much:

But what then? The *vacancy* of this freedom is almost terrifying. In the openness and the freedom this new chaos, this litter of bungalows and tin cans scattered for miles and miles, this Englishness all crumbled out into formlessness and chaos.<sup>127</sup>

Berating Australian ugliness, Lawrence equates it with his antipathy to democracy. Elsewhere he had described liberty, equality and fraternity as ‘the three-fanged serpent’;<sup>128</sup> democracy, meanwhile, ‘stinks’ – ‘it is the will of the louse’.<sup>129</sup> A country such as Australia, with its egalitarian identity, was guaranteed to rile him. He ridiculed the ‘absence of inner meaning’ in Australians: ‘no high command, no interest in anything’, concomitant to the ‘great sense of vacant spaces’ – ‘utterly uninteresting’.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Donald Horne, *The Education of Young Donald*, ‘Foreword – Telling the story’.

<sup>125</sup> John Colmer, *Australian Autobiography: The Personal Quest*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1989, pp. 71/73–4.

<sup>126</sup> Mark Thomas, ‘Australian thinkers: Donald Horne’, citing D.H. Lawrence, *Kangaroo*, p. 27.

<sup>127</sup> D.H. Lawrence, *Kangaroo*, p. 26; emphasis Lawrence’s.

<sup>128</sup> D.H. Lawrence to Bertrand Russell, 15/7/1915, in Diana Trilling (ed.), *The Selected Letters of D.H. Lawrence*, New York: Farrar, Strauss & Cudahy, 1958, p. 112.

<sup>129</sup> D.H. Lawrence to Lady Cynthia Asquith, 16/8/1915, *Selected Letters*, p. 114.

<sup>130</sup> D.H. Lawrence, *Kangaroo*, pp. 26–7.

Australians, 'so healthy', were 'almost imbecile': 'I feel if I lived in Australia forever I should never open my mouth once to say one word that meant anything'.<sup>131</sup> Lawrence's views, based on a couple of months in Australia mostly spent at a cottage called 'Wyewurk' eighty kilometres south of Sydney in Thirroul, found ready adherents among many Australian intellectuals in the following decades, his themes repeated so often and so eagerly they became clichéd renderings of Australia and Australians. We see them echoed in the work of Clark, of White, of Boyd and of many others.

Horne was certainly an admirer of Lawrence, even though he fitted the description in *The Lucky Country* of 'a person who doesn't like ordinary people to think they are as good as he is, or to enjoy some of the things he enjoys himself'; the type Horne rightly pointed out 'will not like Australia'.<sup>132</sup> But in later life he dismissed any concerns with the anti-democratic, downright fascist elements of *Kangaroo*, declaring the novel to be, in fact, 'a Socratic dialogue' about authority and the nature of 'human relations'.<sup>133</sup> Lawrence's interest in making something tangible and valuable from the raw materials of a seemingly empty national cultural life was Horne's own objective, as it was for so many Australian intellectuals – but their enthusiasm to endorse the hastily assembled ideas of an eminent visitor carries more than a hint of the cringe. Judith Wright, as we shall see, was a notable exception, seeking to understand the continent from a perspective other than of a transplanted European. For her, the vast spaces were not a metaphor for intellectual emptiness, but a living ancient land crowded with meaning.<sup>134</sup>

Lawrence, in fact, found much to admire in Australia, not least the 'concise, laconic' way with words on display in *The Bulletin*, which he praised for its depiction of the 'the sheer momentaneous life of the continent'. It was 'not mere anecdotage'; there was 'no consecutive thread': it portrayed 'only the

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<sup>131</sup> D.H. Lawrence to Else Jaffe, 13/6/1922, *Selected Letters*, p. 199.

<sup>132</sup> Donald Horne, *The Lucky Country*, p. 6.

<sup>133</sup> Donald Horne, talk given at the UNSW 'Great Books Club', 1996, cited at the D.H. Lawrence Society of Australia website, <http://www.dhlawrencesocietyaustralia.com.au/j9.htm>; accessed 8/7/2014. He perhaps betrayed some naivety – Lawrence was the man whose self-professed 'great religion' was 'a belief in the blood, the flesh, as being wiser than the intellect'. Some, he said, are 'born fit to govern', and some only 'to be governed'; D.H. Lawrence to Ernest Collings, 17/1/1913 and Lady Cynthia Asquith, 16/8/1915, *Selected Letters*, pp. 46 & 115.

<sup>134</sup> See Chapter 10.



laconic courage of experience'.<sup>135</sup> Horne appropriated such a style, using it so as not to talk down to the people, but to impart their 'momentaneous' lives with meaning. He describes, for example, the moment when 'I Thought my Thought': walking with his father in the Blue Mountains, realising he did not believe in God. These ideas were so important 'that I kept on repeating them to myself for the rest of the walk, so that I would remember them. Now I really felt optimistic about the future'.<sup>136</sup> The voice employed is ironic, teasing, refusing to take itself seriously. We might consider that he is too quick to do himself down, too lacking in seriousness. But although pithy journalese may prevent him from being a literary heavyweight in the mould of White, it helps him avoid the laboured portentousness of Clark, giving his work the fresh and distinctive Australian slant noted with such approval by Lawrence.

On his revelatory (as he describes it) Blue Mountains walk with his father, he had found himself, he says, flummoxed as to how to describe the landscape before his eyes, and he wondered how Keats would have tackled the task. He himself had 'no way', no literary means, of managing it: 'I did not know the names of anything I saw. Australia was an inadequate country, not written about in good literature'.<sup>137</sup> Again, we see the frustration of the articulate and well-read Australian at the paucity of the nation's literary resources. Whilst the cultural nationalists sought to disprove the basic idea at the heart of this assumption, namely the lack of a worthwhile native literary culture, Horne, who fully subscribed to the view that most Australian literature was execrable, aimed to create his own Australian literary vocabulary.<sup>138</sup> In this way, he reflected Clark's ambition, and it is thus perhaps unsurprising that, as he tells us, it was to Dostoevsky he turned, finding in the Russian's works 'storms of conversation' and 'words jumping out of the brain from strange impulses' which, he thought, seemed like 'the real texture of living'.<sup>139</sup> Colmer reflects that 'Donald Horne is no Dostoevsky', and he might have added that neither was Clark.<sup>140</sup> The latter, however,

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<sup>135</sup> D.H. Lawrence, *Kangaroo*, pp. 26/339.

<sup>136</sup> Donald Horne, *The Education of Young Donald*, p. 196.

<sup>137</sup> Donald Horne, *The Education of Young Donald*, p. 196.

<sup>138</sup> Note how both Nettie Palmer and Judith Wright strived to foster the sensibility and language required to understand and describe such Australian scenes – see Chapters 3 and 10.

<sup>139</sup> Donald Horne, *The Education of Young Donald*, p. 325.

<sup>140</sup> John Colmer, *Australian Autobiography*, p. 82.

probably believed he was, whilst Horne, although not a particularly modest man, would no doubt have diffused the idea with a self-deprecating joke. Wit, he said, 'seemed essential as a way of distancing the 'realities' that we create, and thereby constantly reminding ourselves of their hypothetical nature'.<sup>141</sup> He was talking of his earlier writing, but perhaps these words could also apply to his memoir: he was not just trying to remember the Australia of his youth, he was also trying to create a new idea, or at least a new understanding, of Australia itself. Wit was the tool he used to do this.

Horne pointed out that in the polemical commentary of *The Lucky Country* he had still inhabited the persona of 'D.R. Horne, angry shouter' (a key 'character' in the autobiography), whilst in the author of *Education* we see the re-emergence of another persona, 'Young Donald', the 'soft-spoken mumbler of witticisms' who, in *Education's* last chapters (set at university), jostles for primacy with his boisterous alter-ego. This quieter, more reflective 'Donald' was the one he now wished to show the world. He described the genesis of the opening passage of *Education*, in which he depicts his young self, sleeping out on the veranda on a hot night in rural New South Wales. In an earlier essay depicting the scene for the first time, 'angry shouter D.R. Horne' was still trying to butt in, making comment; but in the autobiography, Horne aimed to merely describe it, leaving interpretation to the reader, no hectoring authorial voice getting in the way. 'In the first version,' he said, 'I was concerned with *explaining* the banality of the subject', whilst 'in the second I let the story seem to tell itself'. In other words, he was now trying to show, not tell. The style of the book was 'a very plain one' – 'like water', he said, aspiring to 'a tone of non-intrusive detachment – not the so-called 'detachment' of irony, or of brutality, but the detachment of compassion'. He did not want to 'lay on the emotions too thickly', but hoped readers could 'bring their own emotions with them'; avoiding self-pity and self-importance, he wanted to avoid 'settling old grudges with life, or using past occasion for present advantage'. 'I had conquered D.R. Horne, the angry shouter', he said,

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<sup>141</sup> Donald Horne to 'Mark Pierce', 28/5/1985.

‘and I wanted to compose a work in which a sense of detachment was itself part of the purpose of the book’.<sup>142</sup>

Polemic had given way to a self-consciously literary style, though his claim to having deserted irony is not altogether apparent in a reading of the book. He wished to bring a quality of feeling to the living of Australian lives that could elevate them.<sup>143</sup> He repeats the point over and over in *Education* that he was a young man experiencing life through books: his was an adolescence steeped in a literary sensibility, and his subsequent understanding of ‘Australianness’ was thus a literary one. He had, perhaps, gone some way to fulfilling his professed youthful goal of producing writing which was both literature and political science at the same time.<sup>144</sup> Whilst we would hardly classify his autobiography as the latter, nevertheless he had produced a ‘sociological’ document which also strived to reveal the ‘real texture of living’: the elusive experience of ordinary lives which historians find so hard to re-create. Clark, in his review of *Education*, inevitably picked up on the Dostoevskian element of the book, declaring that Horne ‘was like a Dimitri Karamazov, a man who had had a great dream, who found himself with those who were forever ‘singing soprano in the choir’:

The great interest in the book is to see that he belongs to the mainstream of life – that all that Sydney *Sturm und Drang*, all the talk of a vigorous and creative culture of the few, is just a dream, or, rather, belongs now to the grave-yard; and that he, who managed somehow to survive possession by that evil spirit, must now get back to the roots of his life.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Donald Horne, ABC Queensland broadcast, 19/4/1971.

<sup>143</sup> The attempt to create such a ‘climate of feeling’ was Wright’s goal too, and she was altogether more successful in realising this objective than Horne, as will be shown in Chapter 10.

<sup>144</sup> Donald Horne, *Confessions of a New Boy*, p. 144.

<sup>145</sup> Manning Clark, review of *The Education of Young Donald*, *Overland*, no. 38, March 1968, in Donald Horne Papers, Box MLK 2175.

Clark, therefore, was claiming Horne as a deserter from the elitist 'Sydney' cultural scene. But Horne would remain a pluralist and a believer in the Andersonian idea of a complex and conflicted society, celebrating the 'diversity and fluidity' of Australian cultural life.<sup>146</sup> In hoping that *Education* 'shows how literary techniques can still be used for serious intellectual purposes', it was clear he wanted to tell his story in a way that would make Australians think about themselves afresh, creating a more sophisticated current of Australian thought and feeling.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> 'Introduction', in David Headon, Joy Hooton and Donald Horne (eds), *The Abundant Culture: Meaning and Significance in Everyday Australia*, St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1995, p. xv.

<sup>147</sup> Donald Horne to Geoffrey Dutton, 21/11/1967.

vi) Conclusion: 'Swimming on the surface'

Donald Horne's shifting positions across the decades make it hard to pin him down. His politics changed, his literary style changed, his public persona changed. The various parts he has himself play in *The Education of Young Donald* present a picture of a disinterested actor in his own life; the Hunter Valley, suburban Sydney and the University his various stages. Tim Rowse sees evidence of an 'emerging detachment' that signified 'the beginnings of withdrawal from commitment'. The contesting realities which were a central tenet of Andersonianism would leave him stuck in a rut, displaying, as Rowse puts it, a 'fascination with the critic's power to make and unmake realities', resulting in 'criticism as urbane consumption', the treatment of politics a 'curiously remote spectacle from which intellectuals, in Horne's celebrations of their acuity, remain detached'. Therefore, the crucial weapon in his forties and fifties journalistic armoury, the ironic detachment which was a legacy of his devotion to Anderson, became a millstone restricting his ability to commit to politics in a fully engaged fashion. He could not make the leap of faith required, and thus his ideas could not properly connect. Rowse argues that 'we see in his work the persistence of a whimsical iconoclasm which has been rarely harnessed to clearly stated political goals and strategies'.<sup>148</sup> Disappointing both Left and Right with his failure to commit, he drew the ire of critics such as Rowse. Irony continued to offer him a way out – he was always able to keep his distance.

However, Horne's detachment looked to have been finally shaken off as his Asian vision of Australia's future seemed to find fulfilment with Whitlam's advent. But the dream was ruined as the expected victory of a great 'Improving' government was usurped once more by 'Authority', this time in the shape of Sir John Kerr. The 'troglydtes' who had held Australia back through the Liberal years were once more ascendant.<sup>149</sup> Horne was left, in 1976, mourning the Australian people's betrayal (by electing

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<sup>148</sup> Tim Rowse, 'Culture as myth, criticism as irony: the middle class patriotism of Donald Horne', *Island Magazine*, Summer 1988, pp. 12/20.

<sup>149</sup> Horne referred to the 'troglydte element' of the Liberal Party in 'The End of the Age of Menzies', *The Bulletin*, 9/12/1972, p. 18.

Fraser's government) of 'what might have been their destiny: positively affirming themselves a nation self-confident in its democratic forms'.<sup>150</sup> The stock of optimism he seemed to have been building up since the mid-sixties was shattered, and the political ambivalence of his early career confirmed. Paul White, writing of Horne's absurdist novel *The Permit* (1966), notes how Horne seemed to be 'trying to work out some lingering optimism', only to find that 'satire was the most appropriate mode of living with the ambivalence of wanting to believe in politics, while recognising the futility of that belief'.<sup>151</sup> The events of 1975 confirmed that futility. Horne always fell back on his distrust of politics and politicians, noting that 'fiasco and irony are typical political forms'.<sup>152</sup>

Nevertheless, if his hopes for the political class were dashed, he could still find new ways of articulating the people's experience. But in his endeavour to banish 'humdrum' Australian language and find a suitably literary understanding of nation we would have to conclude that, again, he was not altogether successful. He was not a good enough writer. Phillips' Australian Tradition ran aground, as Horne himself gleefully pointed out, because of the paucity of worthwhile writers offered up as its foundations. Horne, however, was not able to take his place in any sort of canon either: if he tried to formulate a new way of articulating what it meant to be Australian, he ended up presenting only a sociological account of the nation, and as a result his work could not really aspire to the heights of great literature. His 'flat' style of reportage seemed to underline Lawrence's point, that:

This is the land where the unborn souls, strange and not to be known, which shall be born in 500 years, live. A grey foreign spirit. And the people who are here, are not really here: only like ducks that swim on the surface of the pond:

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<sup>150</sup> Donald Horne, *Death of the Lucky Country*, Penguin, Ringwood, Vic.: 1976; in *Selected Writings*, pp. 172–3.

<sup>151</sup> Paul White, 'Towards an intellectual biography', p. 13.

<sup>152</sup> Donald Horne, 'Who called us the Lucky Country?', *The Bulletin*, 12/7/1975, p. 18.

but the land has a 'fourth dimension' and the white people swim like shadows over the surface of it.<sup>153</sup>

It is tempting to see Horne himself as one of those 'swimming on the surface'. While *Education* enjoyed success, subsequent volumes of his memoirs lacked its bite and originality,<sup>154</sup> and it is for polemic and political comment that he is chiefly remembered. The ranting D.R. Horne out-shouted the considered Young Donald, and thus it was not to be Horne himself who would give Australia the sophisticated literary voice for which he yearned. Still, we must conclude that, in his search for meaning in Australia and his contributions to the debate as to the shape and texture of national identity, Horne was responsible for important steps towards a more self-confident, independent and substantial nation. Thus he contributed to the attrition of the cultural cringe in much the same way as his adversaries the cultural nationalists did, even if it fell to others to strike greater blows: most notably Patrick White and Judith Wright, to whom we shall now turn.

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<sup>153</sup> Warren Roberts, James T. Boulton and Elizabeth Mansfield (eds), *Letters of D.H. Lawrence, Volume IV: June 1921 to March 1924*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 238.

<sup>154</sup> Critics have pointed out that subsequent volumes of autobiography could not repeat the artful trick of the first – see John Colmer, *Australian Autobiography*, pp. 82–5.





## CHAPTER 9

### Patrick White: 'The Bags and Iron of Australian life'



Patrick White's writing desk and typewriter, now found in the State Library of New South Wales. His writing life was not necessarily as ordered as this photograph might suggest: he would rise at midnight to write until 4.30 in the morning, 'often ill, scribbling in bed or sitting where he worked in a mess of papers at the kitchen table gasping for breath.'

#### i) Introduction

Of Australian writers, only Patrick White, wrote Chris Wallace-Crabbe in 1961, 'demands to be judged – even if it is to be judged harshly – against the highest standards'.<sup>1</sup> Many Australian critics and readers did judge White harshly, and this, as we shall see, was a source of continual angst and anger on the part of the novelist. He used this to spur on his creative endeavours, taking delight in further antagonising his perceived enemies and railing against the philistinism and mediocrity of Australia. 'Yes,

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Wallace-Crabbe, 'Crucifixion at Sarsaparilla', review of *Riders in the Chariot*, *The Bulletin*, 25/11/1961, pp. 35–6, in Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 345.

I do think we are a mediocre people', he wrote to Marcel Aurousseau: 'our beginnings were mediocre, and from there we went on to make a religion of the second-rate. All the time I am meeting people who explain proudly they have no education, and others who try to disguise the little they have got'.<sup>2</sup> Such words offer a neat summary of White's position on his fellow Australians, and these views inform his writing, his ideas, and his lifelong cantankerous relationship with Australia and Australians. But his writing was also of great importance in the battle against such attitudes, because by stretching and expanding what an Australian novel could say and do, by introducing Australian vernacular culture into the world's canon, he forced his fellow Australians to look at themselves anew; he forced his fellow Australian writers to reconsider their own craft; and he helped create a new and powerful idea of Australia.

Wallace-Crabbe, like so many others in that era taking a close interest in how Australian literature might best achieve maturity, said the weakness of Australian poetry was a 'mistrust of the intellect, of the range which the intellect will encompass, a tendency to let personal reverie, personal observation be enough, to mistrust larger intellectual and metaphysical questions, ranges'.<sup>3</sup> These observations may not surprise us, given what we have seen so far. Wallace-Crabbe wished his contemporaries would 'push' themselves more, asking questions beyond the personal and, 'pressing *beyond* the first answers to subsequent answers'.<sup>4</sup> White's medium was prose, not poetry, and he deeply mistrusted intellectuals, but his engagement with ideas, his willingness to push himself in his art, was what Wallace-Crabbe and others believed was required for Australian letters to take the step up into international prominence.

Christesen understood this and made it clear in a letter to White himself, telling him that he had helped 'improve conditions here by making us aware, in the Kierkegaardian sense'.<sup>5</sup> Such awareness was lost, so Wallace-Crabbe's argument goes, in the personal preoccupations of poets happy to settle for

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<sup>2</sup> Patrick White to Marcel Aurousseau, 10/3/1958, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 350.

<sup>3</sup> Chris Wallace-Crabbe, in interview, Henry Rosenbloom, 'To mark an outline truly', *Farrago*, 4/8/1967, pp. 6/7, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 345.

<sup>4</sup> Chris Wallace-Crabbe, manuscript of interview with Lynne Strahan, undated, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 345; emphasis Wallace-Crabbe's.

<sup>5</sup> Clem Christesen to Patrick White, 29/9/1964, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 350.

easier or simpler reflections. Ward, writing in the mid-sixties, tried to show the stages of Australian literary development, illustrating this through four authors: Joseph Furphy, Henry Handel Richardson, Martin Boyd, and White. Furphy, he said, represented the initial 'violent reaction' against British culture; Richardson, the 'recognition of the problem' – the fact that Australia was caught between two cultures; Boyd, 'by means of deft but light-hearted irony and humour', moved Australia towards 'unforced acceptance' of Australian identity and, crucially, 'its difference from that of England'; whilst White, being 'first a novelist and only incidentally Australian', located the 'mature solution' – like Tolstoy or Hardy, he dealt with 'universal themes in their national settings'.<sup>6</sup> In this way, as Ward saw it, the colonial culture – second-rate, in thrall to the colonising power – was overthrown and replaced with something of maturity. This maturity came in the form of White's bracing modernist style: the dreamscapes and weird visions of *The Aunt's Story* (1948) segueing into the unsettling banality of Australian life in *The Tree of Man* (1955), the mad explorer's journey into the nightmarish heart of Australia in *Voss* (1957) and the outsiders bringing the instability of religious fervour, lonerism, Aboriginal marginalisation and the horrific memories of European genocide into the seemingly cosy confines of the Australian suburbs in *Riders in the Chariot* (1961). The novels that followed, *The Solid Mandala* (1966) and *The Vivisector* (1970), saw artists (or, those with artistic temperaments) seeking to carve art and meaning out of a nation so antipathetic to their sensibilities.

Thus White attained the heights dreamed of by Ward, Phillips and their friends, giving Australia the major writer it so desperately needed, and rubber-stamping the nation's cultural development by bringing home the Nobel Prize. However, his novels depicted an Australia that was uncomfortable, unstable, nightmarish and far from folksy or nationalist. White as standard-bearer in the cultural nationalist mould was certainly a problematic idea. He despised Australia; he wrote about the nation and its people in a starkly pejorative manner; he shrugged off nationalism; and for many years he obdurately

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<sup>6</sup> Russel Ward, 'Colonialism and Culture', published in C.D. Narasimhaiah, *An Introduction to Australian Literature*, Mysore: Jacaranda Press, 1965, pp. 21–7, Russel Ward Papers, Box 51, Folder 4.

avoided literary circles, maintaining a distance that only really began to diminish when he was moving past his peak. Seeing himself very much as an outsider, as he was seen by others, he and his work were not greeted with rapture by his countrymen, even as he received plaudits abroad.

This chapter will show the importance of White's outsider status to his work; the paradoxical need he had for Australia even as he repudiated what it stood for; and how his strong antipathy to intellectuals, coexisting with his disdain for the uneducated and those who denied their education to fit in, shaped his ideas and his understanding of his homeland. Ultimately, though, we will see that, just like the cultural nationalists, White at heart wished to civilise Australia, and as a novelist he sought to do this by creating an idea of the nation. In this he was more successful than most of his contemporaries, and by the end of his life he was playing the role of public intellectual which he had loathed and avoided for so long. White, and the Australia he had created, had far more impact in eroding the cultural cringe than those, like Phillips, who denigrated and distrusted him.

ii) 'A foreigner in my own country'

Tim Winton, reviewing Patrick White's letters, portrays a man who 'ragged' against his country, 'convinced it hated him'.<sup>7</sup> The title of the review, 'Foreign body', is taken from a diary entry written whilst White was stationed with a South African flying squadron in the Sudanese desert in 1941. White described his 'fondness' for the men he was with, something he said he had 'found in few relationships'. But he wondered whether he was 'entitled' to this affection: 'it is like reaching over into a world to which you don't belong, from oil to water... I feel like I am always likely to be this foreign body, always'.<sup>8</sup> It is very common to talk of White in these terms of alienation, especially from Australia, and not least by White himself. There are countless references in his letters, essays, speeches and books to not fitting in, being out-of-place. 'Throughout my life I have been an outcast myself in one way or another', he wrote to his New York publisher Ben Huebsch in 1961: 'first a child with what kind of a strange gift nobody quite knew; then a despised colonial boy in an English public school; finally an artist in horrified Australia – to give just a few instances'.<sup>9</sup> In 1971 he said that if he were to win the Nobel Prize for Literature it would 'embarrass' him 'to be held up to the world as an Australian writer when, apart from the accident of blood, I feel I am temperamentally a cosmopolitan Londoner'.<sup>10</sup> Accepting that very prize two years later (although not in person, his friend Sidney Nolan collecting it for him) he said that, when he and his partner Manoly Lascaris first moved to Castle Hill on the outer edges of Sydney, he had 'never felt such a foreigner', a 'foreigner in my own country'.<sup>11</sup> Over a decade later, as he railed against nuclear armaments, he implored his audience to 'search for the good faith which may help save the world, even if we risk turning ourselves into outsiders in this materialist, muscular society'.<sup>12</sup> The novelist had long seen himself as just such an outsider in such a society; it was an idea he could not but help returning to incessantly.

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<sup>7</sup> Tim Winton, 'Foreign body', *London Review of Books*, 22/6/1995, pp. 18–9.

<sup>8</sup> Patrick White, diary entry, 23/5/1941, in David Marr (ed.), *Patrick White Letters*, Sydney: Random House, 1994, p. 46.

<sup>9</sup> Patrick White to Ben Huebsch, 5/2/1961, *Patrick White Letters*, p. 180.

<sup>10</sup> Patrick White to Frederick Glover, 28/11/1971, *Patrick White Letters*, p. 389.

<sup>11</sup> Patrick White, Nobel acceptance speech, 18/12/1973, *Patrick White Speaks*, p. 43.

<sup>12</sup> Patrick White, 'The role of the Australian citizen in a nuclear war', speech manuscript, 1983, Patrick White Papers, National Library of Australia, Canberra, MS 9982, Box 15, Folder 1.

Australia's unfettered materialism was White's chief bugbear. Ingmar Björkstén – who met him at Castle Hill in 1962 and carried out a full correspondence with him over the next twenty years, becoming one of his champions – says that 'for a long time he was dismissed as peculiar, pretentious, and irrelevant by his countrymen, whose restricted vision and whose limited experience of what human life has to offer he exposed time after time, whilst simultaneously attacking the holy cow they so deeply revere: an uncritical materialism that never questions itself'.<sup>13</sup> There are countless examples in White's writings of this hatred of the materialist and utilitarian world of Australia. 'I don't think I have learnt to *accept* Australia, but to *endure* it', he wrote to Björkstén in 1973.<sup>14</sup> It was a sort of war of attrition he waged with the nation: 'he confronted a monstrous society devoted to material possessions and material pleasure', notes McKernan.<sup>15</sup> This harsh confrontation is depicted in his most famous essay, 'The Prodigal Son' (1958), in which he groaned that 'the march of material ugliness does not raise a quiver from the average nerves'.<sup>16</sup> Materialism is compared to the worlds of literature and of the mind, which are antithetical to the barbarities of utilitarian colonial society. In *Voss*, the music master Topp is derided by that society because 'all he made was music, for which he was continually apologizing, and hoping he might not be called upon to explain what useful purpose his passion served'. The novel's heroine Laura Trevelyan is laughed at by the 'young men' of Sydney society because 'she was given to reading books'; the Sandersons are considered a good family, although 'the one thing' people hold against them is their 'vain and peculiar' bookishness; and Miss Linsey, the Girls' School Headmistress, 'recoils' from poetry, 'almost as if it had been contrived as part of an elaborate practical joke'.<sup>17</sup> As the 'cocky' Rory MacRory, in *The Eye of the Storm*, puts it: 'I only ever believed in what I can see and touch'.<sup>18</sup> Needless to say, he does not believe in literature.

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<sup>13</sup> Ingmar Björkstén, *Patrick White: A General Introduction*, translated from the Swedish by Stanley Gerson, Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1976 (originally published in Sweden, 1973), p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> Patrick White to Ingmar Björkstén, 27/5/1973, *Patrick White Letters*, p. 413; emphasis White's.

<sup>15</sup> Susan McKernan, *A Question of Commitment*, p. 171.

<sup>16</sup> Patrick White, 'The Prodigal Son', April 1958, *Patrick White Speaks*, p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> Patrick White, *Voss*, Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1983 (first published 1957), pp. 30/61/126/404.

<sup>18</sup> Patrick White, *The Eye of the Storm*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1973, p. 485.

White's ambivalence to Australia seems to have been reflected in his low key return after years spent abroad. Arriving back after the war, he was almost a hermit, at least in terms of his participation in the world of letters, holing up with Lascaris in Castle Hill, tending vegetable patches, milking cows and breeding pedigree dogs. Marr says that 'he never had, never did, live in literary circles'.<sup>19</sup> The literary world barely acknowledged him, and he shunned the collegiality of any scene. When *The Tree of Man* was published in 1955 the prevailing reaction of Australia's literary establishment was akin to shock: where had this novel come from; who was this seemingly forgotten man who had written it; had he really been living amongst us all these years? White said approvingly of Marjorie Barnard, who wrote a piece on him for *Meanjin*, that 'until recently, it was quite a rare thing to meet an Australian who knew I had written one novel, let alone four'.<sup>20</sup> Christesen described White as 'something of a mystery man': 'some years ago, in a course of lectures, I wanted to discuss your writings; but your novels were well-nigh unobtainable here, and I could find out very little about you personally'. The editor commissioned Barnard's essay, and they obtained a proof-copy of *The Tree of Man*: 'we were both greatly surprised, and disconcerted, to learn that you were living only twenty miles from Sydney'.<sup>21</sup>

When the literati turned on him, most famously in A.D. Hope's *Sydney Morning Herald* review of *The Tree of Man*, which saw the novel derided as 'illiterate verbal sludge',<sup>22</sup> White snarled back: he disparaged Australian critics, and 'worse still' professors; he took aim at his fellow novelists, for example Vance Palmer, whom he denigrated as 'profoundly unsympathetic'; he bristled at the nature of the country and his own unfortunate tethering to it:

How sick I am of the bloody word AUSTRALIA. What a pity I am part of it; if

I were not, I would get out tomorrow. As it is, they will have me with them till

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<sup>19</sup> David Marr, *Patrick White: A Life*, Sydney: Vintage, 2008 (first published 1991), pp. 254–5.

<sup>20</sup> Patrick White to Clem Christesen, 15/6/1956, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 350; Barnard's essay: 'The four novels of Patrick White', *Meanjin*, vol. 15, no. 2, Winter 1956, pp. 156–70.

<sup>21</sup> Clem Christesen to Patrick White, 18/6/1956, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 350. This surprise was also noted in the magazine: C.B. Christesen, 'A note on Patrick White', *Meanjin*, vol. 15, no. 2, Winter 1956, p. 223.

<sup>22</sup> A.D. Hope, 'The Bunyip Stages a Comeback', review of *The Tree of Man*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16/6/1956, p. 15.

my bitter end, and there are about six more of my un-Australian Australian novels to fling in their faces.<sup>23</sup>

The unfeeling, unsympathetic Australian critic would continue to be a theme for the rest of his life, and the perceived disdain in which he was held was seemingly one of his chief motivators: ‘always when I meet with lack of understanding in Australian critics, I feel like sitting down and starting another of the novels they deplore, to give them further cause for complaint’.<sup>24</sup> His contempt for intellectuals is a topic to which we will return; but it was *Australian* intellectuals, in particular, that he abhorred – a cringe-like disdain, as he compared them unfavourably to the London prototype. In a letter to Christesen, already mentioned in Chapter 2, he commented on the lack of Australian critics, lamenting that magazines such as *Meanjin* had to ‘fall back on university professors trailing an academic aura’, or ‘creative writers hot from their own involvements’. The trouble with this, he said, was the lack of ‘detachment’ these reviewers were then able to achieve.<sup>25</sup> It was not just that White didn’t like intellectuals; it was that he believed the Australian breed were even more execrable. And other Australian writers were not much better.

White had a much more sympathetic hearing in far off New York, from critics such as his great champion James Stern and publishers like Huebsch and Marshall Best. White would write to these figures with his gripes and moans about Australia, Australians, Australian critics and Australian writers. In 1970 he described, in a letter to Best, a talk given by Anthony Burgess at the Adelaide Festival. He was not present, but he read about it in the paper: ‘a country is only remembered for its art’, we are told Burgess said, who described how Greece is remembered for Homer, Rome for Virgil, and ‘Australia may be remembered for Patrick White’. White gleefully cites the newspaper’s reporting of the audience response:

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<sup>23</sup> Patrick White to Gwen and David Moore, 8/2/1958, *Patrick White Letters*, p. 130; emphasis White’s.

<sup>24</sup> Patrick White to Ben Huebsch, 11/2/1958, *Patrick White Letters*, p. 131.

<sup>25</sup> Patrick White to C.B. Christesen, 19/11/1960, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 350.



‘the entire gallery of writers... held its breath in shock for a moment before releasing it in a smothered gasp. No one clapped’. He wished he had been there, ‘watching and listening at a hole in the wall’.<sup>26</sup>

Phillips, as we have seen, was one of those critics who did not like White’s novels: he distrusted what he saw as their heavy-handed symbolism, disparaging it as ‘algebraic’, obscuring and deadening the ‘imaginative impact’ of the novels. In particular, he criticised *Riders in the Chariot*, comparing it unfavourably to Tolstoy as well as Richardson’s *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. Tolstoy, he says, ‘gives us no chariot’ in *War and Peace*, he just gives us ‘the experience itself’; similarly, Phillips saw the figure of Richardson’s Mahony as being ‘more solidly present in one’s mind’ than Himmelfarb in White’s novel:

The question which stands most obstructively in the way of my acceptance of White’s methods is this: would the imaginative impact of these novels be in any way diminished, might they not be enhanced by compression, if the cumbrous paraphernalia of the Christ parallels were excised from the books, and the meanings of these symbolisms conveyed by the direct presentation of human experience?<sup>27</sup>

Phillips felt White’s verbosity and accretion of symbolic detail precluded an honest appraisal of his characters, and meant they did not live and breathe in the mind of the reader. We have noted his distrust of modernism, which he felt lacked sincerity.<sup>28</sup> And his democratic instincts no doubt made him balk at the patrician White, sneering at the Australian people from his secluded eyries in Castle Hill and Centennial Park.

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<sup>26</sup> Patrick White to Marshall Best, 31/3/1970, *Patrick White Letters*, p. 361.

<sup>27</sup> A.A. Phillips, ‘Patrick White and the Algebraic symbol’, *Meanjin*, vol. 24, no. 4, 1965, pp. 458/59/61.

<sup>28</sup> See Chapter 1.

In a later, largely positive, review of *The Solid Mandala* (though White did not think so, describing it to Christesen as ‘trashy’ and ‘evasive’)<sup>29</sup> Phillips said that White had ‘sometimes failed in the past to set the feet of his representatives of spiritual enlightenment on a globe made of earth’.<sup>30</sup> Phillips’ friend Douglas Stewart also published negative reviews of White, describing his style as ‘wholly bad’.<sup>31</sup> That style was seen as dense, obtuse, pretentious; too portentous for Australian tastes. As Wallace-Crabbe had observed, Australians seemed to prefer writing that did not take itself so seriously, that avoided metaphysical or intellectual conundrums, shying away from wrestling with the ‘big’ themes.<sup>32</sup> David Marr points out that White was ‘dogged’ by ‘the demand that he put aside his private vision and write optimistically about decent Australians’, citing the *Adelaide Mail’s* review of *Happy Valley*: ‘surely a little hope, a little looking towards the future, might be advisable’.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps writers were scared of setting themselves up for the violence of an attack like Hope’s; it was easier not to address difficult issues. But their failure to do so only led to harsher criticism, and the risks White took allowed him, in the end, to take his place in the canon.

What must have irked Phillips and Stewart the most was White’s ambivalence towards, indeed hatred of, Australia and Australians. Phillips’ democratic impulse was not reflected in a writer who seemed to have nothing but contempt for ordinary Australians and the documentation of their lives. ‘When I hear the phrase ‘Australian writers’’, he wrote to a friend, ‘a heavy brown curtain always seems to descend before my eyes’.<sup>34</sup> He bemoaned the ‘dreary, dun-coloured journalistic realism’ of Australian fiction,<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Patrick White to Clem Christesen, 20/4/1966, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 350. Christesen replied (27/4/1966): ‘Don’t be too hard on Arthur Phillips. I’m to blame, for I gave him only a few days in which to read the novel and write his review.’

<sup>30</sup> A.A. Phillips, ‘*The Solid Mandala*: Patrick White’s new novel’, *Meanjin*, vol. 25, no. 1, 1966, p. 33.

<sup>31</sup> Douglas Stewart, ‘The Tree of Man’, *The Bulletin*, 18/7/1956, pp. 25/35, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 350.

<sup>32</sup> This was an issue in other genres as well: Bruce Bennett talks of Australian biography of the sixties and seventies as shying away from the personal and intimate, preferring the public and visible; in ‘Literary Culture since Vietnam’, Bruce Bennett, Jennifer Strauss and Chris Wallace-Crabbe (eds), *Oxford Literary History of Australia*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 255.

<sup>33</sup> David Marr, *Patrick White: A Life*, p. 167.

<sup>34</sup> Patrick White to Juliet O’Hea, 26/1/1965, cited in David Marr, *Patrick White: A Life*, p. 417.

<sup>35</sup> Patrick White, ‘The Prodigal Son’, p. 16. White might have been thinking of Kylie Tennant’s tales of hard scrabble inner-city and outback lives – for example, *Foreaux* (1939) and *The Battlers* (1941). He enjoyed some Australian novels, though: in *Flams in the Glass* (p. 106) he says that his wartime reading of Eve Langley’s *The Pea-pickers* (1942), a strange novel about two

and on the first page of *The Solid Mandala*, as if to underline the point, we are introduced to Mrs Dun, on the bus from Sarsaparilla to Barranugli, ‘the sallow sort’, sucking her teeth and muttering ‘yairs’ in response to all enquiries. ‘Oh, Mr Brown senior was a gentleman’, says Mrs Poulter, Mrs Dun’s companion on the bus, ‘but not any better than us’, as White puts the knife into the clichéd Australian idea of democracy.<sup>36</sup> Another ‘democratic’ Australian coruscated by the novelist is Mrs Godbold’s husband in *Riders in the Chariot*, a man disdaining religion (in stark contrast to his spiritualist wife) but seeing worth in other pursuits:

What he had time for could be very quickly specified. It was beer, sex and the trots, in that order. Not that he really enjoyed beer, except as a dissolver of the hard line. Not that sex was more than a mug’s game, involving the hazards of kids and syph, though he did succeed in losing himself temporarily in the brief sexual act. Nor did a horse appeal to him as a horse; it was simply that the material future – which, after all, was all that mattered of it – depended on those four bleeding legs.<sup>37</sup>

The hatred of these people and their materialist culture may well come from the total lack of interest in, or understanding of, them. Waldo Brown in *The Solid Mandala*, White tells us, ‘did not understand people, except those he created by his own imagining. If it hadn’t been for his own visions he might have been desperate’.<sup>38</sup> Living in a world of the imagination, replete with ‘visions’ far removed from quotidian existence, Waldo is disconnected from the Australian life around him. Marr points out that the Brown brothers (Waldo and his twin Arthur) are ‘at heart’ White himself: ‘Waldo is White’s idea of what he might be if all traces of love and intuition are cut away: a spiteful intellectual with a nose for

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cross-dressing women drifting through Gippsland, filled him with ‘a longing for Australia, a country I saw through a childhood glow.’

<sup>36</sup> Patrick White, *The Solid Mandala*, London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1966, p. 11.

<sup>37</sup> Patrick White, *Riders in the Chariot*, Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1964 (first published 1961), p. 230.

<sup>38</sup> Patrick White, *The Solid Mandala*, pp. 98–9.

failure, timid, fragile and unforgiving’, and he quotes White in a letter to Geoffrey Dutton: ‘I am unforgiving. It is one of my worst faults – too much Waldo in me’.<sup>39</sup> When White wrote this he was thinking of personal relationships, but he might also have been referring to his relationship with the country of his birth: he could not forgive Australia her faults, and he was unsparing in his attack on them in his art. And yet, as we shall see, that art was wholly reliant on Australia. Hate her as he might, he was beholden to Australia for the stuff of his stories.

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<sup>39</sup> Patrick White to Geoffrey Dutton, 13/11/1966, cited in David Marr, *Patrick White: A Life*, p. 417.

iii) Filling the 'Great Australian Emptiness'

One might wonder why White even bothered returning to Australia. He seemed so miserable there – what was the point? Australia was what he loathed the most, and what perplexed him the most, but he felt strongly that it was what he had to wrestle with in his writing, and this tension was the wellspring of his creative imagination. 'I find it a great help to hear the language going on around me', he said in 1969 as he tried to explain his reasons; 'not that what I write, the narrative, is idiomatic Australian, but the whole work has a balance and rhythm which is influenced by what is going on around you'. He said that when he came back he 'had to learn the language again' and this is 'one of the reasons I work in Australia', because 'I write about Australia; you have to do a certain amount of research; and I think it's a good thing to be close to one's roots'.<sup>40</sup> Later in life he recalled a conversation with the English artist Bridget Reilly, who told him that 'even abstract painters can't afford to sever their roots' as she described an abortive attempt to live in the South of France. 'This is what I think I sensed before returning', said White: 'Australian expatriate writers, and artists in general, eventually starve for lack of their natural sustenance'.<sup>41</sup>

Without recourse to these 'roots' White, like all artists as he saw it, ran the risk of losing the core of what sparked his imagination and gave him creative impetus. In *The Vivisector*, the artist Hurtle Duffield finds himself in Paris after the war, but he cannot find inspiration there: 'what he needed was to go home, to renew himself'. 'God knows why we do (come back) to Australia', muses Duffield's sister Rhoda, 'except that a cat prefers to die in the gutter it belongs to spiritually'.<sup>42</sup> Undoubtedly White believed that he belonged in this manner, and a gutter was not far off his conception of his homeland. Writing to Arouseau, who was editing Ludwig Leichhardt's letters, White discussed his novel *Voss* (based, of course, on Leichhardt's life): 'as Australia is really the only country I wanted to

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<sup>40</sup> Patrick White, 'In the making', 1969, *Patrick White Speaks*, p. 20.

<sup>41</sup> Patrick White, manuscript for speech delivered at National Book Council Awards, 1980, Patrick White Papers, Box 15.

<sup>42</sup> Patrick White, *The Vivisector*, North Sydney: Vintage, 2012 (first published 1970), pp. 166/433.

write about, Australia had to be the setting'.<sup>43</sup> He said the idea for the novel came to him in the North African desert during the war, and in 'The Prodigal Son' he reflected further on this time: 'all through the war in the Middle East there persisted a longing to return to the scenes of childhood, which is, after all, the purest well from which the creative artist draws'. He said he was 'tempted' to settle in Greece, but 'perhaps it was the realisation that even the most genuine resident Hellenophile accepts automatically the vaguely comic role of Levantine beachcomber. He does not belong, the natives seem to say, not without affection; it is sad for him, but he is nothing'.<sup>44</sup> Belonging for the novelist was about being where formative memories could fertilise the imagination; in Australia he could be something, rather than nothing.

Among the rewards of the returning expatriate, he said, is the 'refreshed landscape which even in its shabbier, remembered version has always made a background to my life'.<sup>45</sup> He wrote that 'as I could not come to terms with the inhabitants, either then (in childhood) or again on returning ... I found consolation in the landscape. The ideal Australia I visualised during my exile and which drew me back, was always, I realise, a landscape without figures'.<sup>46</sup> This landscape occupied a central position in his imagination, and seemingly his work was reliant on it. He was not alone in this. Nolan and Clark, as we have seen, entertained similar obsessions, focussing on the lonely figure in the landscape, and this fed the connection they felt they had with White. 'What (was it) like to be a human being in this harsh, weird and beautiful land?' asked Clark.<sup>47</sup> The quest to answer this question was what could give Australian culture its peculiar genius, although in many ways it is a strange place for a culture to come from, because landscape is a culture-free realm, at least in the sense Clark and White talked about it – and this was a

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<sup>43</sup> Patrick White to Marcel Aroussseau, 10/3/1958.

<sup>44</sup> Patrick White, 'The Prodigal Son', p. 14.

<sup>45</sup> Patrick White, 'The Prodigal Son', p. 16.

<sup>46</sup> Patrick White, *Flaws in the Glass*, Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1983 (first published 1981), p. 49.

<sup>47</sup> Manning Clark, 1967 interview with Hazel de Berg, cited in Mark McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity*, p. 431. Nolan was a very close friend of White's until, as was not uncommon with White's friendships, he cut off all ties. In this case, the breach was sparked by the suicide of Nolan's wife, Cynthia, in 1976. Another great friend whom White ruthlessly jettisoned was Dutton. A classic White falling out was with socialite and sometime muse Klari Daniel, the final rupture caused by her refusal to try a new cauliflower salad he had made. (David Marr, *Patrick White: A Life*, pp. 530–1/568–70/422.)

major difference between them and Judith Wright.<sup>48</sup> White's understanding of the landscape allowed him to connect to Australia by circumventing the culture he so despised and instead connecting to a spirit of place. For those who read or met White and who were not themselves from Australia, it was impossible to imagine him anywhere *but* Australia. Björkstén recalled the powerful impression he made:

This is what one remembers of him: his eyes and the countryside – the Australian countryside. One cannot remember Patrick White in any other setting.<sup>49</sup>

Australian critics could not find their way past White's swingeing criticisms of Australia; the Swede Björkstén on the other hand could only understand the novelist in his Australian context. There was no way White could exist in any other country, and he made it clear to Björkstén that it was the landscape that cleaved him to Australia: 'it was eighteen years before I dared to come back to Australia for the third time', he said when they met in 1962, 'but I couldn't do without the countryside out here':

I don't believe in a final break with the place one originates from. Only in a temporary break... to get perspective. You are shaped by the place you have your roots in; it has become part of you. Outside places don't shape you in the same way. This has nothing to do with nationalism. People are always the same.

This is what my compatriots find so difficult to understand.<sup>50</sup>

For White an understanding of Australia was emphatically *not* nationalist in temper; it was far from political. The nationalist tendency in Australian literature and its criticism was in fact antithetical to the production of worthwhile art. He said that 'Australia will never acquire a national identity until enough *individual* Australians acquire identities of their own'.<sup>51</sup> Clark argued that the great works of art created by

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<sup>48</sup> See Chapter 10.

<sup>49</sup> Ingmar Björkstén, *Patrick White: A General Introduction*, pp. 4–5.

<sup>50</sup> Patrick White, 1962 interview with Ingmar Björkstén, Castle Hill, quoted in Björkstén, *Patrick White: A General Introduction*, p. 6.

<sup>51</sup> Patrick White, 'The role of the Australian citizen in a nuclear war', 1983; White's own emphasis.

the likes of White and Nolan did not come about through ‘insular nationalism, but by painting and writing about the universal problems of mankind’, writ large in the lonely Australian landscape.<sup>52</sup> In returning to the country of his birth, White was acknowledging who he was: he saw that his own identity was inescapable, and rather than deny it (tempting as it was as he considered a life amongst the Greek islands) he knew that, in order to fulfil his literary talent, he must be a part of Australia. As we have seen, he could not even contemplate writing about anything else, and only one of his novels (*The Living and the Dead* of 1941) fails to locate its characters in Australia at all. So whilst the Australian trait of ‘the exaltation of the average’ made him ‘panic’, nevertheless it was something that could not be avoided, and indeed it could serve as inspiration, as he attributed it to the conception of *The Tree of Man*:

Because the void I had to fill was so immense, I wanted to try to suggest in this book every possible aspect of life, through the lives of an ordinary man and woman. But at the same time I wanted to discover the extraordinary behind the ordinary, the mystery and the poetry which alone could make bearable the lives of such people, and incidentally, my own life since my return.<sup>53</sup>

The cultural aridity and ‘averageness’ of Australia was a void that needed to be filled with meaning. Stan Parker, as Marr has pointed out, was a simple man: ‘simplicity is his only guide’, as he is ‘absorbed in the mystery of the God whose presence he senses in the shabby paddocks of (his) farm’.<sup>54</sup> In this way White finds something profound in Australia. He said that when he returned he ‘felt the life was, on the surface, so dreary, ugly, monotonous, there must be a poetry hidden in it to give it a purpose, and so I set out to discover that secret core, and *The Tree of Man* emerged’.<sup>55</sup> Truth and beauty were thus discovered in an Australian ‘mystery of ordinariness’.<sup>56</sup> The profundity is inherent in an individual – or, a couple –

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<sup>52</sup> Manning Clark, speech given to the Victorian Historical Society, 1967, cited in Mark McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity*, p. 478.

<sup>53</sup> Patrick White, ‘The Prodigal Son’, p. 15.

<sup>54</sup> David Marr, *Patrick White: A Life*, pp. 268–9.

<sup>55</sup> Patrick White to Peggy Garland, 30/5/1957, *Patrick White Letters*, p. 118.

<sup>56</sup> Patrick White to Ingmar Björkstén, 27/5/1973, *Patrick White Letters*, p. 413.



alone in the landscape, wrestling with the idea of God. This is not a vision of Australia based on mateship; it is not the simplicity of the swagman's yarn; nor, as Geoffrey Dutton pointed out, was it a worldview that subscribed to 'an Australian national cliché, which is that humour alone makes life bearable'.<sup>57</sup> In *The Tree of Man* 'even the ugliness,' said White, 'the bags and iron of Australian lives acquired a meaning'.<sup>58</sup>

White's genius lay in this transformation of ordinary Australian existence. Fredric Jameson has said of modernism that it can 'show us everything about the individual psyche and its subjective experience and alienation, save the essential – the logic of stereotypes, reproductions and depersonalizations in which the individual is held in our time'.<sup>59</sup> He says that this is what science fiction, so reliant on conventions and formal stereotypes, has contributed to literature, although if we look at White we might suggest that he was able to do this too. He certainly delivered 'subjective experience and alienation', clearly seen in his garish parade of grotesque protagonists. But you can also see in his work a wrestling with stereotype and its 'depersonalizing' effect. Australians, in White's world, are held in the trap of humdrum convention – it is seemingly inescapable. It does indeed provide its own logic, which is intrinsic to the horror of Australianness. The depiction of this nightmare, in language that is abundant, overflowing and potent, is what lends his novels their hallucinatory qualities. Characters such as Theodora Goodman, Voss and Elizabeth Hunter are nothing if not stereotypes – in turn the frumpy spinster, mad explorer and embittered society matriarch – and these conventions are rigorously explored and interrogated through a warped modernist lens that always reminds us of the instability and unreality of their worlds.

In such a world, ordinary things – possessions and other material detritus – become powerful symbols of magnified importance and intensity. In a letter to Barnard, White described the 'mysticism of

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<sup>57</sup> Geoffrey Dutton, *Australian Writers & their Work: Patrick White*, Melbourne: Lansdowne Press, 1961, p. 28.

<sup>58</sup> Patrick White, 'The Prodigal Son', p. 17.

<sup>59</sup> Fredric Jameson, cited in Benjamin Kunkel's introduction to Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, Melbourne: Penguin, 2009 (first published 1963), p. xi.

objects': a theme 'that means a lot to me'. In *The Tree of Man*, he said, 'the consolation of the essence of objects recurs a lot... with Stan in his workshop and about the farm, with Amy in her house'; whilst in *The Aunt's Story* Theodora Goodman is 'obsessed by objects', for example 'where she goes to work in the ruined house at the end, and where she lays down her own possessions in the bedrooms of hotels'.<sup>60</sup> It is quite unusual for White to be seen to offer this analysis of his own work; on other occasions he castigated the academic 'symbol chasers' who badgered him with questions.<sup>61</sup> White approved of Barnard's *Meanjin* essay and was pleased he was getting such a positive reception in an Australian magazine. His relationship with *Meanjin* at this time was strong, attested by the correspondence to be found in the *Meanjin* archive. White and Christesen spent a lot of time swapping tips for the alleviation of asthma.<sup>62</sup> Barnard said of *The Tree of Man*:

His (White's) philosophy seems to be resolved, the goal of man's long, inarticulate seeking is glimpsed. It is the ineffable moment. It has no substance, it is of the creative spirit, it comes and it goes; but that it should come, even once in a lifetime, is a positive gain, an apotheosis. It is the troubling of the waters at Bethesda. It does not touch the loneliness for it is a personal, private and detached revelation. Each man's life is a mystery between himself and God.<sup>63</sup>

The power of the writing is in the revelation of the extraordinary in the ordinary, of beauty in the banal. Thus out of 'bags and iron' White manages to construct a meaningfulness in Australian life that seemed, previously, to be absent. The unbearable state of being Australian is mined for meaning, and that meaning is found in the spiritual, in God (again, we can see why White held great appeal for Clark).

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<sup>60</sup> Patrick White to Marjorie Barnard, 15/6/1956, *Patrick White Letters*, p. 103.

<sup>61</sup> See, for example: Patrick White to Geoffrey and Ninette Dutton, 18/1/1965, cited in David Marr, *Patrick White: A Life*, p. 416.

<sup>62</sup> See, for example, Christesen's letter to White, 25/11/1960, in which the editor gives the novelist his asthma remedy: no dairy, bicarbonate of soda, cooler climate ('e.g. Eltham', the semi-rural, slightly bohemian suburb where he lived) and aspirin before bed; Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 350.

<sup>63</sup> Marjorie Barnard, 'The four novels of Patrick White', p. 170.

It seems counter-intuitive, but the despised mediocrity of Australian life – the drabness, the boredom, the materialism – is what he needed to create a profound Australian understanding of life. In *Voss*, artist Willie Pringle (‘who, it transpired, had become a genius’) says that Australians’ ‘mediocrity’ is not

a final and irrevocable state; rather it is a creative source of endless variety and subtlety. The blowfly on its bed of offal is but a variation of the rainbow. Common forms are continually breaking into brilliant shapes. If we will explore them.<sup>64</sup>

White was certainly intent on exploring them. In *The Aunt’s Story*, says McKernan, he ‘demonstrates the power to remake the physical world in the mind which he sees as the salvation from destructive mediocrity’; in his next novel, *The Tree of Man*, something universal is found in what she calls the ‘awesome boredom of Australian life’; and then in *Voss*, he ‘tries to retrieve from the great European civilization some of the elements which make Australian life bearable’.<sup>65</sup> This is how he tackles what he termed the ‘Great Australian Emptiness’, an emptiness of the intellect and the spirit, materialist of course, ‘in which the mind is the least of all possessions’.<sup>66</sup> The emptiness was anathema to White, it was what he despised about Australia, but the ‘landscape without figures’ – the literal understanding of an empty Australia – was also what pulled him back from Europe.

Once returned, he remade the Australian novel in the modernist image and thus, in ways not dissimilar to Clark’s remaking of Australian history in Dostoevskian terms, was able to take the continent seriously in ways hitherto unimagined – or, at least, unattempted. He was leaving ‘dun coloured’ bush literature behind; looking, instead, at Australians through the deliberately confused lens of modernism. Up until *Riders in the Chariot*, scholars have asserted, his novels were primarily modernist in ‘their obsession

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<sup>64</sup> Patrick White, *Voss*, p. 447.

<sup>65</sup> Susan McKernan, *A Question of Commitment*, pp. 180–1.

<sup>66</sup> Patrick White, ‘The Prodigal Son’, p. 15.

with the individual outsider', while subsequent novels, beginning with *The Solid Mandala*, 'consider the limitations on the knowledge of the artist' before the final novels (in particular *The Tnyborn Affair* of 1979) 'openly declare the provisional and distorted nature of art'.<sup>67</sup> This supposed shift from modernism to post-modernism is a reflection of international trends, linking White's particular, local vision to the wider literary scene. It is interesting that critics have felt the need to fix White in this 'taxonomy' of modernism – it is as if it is only in this way that his work is able to break out of the parochial mould and assert an Australian idea of international resonance.<sup>68</sup> The professedly anti-intellectual White himself, as we shall see, would have grave misgivings at such an interpretation, but the scholarship up until recent times has pressed on White these claims through investigation of, for example, 'the audacity of his images' (as Gail Jones terms it), his 'radical stylistics', 'dissenting novelty', 'imagistic exorbitance' and 'auratic confidence' – all contributing to the 'hyper-modernist', indeed modernist irrational', nature of his work. In novels such as *The Aunt's Story*, White presented unreliable narratives and skewed perspectives, using defamiliarization and 'mystification' – his protagonists encountering 'radically incommensurable orders of being'<sup>69</sup> – in order to undermine familiar tropes (or stereotypes, as we have seen) of Australia and Australians. As a result, he framed Australia in a way acceptable to the international intelligentsia (and their followers at home) thus enabling his acceptance way beyond the parochial confines prescribed by cultural nationalism.

*The Aunt's Story*, transferring as it does from a conventional narrative in Australia in the first half of the novel to the weird Hotel du Midi in Europe of the second, seems to forego the possibilities of Australia as a place for such dementing dreams. In the end, Theodora is finally removed from the Old World too and settled in New Mexico, where she is divested of the tokens of her existence (passports,

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<sup>67</sup> Susan Lever, 'Fiction: Innovation and Ideology', in Bruce Bennett, Jennifer Strauss and Chris Wallace-Crabbe (eds), *The Oxford Literary History of Australia*, p. 311.

<sup>68</sup> Lever cites Brian McHale's 'taxonomy of the shift from modernist to post-modernist fiction', *Postmodernist Fiction*, London: Methuen, 1987.

<sup>69</sup> Gail Jones, 'Desperate, marvellous shuttling: White's ambivalent modernism', in Ian Henderson and Anouk Lang (eds), *Patrick White Beyond the Grave: New Critical Perspectives*, London: Anthem Press, 2015, pp. 155/6.

money, tickets and name) and communes with a man who is not there. This world seems far removed from the realities of Australian existence, but in his next novels – *The Tree of Man* and *Voss* – White resoundingly returned to the dusty reality of the Australian landscape. It is this landscape Björkstén so strongly associates him with. Meanwhile, Ivor Indyk contends that his wrestling with its emptiness was a whole domain of Australian experience largely ignored. By tackling this terrain, he ‘unlocked the realm of feeling in Australian literature’ as his characters explored ‘psychological landscapes’ – not just the psycho-horror of *Voss*’s wilderness, but also the terrifying urban landscapes through which Stan Parker and Himmelfarb travel in moments of great crisis.<sup>70</sup> White’s relationship with Australia was a tortured one, as if the country was a lover feared and hated, but ultimately the most potent of muses. The ‘realm of feeling’ is discovered in the most brutal of psychological situations. It is quite different to the love and respect Wright felt for Australia; feelings that had their inspiration in the First Australians, the Aborigines. She, therefore, cast aside the material present as something that might have utility as literary inspiration. White, though, could not, because it was all he could see as he looked at Australia, and even the empty landscape reminded him of the emptiness at the heart of Australians.

Therefore, the impulse behind the cringe itself – and what does White do but cringe at the world all around him? – is used by the novelist to defeat the cringe; as we see in the Nobel citation, with White, now placed upon the world pedestal dreamed of for so long by the cultural nationalists, eulogised for creating ‘an epic and psychological narrative art which has introduced a new continent into literature’.<sup>71</sup> Marr quotes Artur Lundkvist, White’s champion in the Nobel committee, who said that he gave Australian literature

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<sup>70</sup> Ivor Indyk, speaking at ‘Is Patrick White anti-Australian?’, Sydney Writers’ Festival, 19/5/2012, broadcast on ABC Radio National, 28/5/2012. In *The Tree of Man*, Parker finds himself having an encounter with a prostitute in seedy Bondi upon the discovery of Amy’s infidelity; in *Riders in the Chariot* Himmelfarb travels through hellish Sarsaparilla and Dickensian-monickered Barranugli before his weightily symbolic crucifixion at the hands of the workers.

<sup>71</sup> Nobel Prize, Patrick White citation, Nobel Prize in Literature 1973, [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1973/press.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1973/press.html); accessed 10/9/2013.

a style, a flexible and characteristic form of expression, in short, something of a language of its own. For Australia has long been one of the relatively voiceless countries unable to articulate its inner-most problems, its own outlook on life. In this respect, the effects of British colonisation have been prolonged. Emptiness, desolation, banality, robust extroversion and stagnant welfare – these are the main things one associates with Australia, this ‘white’ continent awkwardly situated between Asia and Oceania. Patrick White does not contradict this impression, but gives it sharpness, depth, light and shade in a single-mindedly critical way.<sup>72</sup>

Again, a foreign perspective sees White’s critique of Australia as his strength, not as his weakness. It is as if Australia needs this unflinching and harsh critical eye to become a nation we can take seriously. An unsentimental *literary* understanding is required. As Dutton put it, he had succeeded in doing what Marquez had done for Colombia, or Neruda for Chile, and made Australia ‘a country of the mind’.<sup>73</sup> And he had done this by ‘filling’ the emptiness of Australia; not necessarily with ideas, but with intuitive passion. ‘Emptiness is not emptiness when it serves a purpose’, says a character in *The Eye of the Storm*:

Many of the greatest have been empty. How else could they have filled with those necessary flashes of inspiration, the surge of words, emotion, if they had been a bunch of intellectuals stuffed with theories and ‘taste’?<sup>74</sup>

White believed his vision could be authentic only if it was not intellectual; it had to originate from everyday experience, the juxtaposition of the banal materialism of Australian life and the vast, empty

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<sup>72</sup> Artur Lundkvist, quoted in David Marr, *Patrick White: A Life*, p. 493.

<sup>73</sup> Geoffrey Dutton, ‘The return to confidence’, *The National Times*, 17/2/1979, pp. 24–8.

<sup>74</sup> Patrick White, *The Eye of the Storm*, p. 126.

landscape – a sort of spiritual void. This anti-intellectual worldview was central to his conjuring of an Australian idea, as we shall now see.

iv) 'Intuition, not reason': White as anti-intellectual

In *Riders in the Chariot*, the four 'riders' fight against the material vacuum of Australian society and, although they are all – naturally – misunderstood, vilified and shunned, nevertheless they do all reach some sort of spiritual awakening living in the great Australian emptiness. Indeed, as seemingly with White himself, that emptiness is part of their salvation. The religious Mrs Godbold, the half-mad Miss Hare, the holocaust survivor Himmelfarb and the itinerant Aboriginal artist Alf Dubbo are outcasts representing spirituality in the barren landscape, each living lives which demonstrate a 'passionate act of faith'.<sup>75</sup> Central protagonists in other novels such as Arthur Brown in *The Solid Mandala* and Hurtle Duffield in *The Vivisector* are also members of the 'elect': savants, spiritualists or outcasts without the education, faculties or inclination to understand the world at an intellectual level, but with an understanding derived from a spiritual connection, an intuitive one. White believed that it was 'God's grace' that would help Australians bear the spiritual isolation of their continent; this would be achieved by dispensing with 'the superfluous details of life as we have known it' – in other words, forsaking Australians' hallowed materialism for a spiritual dimension.<sup>76</sup> 'Simplicity is not always enough', as Björkstén says, and White shows that there 'is a meaning in life, a mystery his 'elect' are intuitively aware of, and there 'is a possibility of sharing in this mystery, and thus gaining insight into life'.<sup>77</sup> When the academic Himmelfarb arrives in Australia, having – miraculously – escaped the Holocaust, he refuses to apply for a university position commensurate with his previous career as a Professor of English Literature:

His explanation was a simple one: 'The Intellect has failed us'.<sup>78</sup>

The reference is to the horrors of the Holocaust, unrestrained by the application of any intellectual idea, and White believed that the intellect could not save Australia either. The fate of

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<sup>75</sup> Patrick White to Stephen Murray-Smith, 26/2/1962, Stephen Murray-Smith Papers, Box 200, Folder 1.

<sup>76</sup> Patrick White, 'The role of the Australian citizen in a nuclear war', 1983.

<sup>77</sup> Ingmar Björkstén, *Patrick White: A General Introduction*, pp. 19–20.

<sup>78</sup> Patrick White, *Riders in the Chariot*, p. 198.



Himmelfarb, crucified by drunken Australian workers, seems to mirror the victory of the barbarians. This viewpoint was at odds with the cultural nationalists, whose 'national idea' was nothing if not an intellectual construct. Theirs was a didactic programme, an 'optimistic' urgency to *contribute* to Australia, and to make it better. 'Pessimistic' Sydney intellectuals, on the other hand, saw 'social and political involvement' as 'useless': 'society is utilitarian and philistine, crushes intellectual activity, and has to be either avoided or opposed'.<sup>79</sup> Thus White, so strongly associated with Sydney, felt only the 'selfish' need of the artist who looks for the place where he may best create. His return was seemingly made for himself, not for Australia. He had no desire, so the argument goes, to improve the cultural landscape of his birthplace, only to feed like a parasite off the physical landscape which had haunted his imagination since childhood. And yet: he bequeathed trust funds for writing fellowships, and in later life he stood on a political platform in an effort to change government policies on a number of issues.<sup>80</sup>

But his seeming use of Australia in this parasitic way was *the* lingering image of the man; angering his fellow Australians, who saw a writer who had returned, only to carp and criticise and create art that dealt with the nation in the harshest of terms, and who could not or would not bring himself to show the people their better selves. This, to White, was the problem inherent in cultural nationalism: art as a method to better people, to define a correct Australian way, ended up as second-rate art. 'There is a dreadful atmosphere of Adult Education', he said, 'in which no art can flourish'.<sup>81</sup> His art – *real* art – was created alone; the artist was sequestered from society, and any potential impact on that society, spurned for the sake of art, was of no importance. Marr describes White's aloofness and prickliness, his fear of 'what might happen to him if he led the life of a literary celebrity', so that in fact he 'welcomed and in a sense provoked' the public's hostility, in order that 'he might deliberately turn his back' on that public.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> John Docker, *Australian Cultural Elites*, p. ix.

<sup>80</sup> White used his Nobel Prize winnings to endow the Patrick White Award for Australian writers, the first recipient of which was Christina Stead in 1974. He became involved in multiple political causes (examples: nuclear disarmament; saving Sydney's Moore Park from development) through the seventies and eighties; political speeches are collected in *Patrick White Speaks* and his papers in the National Library of Australia.

<sup>81</sup> Patrick White to Ben Huebsch, 2/2/1962, *Patrick White Letters*, p. 204.

<sup>82</sup> David Marr, *Patrick White: A Life*, p. 321.

Docker points out that, in *The Vivisector*, Duffield is the ‘archetypal artist’, with an ‘organic sensibility which is seen as fundamentally and necessarily both childlike and animal-like’. He is, to continue the Sydney theme of the artist’s outsider status, ‘born with this sensibility’, which society ‘can only destroy’.<sup>83</sup> Duffield clings to childhood, which, he says, is an ‘unalterable landscape’<sup>84</sup> – and we might think it is inextricably linked with the landscape of Australia, the ‘landscape without people’, also unalterable in Duffield’s creator, White. Both men were (as White described himself) ‘doubtful Australians, beyond the pale’,<sup>85</sup> but this was not something to regret. Being an ‘outsider’ was a comfortable fit for White, something he had always known and often nurtured. ‘If I am anything of a writer’, he said to Dutton, ‘it is through my homosexuality, which has given me insights’.<sup>86</sup> It was his homosexuality that meant he had ‘always known what it is to be an outsider’, and the insight gained helped him understand ‘the plight of the immigrant (such as Himmelfarb) – the hate and contempt with which he is often received’.<sup>87</sup> He clung to this idea of himself because he could not bear to be seen to be a part of a philistine and ignorant Australian establishment. If working-class characters such as Mrs Dun are skewered for their stupidity and narrow-mindedness, the rich do not escape White’s barbs either. Sydney society is depicted as vacuous and parochial in almost every book. Mrs Courtney, Duffield’s adoptive mother, is one such example; Elizabeth Hunter, the ‘eye’ of *The Eye of the Storm*, another. White knew these people well – he came from their world – but he hated this fact. In 1980, as he was falling out with Dutton, he took great umbrage at his erstwhile friend’s published description of him as ‘aristocratic’.<sup>88</sup>

However, it would be too simplistic to see White in terms of utter aloofness. Whilst he did indeed stand in obdurate opposition to the society around him, a point made so abundantly clear in just about

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<sup>83</sup> John Docker, *Australian Cultural Elites*, p. 61.

<sup>84</sup> Patrick White, *The Vivisector*, p. 294.

<sup>85</sup> Patrick White to Clement Semmler, 10/5/1970, *Patrick White Letters*, p. 363.

<sup>86</sup> Patrick White to Geoffrey Dutton, 17/9/1980, *Patrick White Letters*, p. 537.

<sup>87</sup> Patrick White, ‘The search for an alternative to futility’, manuscript of speech delivered at LaTrobe University, circa 1984, Patrick White Papers, Box 15, Folder 2.

<sup>88</sup> David Marr, *Patrick White: A Life*, p. 569.

everything he ever wrote, nevertheless he did not see engagement with that society as a useless undertaking. In fact, as we have seen, Australian society served as inspiration for his novels; they were totally reliant on it. Furthermore, he did in fact see a role for himself in changing and moulding it. Could any reader of *The Tree of Man*, McKernan asks, ‘miss the fact that White saw himself as the teacher of a materialist people?’<sup>89</sup> As he recoiled from this society, he also set about changing it: he said that ‘there is the possibility that one may be helping to people a barely inhabited country with a race possessed of understanding’.<sup>90</sup> In 1960 he commiserated with friend Mollie McKie that her brothers were leaving Australia: ‘distinguished Australians should be trying to make something of their own country, hopeless as the task may seem’.<sup>91</sup> Later on he said that his ‘chief incentive’ had always been ‘to contribute something to Australia’.<sup>92</sup> Whilst he believed that the ‘tragedy’ of some Australian writers was that they did not travel overseas, for others that tragedy was that ‘they do not return to contribute anything’:

The artist, once he has found out about the world, ought to return here to form a core of resistance to the philistines. I am resisting the philistines in everything I write, which is in a way a criticism of Australia and the only place I know well. An artist’s work is what he has to say. He should be close to life – the life of his own country.<sup>93</sup>

Again, we see White affirming his need to be close to his ‘roots’; for creative stimulation, but also so that he may make a contribution, which was, as he saw it, to show Australians a different way of understanding the world. He told Clement Semmler that he was trying ‘to give professed unbelievers glimpses of their own unprofessed faith’, which, he said, they were afraid of admitting to because they

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<sup>89</sup> Susan McKernan, *A Question of Commitment*, p. 175.

<sup>90</sup> Patrick White, ‘The Prodigal Son’, p. 17.

<sup>91</sup> Patrick White to Mollie McKie, 23/6/1960, *Patrick White Letters*, p. 165.

<sup>92</sup> Patrick White to Margery Williams, 16/7/1967, *Patrick White Letters*, p. 315. He did qualify this statement with a typically curmudgeonly caveat: ‘now I no longer care’.

<sup>93</sup> Interview with Patrick White, in John Chesney Frost, ‘Patrick White: a profile’, *Vogue Australia*, Autumn 1962, pp. 86–7/106, in Stephen Murray-Smith Papers, Box 200.

would 'forfeit their right to be considered intellectuals'. This was particularly common in Australia because 'the intellectual is a comparatively recent phenomenon', but 'it is easier for me to make these admissions, because I am not an intellectual'.<sup>94</sup> In this way he linked his anti-intellectualism to the cringe: Australian intellectuals were scared of the spiritual or the intuitive because they thought that acknowledgment of these things would open them to derision from those foreign intellectuals whose approbation they so desired. He held deep contempt for intellectuals. 'Everything I have done', he wrote, 'has been through intuition rather than through reason'. Surely he was wrong in this contention, but it was why, he said, Australian intellectuals 'hate my books': 'the mind that works by reason alone', which he categorized as 'the average Australian mind', is 'incapable of understanding my books'.<sup>95</sup> He approved of a quotation from his friend John Gielgud, the English actor, who said that whilst people thought of him as 'cerebral', he was in fact 'not in the least intellectual': 'everything I do is through my intuition and emotions'. 'I never stop repeating this of myself to Australian academics and intellectuals', cackled White, 'who stare at me in bemused disbelief'.<sup>96</sup> White was conforming to a stereotype of the romantic artist, in which all insight and creativity arrives like flashes of lightning from above: it is something that cannot be rationally explained or logically traced, it resists reason, and hence the artist is lifted above the realm of the ordinary, and of the intellectuals.

His disdain for the intellectual parsing of his books can be seen as he declared that 'Australia seems to be suffering from a sickness called seminar'.<sup>97</sup> As we have seen, he often derided the 'symbol hunters' who came round to Martin Road trying to find the deeper meanings in his works, and 'Australian Professors of English who continue to accuse me of illiteracy'.<sup>98</sup> He told Dutton about a Plato quotation he had come across: 'common sense is the greatest obstacle to poetry'. It seemed, he said, 'to be aimed

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<sup>94</sup> Patrick White to Clement Semmler, 10/5/1970, *Patrick White Letters*, p. 363.

<sup>95</sup> Patrick White to Peggy Garland, 14/5/1962, *Patrick White Letters*, p. 206.

<sup>96</sup> Patrick White to Geoffrey Dutton, 23/4/1970, cited in David Marr, *Patrick White: A Life*, p. 459.

<sup>97</sup> Patrick White to Mary Lord, 17/6/1979, *Patrick White Letters*, pp. 519–20.

<sup>98</sup> Patrick White to Peggy Garland, 7/1/1960, *Patrick White Letters*, p. 161.

right at the heart of Australian creativity'.<sup>99</sup> The 'dun coloured' dreariness of Australian fiction was an intellectual problem as much as anything else. A 1961 UK profile of White noted the 'venom' directed at him by Australian reviewers, quoting a 'local critic' who suggested that 'Australians have never before been asked to contemplate such vast ambiguities in their country and their souls'.<sup>100</sup>

When Christesen wrote to White in 1960, upset at the lack of articles the novelist was sending him for publication, he countered that 'if I have not sent you articles, if I haven't reviewed books, it is because I am not a professional intellectual. I am an artist trying to get down on paper a number of novels I have in my head, and wondering, when I get held up by illness more and more each winter, whether I shall have the time'.<sup>101</sup> His pursuit of the life of the artist was ruthless. Personal comfort, relationships, money, health: all could be, and were, destroyed in the interests of the writing of novels. The first draft of a novel was 'dragged out, by tongs, a bloody mess, in the small hours'.<sup>102</sup> Art was supposed to be tough, difficult, and the role of the artist was really only this pitiless act of creation. Marr says that White, like Voss, hoped through the suffering endured on his journey to 'discover his genius, possess this new country and conquer his pride',<sup>103</sup> and his biography is full of examples of this monomaniacal pursuit of the writer's life, the fevered and asthmatic writer in Castle Hill drinking too much, rising at midnight to write until 4.30 in the morning, 'often ill, scribbling in bed or sitting where he worked in a mess of papers at the kitchen table gasping for breath'.<sup>104</sup> And art was emphatically *not* an intellectual pursuit. If it was an act of possession – the possession of Australia – then this possession was an intuitive, emotional and creative act.

The anti-intellectual facet of White's art was visible in the vulgarity of his prose. He told Dutton that, along with his outsider status, it was 'a *very strong vein of vulgarity*' (the emphasis his own) which made

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<sup>99</sup> Patrick White to Geoffrey Dutton, 26/2/1967, *Patrick White Letters*, p. 310.

<sup>100</sup> Profile of Patrick White (no byline), *The Observer* (UK), 12/11/1961, Stephen Murray-Smith Papers, Box 200, Folder 1.

<sup>101</sup> Patrick White to Clem Christesen, 19/11/1960, Christesen *Meanjin* Archives, Box 350.

<sup>102</sup> Patrick White to James Stern, 20/3/1966, *Patrick White Letters*, p. 291.

<sup>103</sup> David Marr, *Patrick White Letters*, p. 98.

<sup>104</sup> David Marr, *Patrick White: a Life*, p. 265.

him as a writer.<sup>105</sup> He did not subscribe to the prudish morality of Sydney society, a point easily proven by his withering portrayals of the buttoned up world of Sydney's rich in novels such as *Voss*, *The Vivisector* and *The Eye of the Storm*. His books are filled with references to farts, bodily functions and sex. 'Some critics complain that my characters are always farting', he wrote in his autobiography (and it is true, they are). 'Well, we do, don't we? *Fart*. Nuns fart according to tradition and *patisserie*. I have actually heard one'.<sup>106</sup> Bodily functions are portrayed as more important than ideas of the intellect for the creative artist: 'a smooth, velvety stool might have been the great rectifier', muses a (physically and creatively) constipated Hurtle Duffield, 'much more depended on the bowels than the intellect was prepared to admit'.<sup>107</sup> Meanwhile, sex is almost always portrayed as unpleasant and rather disgusting, if not violent: a woman's hands in the coital act are 'claws', knees 'tremble and knock' as the protagonist (in this case Duffield) begins 'to tear her breasts apart, to get at the flesh inside the skin: the scented, running juices; in a drought even the bitter seeds could be sucked and spat out'.<sup>108</sup> 'Don't be too strait-laced', he told the librarians of Australia, and he certainly followed his own advice.<sup>109</sup> Brad Darrach mentions his 'fine, sweaty flair for physical detail'.<sup>110</sup> This can be seen in one of many descriptions of food in *The Eye of the Storm*: 'The perfectly folded omelette shuddered as it settled on the plate, not so much from resignation as voluptuousness'.<sup>111</sup> Indyk meanwhile discusses his 'abundance and flamboyance', his 'baroque' style and his 'expressionism', all 'coloured and no doubt intensified by his reaction to Protestant inhibition'.<sup>112</sup>

Another similarity to Clark.

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<sup>105</sup> Patrick White to Geoffrey Dutton, 17/9/1980, *Patrick White Letters*, p. 537.

<sup>106</sup> Patrick White, *Flaws in the Glass*, p. 143. White's descriptions of farts became more common in the mid-career novels: 'He would have liked to enjoy a fart now they were finished (a meal), but supposed he shouldn't.' (*The Vivisector*, p. 436); 'Arnold Wyburd hardly allowed himself to hear what could only be a slow, soft fart from the direction of his client's bed; he could not remember ever having heard a woman break wind before'; 'Sometimes falling asleep (after sex) her prince farted as though in disgust.' (*The Eye of the Storm*, pp. 30/55.)

<sup>107</sup> Patrick White, *The Vivisector*, p. 381.

<sup>108</sup> Patrick White, *The Vivisector*, p. 335.

<sup>109</sup> Patrick White, manuscript of 'Address to the Librarians of Australia', Mitchell Library, Sydney, 19/9/1980, Patrick White Papers, Box 15.

<sup>110</sup> Brad Darrach, review of *Riders in the Chariot*, *Time Magazine*, 6/10/1961, cited by M.A. Orthofer, *The Complete Review*, <http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/whitep/riders.htm>; accessed 12/12/2016.

<sup>111</sup> Patrick White, *The Eye of the Storm*, p. 372.

<sup>112</sup> Ivor Indyk, 'Is Patrick White anti-Australian?', Sydney Writers' Festival, 19/5/2012 and 'Patrick White's expressionism', in Ian Henderson and Anouk Lang (eds), *Patrick White Beyond the Grave*, p. 132.

Meanwhile, White himself saw the act of writing as akin to quotidian bodily functions, and was pleased that he was not alone in this, some large presences in the canon, he declared, sharing this view:

I shocked some people the other night by saying that writing is really like shitting; and then, reading the letters of Pushkin a little later, I found he said exactly the same thing! It's something you have to get out of you.<sup>113</sup>

He delighted in shocking; an Australian audience, in particular. His use of vulgarity reflected his own character, which, Marr tells us, was gossipy and far from cerebral. Guests at his dinner parties were often surprised, if it was their first invitation, at the lack of highbrow discussion in evidence around the table; White preferred gossip, which ought not to surprise us that much given both his opinion of intellectuals, and his career as a novelist interested in everyday life, language and interaction, as well as society's mores. We might consider that his vulgar streak was also his own way of 'democratising' his work in order to show that his novels were not of some other, detached realm. It served to emphasise the ordinariness of the lives depicted, which was important because it was through this that the profundity at the heart of the Australian 'emptiness' could be shown, as we have seen. And ultimately it would seem that his goal was not so entirely different to the distrusted, democratising cultural nationalists, for what was most 'essential' in the defence of an 'independent democracy' was, he said, 'sharpened minds', 'otherwise, when our British and American overlords have faded away, Australia may be remembered by relics of a quaint, abortive culture in the museums of Japan's colonial empire'.<sup>114</sup> Such a vision – articulated in a 1981 speech entitled 'The state of the colony' – was remarkably similar to that of Vance Palmer in 1942. Back then the threat from Japan was seemingly more real than it was in 1981. But the terrible fate sketched out was much the same, and it would seem that White, towards the end of his life as he became more of a public figure and took up more political causes, had travelled a lot closer to the

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<sup>113</sup> Patrick White, 'In the making', p. 22.

<sup>114</sup> Patrick White, 'The state of the colony', manuscript for speech, 1981, Patrick White Papers, Box 15.

likes of the Palmers, Phillips, Christesen *et al* in his engagement with the cultural idea of Australia. ‘Now, perhaps because I am an old man’, he said, ‘I am obsessed by the limitations of time – not only that it is running out for me personally, but for Western Civilisation as a whole, and this retarded colony in particular’.<sup>115</sup> If he was no intellectual, but just a vulgar writer with a cantankerous character and a delight in being an ‘outsider’ in what he derisively insisted remained a colonial society, he was still strongly engaged in the cultural and spiritual welfare of Australia, and as such helped shape the idea of Australia in a way few, if any, other cultural figures of the twentieth century were able to do.

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<sup>115</sup> Patrick White, ‘Address to the Librarians of Australia’.



v) Conclusion: Creating Australia

Poet Joseph Brodsky, when he accepted his Nobel Prize in 1987, declared that because ‘the lock and stock of literature’ is ‘human diversity and perversity’, it means that literature is a ‘reliable antidote for any attempt’ toward ‘summary solutions to the problems of human existence’. He advocated ‘choosing our political leaders on the basis of their reading experience and not their political programmes’, because reading Dickens or Dostoevsky or Stendhal creates civilized human beings who are less likely to make barbaric decisions: ‘for someone who has read a lot of Dickens, to shoot his like in the name of some idea is somewhat more problematic than for someone who has read no Dickens’.<sup>116</sup> This, I think, is how the cultural nationalists were thinking as they strived for a ‘civilized’ Australia in which national policy was not formulated in a vacuum of ideas, but by people who were knowledgeable of the world in a literary sense. Phillips hoped that an Australian tradition would give to the nation an artistic and intellectual idea of itself. In this way, Australia would be remembered for its great writers, who, in making the myths of the nation, make the nation itself.

To Patrick White, Australians’ lack of this literary knowledge or sympathy or understanding was the core problem. Its lack created an unfeeling, ‘empty’ nation, one, as we have seen, he attacked over and over again. Brodsky saw an emptiness in his native Soviet Russia, from which he had been exiled:

Looking back, I can say now that we were beginning in an empty – indeed, a terrifyingly wasted – place, and that, intuitively rather than consciously, we aspired precisely to the re-creation of the effect of culture’s continuity, to the reconstruction of its forms and tropes, toward filling its few surviving and often totally compromised forms with our own new content.

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<sup>116</sup> Joseph Brodsky, ‘Acceptance Speech’, *On Grief and Reason*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1995, pp. 52/3.

The Australian situation in the mid-twentieth century was not, of course, as brutal or ‘compromised’ as that of Stalin’s USSR, but to the Australian writers of that era the materialist and ignorant contemporary culture still represented, in its own way, a national tragedy (and such hyperbolic terms were not uncommon from the lips and pens of the cultural nationalists). They might have recognised Brodsky’s assertion that ‘the Russian tragedy is precisely the tragedy of a society in which literature turned out to be the prerogative of the minority: the celebrated Russian intelligentsia’.<sup>117</sup> The Australian intelligentsia was not exactly ‘celebrated’, that was part of the problem as they saw it, and anyway a writer such as White, again as we have made clear, was virulent in his own disdain for any such ‘intelligentsia’. But did White’s own Nobel go some way to filling the void? The objective of the cultural nationalists was to make of Australia a literature that could do the continent justice and give the people a worthwhile culture and identity – or, in fact, to *create* Australia, to make the idea of the nation, create its ‘content’, as Brodsky would have it, where previously there had been no ideas and where creativity had been absent. And this is what Australian writers had been trying to do, but they had struggled in this endeavour, or worse, had struggled even to be *heard* trying to do it (because they had been pilloried or just plain ignored). Worst of all, as Wallace-Crabbe believed, they had barely even bothered.

It seems that in other colonial countries writers had not bothered, either. Jorge Luis Borges criticised the nationalist writers of his own country, Argentina, by saying that they ‘pretend to venerate the capacities of the Argentine mind but want to limit the poetic exercises of that mind to a few impoverished local themes, as if we Argentines could only speak of *orillas* and *estancias* and not of the universe’. But Borges refuted such a view, and refused to forego the European tradition just because it was not Argentinian: ‘our tradition is all of Western culture’, he asserted, and ‘if we surrender ourselves to that voluntary dream which is artistic creation, we shall be Argentine and we shall be good or tolerable writers’.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Joseph Brodsky, ‘Acceptance Speech’, pp. 55–6 & 53.

<sup>118</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, ‘The Argentine writer and tradition’, *Labyrinths*, London: Penguin, 1962, pp. 216–20.

White, drawn to his homeland but temperamentally a Londoner as he often said, did just as Borges stipulated: surrendering himself to the ‘dream’ of artistic creation and in so doing making literature of universal worth, but *Australian*. If a national identity was to be found, White believed, it was through universal truths, or the inner world: it was ‘a question of spiritual values’, he said, ‘and must come from within before it can convince and influence others’.<sup>119</sup> When his career was crowned with the Nobel Prize, suddenly a literary understanding of Australia was perceived and had meaning beyond the confines of a few initiates. He had ‘created’ a new continent, as the citation said: in other words, until literature came along the continent had no real shape, no ideas to sustain it, and had been largely irrelevant and unimportant. But now the colonial culture had been dismantled and replaced. And thus the central importance of White lies in the fact that he found or created a national idea that could fill the void, the great Australian emptiness, and thus create Australia. It is a potent legacy, but it is flawed in one striking way: what of the people who were in Australia before the Europeans? White did not address this. Alf Dubbo, in *Riders in the Chariot*, is a powerful character, but only as an outsider. We shall now turn to a writer who thought much more deeply about the Aboriginality of the land, and tried to make it an integral part of the nation.

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<sup>119</sup> Patrick White, ‘The role of the Australian citizen in a nuclear war’, 1983.



## CHAPTER 10

### Judith Wright: Rectifying ‘Australia’s Tragedy’



Louis Kahan, Portrait of Judith Wright, 1969. ‘The gift of the poet is to *feel* the truth that cannot yet be thought.’

#### i) Introduction

Judith Wright said that her first collection of poetry, *The Moving Image* (1946), was an attempt to escape the ‘tyranny’ of her background in the New England tablelands.<sup>1</sup> It limited her, suppressed her, stopped her from being her true self. And yet it was also an integral part of who she was, her ‘blood’s country’.<sup>2</sup> Whilst tearing herself away, she kept returning. She could barely write of anything else. But she

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Wright, manuscript of poetry reading and lecture, unpublished, Warana Festival, Brisbane, 1974, Judith Wright Papers, National Library of Australia, Canberra, MS 5781, Box 32, Folder 239.

<sup>2</sup> Judith Wright, ‘South of my Days’, from *The Moving Image* (1946), *Collected Poems*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1994, pp. 20–1.

wanted her writing to re-imagine that landscape, to re-define it for a modern Australia finally cut adrift from the hang ups and shibboleths of the pastoral world, the world into which she was born, but which she ultimately mistrusted. A.D. Hope went so far as to say that Wright's poetry helped create the 'idea' of New England 'in heart and mind', 'as her forefathers helped to create it in fact and as her own father... did so much to create it politically'.<sup>3</sup> But this political conception of the country was what she sought to escape from, and the guilt she felt at her family's role in the cruelties visited upon the land and its Indigenous people drove her writing and the course of her life, ultimately seeing her forsake poetry for activism.<sup>4</sup>

Wright tried to find a different way to understand Australia, but this was not a nationalist theory. It was bound up in the land, in its ecology and in its Aboriginality, in the culture and traditions of thousands of years. In this way the scope of her imagination was far wider than that of her contemporaries. But she was not unaware of the limits of what she could achieve. 'The Lake' (1963), says Fiona Capp, counter-intuitively shows that 'no poem can capture reality as does the reflection in a lake'; it reveals the poet's fear 'that we can never be true to nature. What we see in it will always be a reflection of the human mind', like the poet's own reflection in the water.<sup>5</sup> We see, therefore, the limits of language and of poetry, although Capp does not mention that the Aborigines were able to dream the land and make it real through language; albeit oral, not written. Perhaps Wright realised she would never be able to do so herself, at least in as meaningful or true a manner. Perhaps in 'The Lake' she acknowledged this shortcoming. Perhaps too she felt guilt at her lack of understanding. She grew uneasy with treating nature as a 'forest

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<sup>3</sup> A.D. Hope, cited in Fiona Capp, *My Blood's Country*, Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2010, p. 61. Phillip Wright was an active civic citizen: councillor of the Graziers' Association of New South Wales (1927–67, serving two years as President, 1946–8); member of the United Country Party's Central Council during the Second World War; and, in the New England context, Chancellor of the University of New England (1960–70) and President of the New England New State Movement (1944–6). See: Jillian Oppenheimer, 'Wright, Phillip Arundell (1889–1970)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/wright-phillip-arundell-12076/text21665>, published in hardcopy 2002; accessed online 9/10/2017.

<sup>4</sup> Admittedly quite late in life – she stopped writing and dedicated herself to conservation and Aboriginal rights in 1985, when she was seventy. See Veronica Brady, *South of my Days: A Biography of Judith Wright*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1998, p. 446.

<sup>5</sup> Fiona Capp, *My Blood's Country*, p. 135.

of symbols for poetic harvesting'.<sup>6</sup> There needed to be something more, a deeper connection. She aimed, through the language of her poetry, to conjure this connection, hitherto absent from the imposed culture of white settlement. And, as a woman brought up in a patriarchal world, making her way as a poet despite numerous prejudices and impediments, we should not underestimate the scale of her achievement. The legacy of her work is a changed perception of the nation, a uniquely Australian sensibility showing subsequent generations a way to escape the cringe, and owing everything to her proud independence of spirit and intellect.

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<sup>6</sup> Judith Wright, cited in Fiona Capp, *My Blood's Country*, p. 134.

ii) 'A revolution directed towards feeling'

Some of Judith Wright's most moving writing – and 'moving' is an apt word, as we shall see – is to be found in her descriptions of places, geographical features, animals. Often, these descriptions relate to childhood. 'Child and wattle-tree', 'Northern River', 'South of my days', 'For New England' – these poems, all from her first collection, are some of the many that trace the flora, fauna and topography of her youth in the New England tablelands, closely relating this 'clean, lean, hungry country' – 'bony slopes wincing under the winter'<sup>7</sup> – to her formative years. In 'My first snake', a prose piece, she describes the guilt she felt, aged eleven, at killing a snake. The girl she was leaves the snake dying, but on impulse returns:

There lay the snake; he was moving a little. I knelt down perilously close to him. Along his beautifully mosaiced body showed the marks of the stick; it was inert, for his back was broken in many places; only his head still moved from side to side, wearily, as though he were a human soul looking for escape from a body too racked to bear. It was a gentle and suffering motion; I had seen my mother, when she thought no-one was looking, move her head a little in that way, seekingly and hopelessly, across her pillow.<sup>8</sup>

Wright transfers the sufferings inflicted on the snake to the guilt she felt at the lonely decline of her mother, who spent her last years gravely ill, dying when Judith was twelve. Growing up, she wanted to be, as she said, 'Outside', away from the traditional female domain of 'Inside' – but her 'heedless dislike of sewing, crochet, and most indoor female occupations except reading' added to her ill mother's isolation and loneliness.<sup>9</sup> 'Claiming the authority to be herself' (as biographer Veronica Brady puts it)<sup>10</sup> had an

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<sup>7</sup> Judith Wright, 'South of my Days'.

<sup>8</sup> Judith Wright, 'My first snake', undated manuscript, Judith Wright Papers, Box 32, Folder 238.

<sup>9</sup> Judith Wright, *Half a Lifetime*, pp. 37 ff.

<sup>10</sup> Veronica Brady, *South of my Days*, 23/4. Brady cites Judith Wright interview with Heather Rusden, Oral History Collection, National Library of Australia, TRC 2202, 1/7.



impact on those she loved, and she realised this as she grew older. Her youthful destruction of a wild animal is extrapolated to larger, wider themes as she contemplates ‘pain, evil and decay – the scroll written everywhere, the secret work on the underside of life. I was the devil, his instrument and victim in one. I began to cry for the snake; my heart was tearing apart with his pain and his death’.<sup>11</sup> It is as if her eleven-year-old self was an instrument of evil, her killing of the snake – surely quite a natural, if very brave, reaction for a frightened little girl confronted by a snake in the garden – a metaphor for greater, more powerful ills visited upon the land. A 1966 poem, ‘Snakeskin on a Gate’, shows that perhaps she need not have been afraid – walking tentatively by the gate of her garden, having found a ‘snake-slough’ on the ground, she comes across the snake which has just shed its skin:

Set free of its dim shell, his glinting eye  
saw only movement and light and had no fear of me.  
Like this from our change, my soul, let us drink renewal.<sup>12</sup>

Our terror before the natural world is misplaced. Even the terrifying and dangerous snake ultimately represents renewal and hope. We will see that Wright believed in nature and the land almost as a sort of deity, a renewing force that could re-shape Australians’ consciousness and show an alternative to the disaster, as she perceived it, of progress and mechanization. So often, though, Wright seemed pessimistic that such renewal could be achieved. ‘The Spring’, a companion piece to ‘The Snake’, shows the terrible human impact of white settlement. She contemplates a spring, ‘its usefulness... almost over’, the cars that noisily and unseeingly skim pass seldom stopping:

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<sup>11</sup> Judith Wright, ‘My first snake’.

<sup>12</sup> Judith Wright, ‘Snakeskin on a Gate’, from *The Other Half* (1966), in *Collected Poems*, pp. 243–4. Despite the story of the young Judith killing her first snake, and her admiration for the sun-baking beast in the poem, Wright did not feel enough guilt to stop decapitating snakes. In a letter to friend Kathleen McArthur (19/4/1953) she describes killing a snake on her front doorstep: ‘I don’t think my lifelong habit of mashing snakes will ever yield to treatment... One needs to be an enthusiast to like black snakes.’ Judith Wright Papers, Box 78, Folder 568.

The days when the local teamsters kept a copper cup hung there on a spike, for their own use and the use of travellers, are long past. The spring's meaning has gone as irrevocably as the tribe that once gave away its secret hiding-place.<sup>13</sup>

A previous rural existence, represented by the bullock teamsters, is lamented. But that is mere nostalgia for a past that, anyway, the poet feels a great deal of ambivalence for. Her guilt at her own family's pastoral privilege grew as the decades wore on, her original investigation of their triumph over the land in *The Generations of Men* (1959) giving way to an exploration of what they took away from the Aboriginal people in *The Cry for the Dead* (1981).<sup>14</sup> As Graeme Davison says, the 'union of land and lineage' celebrated by Wright 'is now relocated to the Aborigines they dispossessed'.<sup>15</sup> This is the most haunting – not to say telling – loss felt at the spring. Progress, represented by road and cars, not only obliterates the beauty of the spring, it also, and more importantly, erases its meaning, mirroring the way it has erased the tribe that once used it.

Remembering previous tribes and generations was a common theme. In the early poem 'Country Town' (1946), she remembers shepherds, bushrangers and travellers, who mourn a country which is 'no longer the landscape they knew'. Now the 'hostile hills' are 'netted in with fences', and 'the town creeps over' the landscape; 'a landscape safe with bitumen and banks'. Progress has brought with it sealed roads, stale towns and the ordered pattern of fields, replacing an atavistic land which, while it may have appeared hostile to the settlers, nevertheless held an intrinsic character, now destroyed. 'What is it we have lost and left behind?' she asks. Whatever it was, its replacement 'is not ours'.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Judith Wright, 'The Spring', undated manuscript, Judith Wright Papers, Box 32, Folder 238.

<sup>14</sup> Judith Wright, *The Generations of Men*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1959 and *The Cry for the Dead*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1981.

<sup>15</sup> Graeme Davison, *The Use and Abuse of Australian History*, cited in Tom Griffiths, 'The Cry for the Dead: Judith Wright', in *The Art of Time Travel*, p. 106.

<sup>16</sup> Judith Wright, 'Country Town', from *The Moving Image* (1946), in *Collected Poems*, pp. 13–4.

The sadness at the changes wrought, coupled with the longing for a lost past, echoes that expressed by the nineteenth-century English ‘peasant poet’ John Clare, who mourned the loss of nature, and the ancient village customs linked to it, brought about by the enclosure of the land. Wright’s distaste for the ‘netting in’ of the hills is very similar to Clare’s for the fencing in of common land, and, as has been little commented on before, Clare’s poetry was a big influence on her writing and her ideas. She discussed him in a lecture, quoting him: ‘True poetry is not in words, but images that thoughts express’. She modified this: ‘nowadays’, she said, we ‘make a distinction that was not so clear in Clare’s day, between thought and feeling’. The former, she asserted, had become a scientific word, used to ‘express relationships between facts rather than feelings’. Thinking had become a ‘practical and abstract activity’, with a ‘heavy emphasis’ on ‘mental and physical experience’; but ‘the other side of us, the side of feeling, where in fact much of our life does lie’, had become ‘dim’ and ‘unimportant’, and thus people had forgotten that ‘meaningful relationships’ could be made ‘between feelings as easily as between mental concepts’.<sup>17</sup> These needed to be illuminated, and it was the job of the poet to do so.

Wright pointed out that, despite what Clare had said, poetry ‘can only find its speech with words’, and these words ‘must follow its meaning exactly’ before ‘the basic invention, the ‘images’, can step across the bridge from the inventor’s mind to the minds of others’.<sup>18</sup> This is the ‘moving image’ – it moves from poet to reader, and it also *moves* the reader’s feelings, not with thought or ideas, but with emotion, and with connection to land and environment and people. To Wright, this is what is meant by poetry. The poet, crucially, is the ‘inventor’, inventing these images that can make connections in the reader’s mind – images that have a resonance that can give a deeper meaning to a concept such as Australia. Thus poetry can do what white people had singularly failed to do thus far. The earth, as Capp points out, is to Wright ‘the source of life and language’,<sup>19</sup> but humans had become alienated from it, seen in the destruction

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<sup>17</sup> Judith Wright, in ‘Invention and interpretation’, manuscript of lecture, ‘second draft’, undated, Judith Wright Papers, Box 32, Folder 240.

<sup>18</sup> Judith Wright, ‘Invention and interpretation’.

<sup>19</sup> Fiona Capp, *My Blood’s Country*, p. 39.

wrought by nineteenth-century pastoralism, or by modern mechanized society. 'Our mechanical and electronic world demands to be served', said Wright, 'and it wrings the life out of its servants'.<sup>20</sup>

Mechanization was not experienced just in terms of technology, it had also been transferred into thought processes, ways of seeing and feeling. This could be seen in criticism, in academia, in the teaching of literature. The substandard teaching of poetry in schools was a preoccupation of Wright's. She received letters on the topic, and she was not unresponsive. One Evelyn Read of Victor Harbour implored her to refuse to allow her poetry to be 'dissected in schools', as her two sons were wrestling with her poems for the Leaving Certificate, and 'instead of learning to love and appreciate poetry they are fast coming to loathe it!'<sup>21</sup> A South Australian pupil asked whether the blacksmith's boy in her poem 'Legend' was 'a symbol of anything or not, as this is giving us considerable trouble'; at the bottom of the letter Wright scrawled in pencil: 'No!'<sup>22</sup> She said that such 'mechanization of our responses' dulled appreciation of not just poetry, but of nature and the land. It denied 'the truth and the importance of individual feeling' – 'feeling becomes a stock response, a mass-reaction, automatically evoked by certain stimuli'.<sup>23</sup> Anyone who has sat a public examination whilst at school might recognise what she is talking about. She argued that the proper role of poetry in education was to encourage feeling, and that the push for 'fact and meaning and learning' precluded children from developing 'imagination and feeling'.<sup>24</sup> She called for a 'revolution in education and our own estimate of ourselves, a revolution directed towards feeling'.<sup>25</sup>

Criticism, like education, had, Wright argued, often failed to consider the 'quality and intelligence' of 'feeling' in poetry.<sup>26</sup> In a scientific world, placing little or no value on what makes us human, links to the natural world around us had been lost. This happened when the ancient land of England was enclosed

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<sup>20</sup> Judith Wright, 'Invention and interpretation'.

<sup>21</sup> Evelyn Read to Judith Wright, 3/5/1964, Judith Wright Papers, Box 28, Folder 211.

<sup>22</sup> W. Jarret to Judith Wright, 14/3/1963, Judith Wright Papers, Box 28, Folder 211.

<sup>23</sup> Judith Wright, 'Invention and interpretation'.

<sup>24</sup> Judith Wright, 'The role of poetry in education', manuscript of paper given at University of New England seminar on Literature in Education, 14 – 20/1/1966, C.B. Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 356.

<sup>25</sup> Judith Wright, 'Invention and interpretation'.

<sup>26</sup> Judith Wright, 'Invention and interpretation'.

at the time of Clare's youth, and it happened when European pastoralists arrived on the Australian continent, denuding the land of its flora, fauna and even its ancient people, all for material gain. Materialism, in Clare's England and Wright's Australia, is the destroyer, like the young Wright killing the snake, or the young Clare stealing eggs from birds' nests, a childhood hobby.<sup>27</sup> The poets-to-be, despite their destructive ways, were nevertheless connected to the land, they loved nature and it fuelled their burgeoning poetic sensibilities. As that precocity ripened into maturity, their poetry sought a return to the natural ways of childhood, 'the purest well from which the creative artist draws' (as White called it). Contemplation of childhood was an exercise in nostalgia: for Clare, the pre-enclosed countryside of his childhood was an 'Eden' lost forever – not just because he had grown to adulthood, but also because, with fences, ditches and warning signs, it had been taken away from the common people. For Wright, her family had been part of the pastoral history that had had the same impact as enclosure in the changes it wrought upon the land. The world of her youth had been corrupted. Later she knew this, and did not shy from it. The vestiges of Aboriginal life, seen in the periphery of her childhood, are recalled and pored over:

As an enclave of England, Thalgarrah and Swallowfield [childhood homes], set either side of a clear river, and the lake and the orchard, were to my innocent eyes examples of settled beauty and success. But if you poked about in the stones of the river-bed, you found relics of an occupation by quite another culture. The stone tools the Aborigines had left were not always easy to recognise, being made of dark rock which was also the material of the natural stone.

What happened to the people who must have gathered here 'is not recorded'. Wright says that as a young girl she did not know what these tools were – it was 'many years before I could see them for

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<sup>27</sup> Jonathan Bate, *John Clare: A Biography*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003, p. 30.

what they were'.<sup>28</sup> Childhood innocence was built on destruction and usurpation, and therein lies the sadness and the darkness inherent in 'my blood's country'.

Wright's poetry, however, was not simply about her own relationship with the land. She rejected a surfeit of self-analysis, saying that 'poems about people are generally more interesting than poems about the poet'.<sup>29</sup> She wanted to 'commune', not with herself, but with others – it was less about examining her own life, and more about her life as lived with other people, as well as with nature and the landscape. Therein lies identity, of the self within something larger. In this way the 'feelings' Wright deemed so important, indivisible from land and people, could 'make new meanings',<sup>30</sup> transforming understanding of Australia. This was the role of the poet, and it was what Aborigines had been doing for thousands of years. She argued that 'artists have something higher than the public to feel responsible to':

The painters in the caves of Lascaux, or in Arnhem Land or the Kimberleys... were not drawing reindeer and kangaroos for the applause of their contemporaries and to be complimented on the remarkable likenesses achieved; they were working for an immortal court of the gods, or whatever kind their gods were.<sup>31</sup>

Such an elemental need to create was at the heart of poetry and art. The poet or the artist could not do it for anyone but him or herself, and she quoted Keats, who said that he 'had not the slightest feel of humility towards the public, or to anything in existence but the Eternal Being, the Principle of Beauty, and the memory of Great Men'.<sup>32</sup> Wright wrote that poets might once have shared the values of their public, but in the modern world this was no longer the case, society – 'the power-organization' – having

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<sup>28</sup> Judith Wright, *Half a Lifetime*, pp. 20–1.

<sup>29</sup> Judith Wright, poetry reading and lecture, Warana Festival, Brisbane, 1974.

<sup>30</sup> Judith Wright, 'Invention and interpretation'.

<sup>31</sup> Judith Wright, 'Invention and interpretation'.

<sup>32</sup> John Keats, Preface to 'Endymion', quoted in Judith Wright, 'Invention and interpretation'.

become the poet's 'mortal enemy'.<sup>33</sup> As Brian Fitzpatrick had castigated the 'trade in literature', Wright too understood the need for an Australian art that answered only to the timeless values of truth and beauty. In 'Poem and Audience' (1963) she boldly declared to her audience that:

No, it's not you we speak to. Don't believe it.

The words go past you to another ear.<sup>34</sup>

It must be the ear of posterity – an ear, she hoped, that once leant would be more attuned to the beauty and spirituality of the natural world, as well as the horror of its destruction. The tin ears of the present were a lost cause, but the importance of posterity was clear. Posterity, of course, could be cruel, as we have seen, but, for Wright as for so many of the writers we have looked at, it was regarded as the one true arbiter.

Wright's similarity to Clare, who shared a publisher with Keats although the two never met, is clear in the elemental urge to create in the face of mechanized progress: he made poetry, his biographer says, 'out of the fragile minutiae that animated his love for the richly textured world encircled within the horizon of his knowledge'. Escaping an Essex asylum to walk a hundred miles home in 1841, Clare coined the term 'self-identity' as he found himself once more surrounded by the countryside to which he belonged; subsequently committed to another asylum for the rest of his life, he coined another term, 'sad non-identity'. His understanding of himself was wrapped up in the idea of home, from which he had been wrenched; he had no identity otherwise. Similarly, when he left 'the woods and heaths and favourite spots' of Helpston, the village he had lived his entire life, and moved to a cottage in Northborough three miles away (though it may as well have been three hundred), he was not just leaving the place that he

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<sup>33</sup> Judith Wright, 'Meaning, value and poetry', draft manuscript of article, 1/11/1967, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 356. This essay was published in *Because I was Invited*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1975, pp. 42–5.

<sup>34</sup> Judith Wright, 'Poem and Audience', from *Five Senses* (1963), in *Collected Poems*, p. 210.

knew, but ‘the place that *had known him*’.<sup>35</sup> It was a vital part of him. Likewise, Wright, travelling back to New England during the war, felt the same deep kinship with the land of her childhood:

As the train panted up the foothills of the Moonbis and the haze of dust and eucalypt vapour dimmed the drought stricken landscape, I found myself suddenly and sharply aware of it as ‘my country’. These hills and valleys were – *not mine, but me*; I felt it under my own ribs. Whatever other blood I held, this was the country I loved and knew.<sup>36</sup>

This connection to the land is the crucial knowledge given to the poet. Clare ‘used his imagination to turn humble objects into grander things. Like a bird building a nest, he collected fragments and made them into wholes, into homes’.<sup>37</sup> The bird’s nest is an apposite image, because nests were the material of the natural world he transformed with his poetry (and in his youth, of course, he had raided them). He leads us to the nightingale’s nest – ‘There have I hunted like a very boy/Creeping on hands and knees through matted thorn/To find her nest and see her feed her young’ – and describes it in minute detail:

How curious is the nest: no other bird  
Uses such loose materials or weaves  
Its dwelling in such spots – dead oaken leaves  
Are placed without and velvet moss within  
And little scraps of grass and, scant and spare,  
What scarcely seem materials, down and hair.<sup>38</sup>

He loved birds, animals, fields, woods and copses, the seasons and the everyday life of the country community. His love of these things, as E.P. Thompson says, ‘conveys his sense of belonging’. As

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<sup>35</sup> Jonathan Bate, *John Clare*, pp. 63/491/363; emphasis Bate’s.

<sup>36</sup> Judith Wright, *Half a Lifetime*, p. 158; my emphasis.

<sup>37</sup> Jonathan Bate, *John Clare*, p. 31.

<sup>38</sup> John Clare, ‘The Nightingale’s Nest’, *Poems*, selected by Paul Farley, London: Faber & Faber, 2007, pp. 53–5.



enclosure destroyed the world he had known (Helpston was enclosed during his adolescence) he railed against the ‘new instrumental and exploitative stance’ against country labour, and ‘also towards the natural world’. Thompson calls him, ‘without hindsight’, a ‘poet of ecological protest’: he did not make a division between humans and nature, but lamented ‘a threatened equilibrium in which both were involved’.<sup>39</sup> Wright too was a poet of protest – it was one of the things that drew her to Clare. She said of ‘poor Clare’ that he had been driven mad by his public,<sup>40</sup> and like every poet – as Keats bitterly put it – the hostility of the public was a given. It was not just twentieth-century Australian poets who had to combat philistinism. In fact, as Wright might have understood, it was not just the public that drove Clare to insanity – the enclosure of the land and tearing apart of the rural way of life to which he was intrinsically bound also played a role. Jonathan Bate notes that over fifty of Clare’s poems begin with the phrase ‘I love’, but his sonnet on trespassing, written just before his committal to the asylum, begins ‘I dread’ – his alienation from the land, and its telling effect on his mental instability, is made abundantly clear.<sup>41</sup>

The stuff of Clare’s poetry was the stuff of Wright’s poetry. She too mourned a lost equilibrium, in this case that provided by the ancient Aboriginal way of life. She too expressed her sense of both belonging and loss through poetry of the rural geography of her childhood, fixated on the minutiae of the natural world. She published a whole collection on birds,<sup>42</sup> and her poems abound with the rich visual imagery of rural Australia (sometimes threatened). Her 1953 collection *The Gateway* alone contains poems

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<sup>39</sup> E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture*, New York: The New Press, 1993, p. 180–1. Modern commentators have in particular picked up on what they see as Clare’s environmentalism; see: George Monbiot, ‘John Clare, the poet of the environmental crisis – 200 years ago’, *The Guardian*, 10/7/2012, at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jul/09/john-clare-poetry>; accessed 10/10/2017.

<sup>40</sup> ‘Clare was, if anyone has been, an example of what the public can do to a poet’; Judith Wright, ‘Invention and interpretation’. To describe him as ‘poor Clare’, as Wright does, has been very common, from his own time onwards: two examples include Victorian writer Agnes Strickland in 1860 and twentieth-century Irish labouring poet Patrick Kavanagh in a 1936 tribute to Clare. Bate says that he rose to fame as a ‘peasant poet’ and died ‘mad’ in a lunatic asylum, remembered as ‘poor John Clare’ – ‘peasant poets and mad poets were considered to be freaks of nature’; *John Clare*, pp. 524/47/56.

<sup>41</sup> In fact, as Bate says, Clare’s ‘mania’ is unlikely to have had a single origin. Factors might have included his heavy drinking, the probability he suffered from malaria (then common in the fens where he lived), mercury poisoning following treatment for venereal disease, the lasting effects of a childhood concussion incurred when he fell from a tree, a life of poverty as he suffered the stress of providing for a family of seven, poor diet, and the ‘manic intensity of his writing’ – *John Clare*, pp. 405/409–12.

<sup>42</sup> Judith Wright, *Birds*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1962.

about floods, droughts, ‘eroded hills’, orange trees and flame trees, swamps, orchids, winter, cicadas, forests and fire.<sup>43</sup> The natural world is unknowable to her, as in the markings on a scribbly-gum:

I peeled its splitting bark  
and found the written track  
of a life I could not read.<sup>44</sup>

Or it is defenceless against the unnatural encroachments of pastoralism, as in ‘Flying-fox on barbed wire’:

Little nightmare flying-fox  
trapped on the cruel barbs of day  
has no weapon but a wing  
and a tiny scream.<sup>45</sup>

The first poets after European arrival, Wright averred, had to deal with the ‘wholly unfamiliar landscape’ of the new continent ‘in the terms of *English* poetry’. But the landscape ‘demanded quite other treatment’. The Aborigines, with their ancient ‘art religion’, were ‘delicately adapted to the country’ and ‘bound up most deeply with it’ – Europeans, however, ‘started, as poets, with a tradition alien to everything we found within the country’, an ‘imposed’ tradition, at odds with the land, uncomfortable and awkward, failing to ‘fit’ and ‘difficult to adapt to the new conditions’.<sup>46</sup> Wright said that ‘Australia’s tragedy’ was that it ‘was settled by the English – no other race could have brought so sentimentally opposite a picture with them of what landscape should be’. This ‘tragedy’ was most obvious in the preference for a ‘pink plastic gladdie’ to ‘a clump of mallee or even a waratah’.<sup>47</sup> There was not even an

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<sup>43</sup> Judith Wright, from *The Gateway* (1953), *Collected Poems*, pp. 71–116.

<sup>44</sup> Judith Wright, ‘Scribbly-gum’, from *The Two Fires* (1955), in *Collected Poems*, p. 131.

<sup>45</sup> Judith Wright, ‘Flying-fox on barbed wire’, from *The Two Fires*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 132.

<sup>46</sup> Judith Wright, ‘Poetry in a young country’, manuscript of talk delivered at Seminar of Australian and Indian Literature, New Delhi, 12 – 16/1/1970, Judith Wright Papers, Box 32, Folder 238; emphasis Wright’s.

<sup>47</sup> Judith Wright, ‘Letter from Australia’, draft of article for *Landfall*, 20/4/1966, Judith Wright Papers, Box 31, Folder 237.

effort made to appreciate the uniquely Australian. Wright was determined to do so, and, as she felt her way towards a different way of understanding Australia, she relied heavily on the ideas of her partner, Jack McKinney.

iii) 'He has the clue': The influence of Jack McKinney

'Apocalyptic' and 'demon devotees' – Jack McKinney's kindred spirits.<sup>48</sup> Formulating a philosophy he maintained could explain the political and humanitarian nightmares of the mid-twentieth century, McKinney worked on the margins, keeping marginal intellectual company, as he challenged Western philosophical thought and what he perceived to be academic dogma. His influence on his partner Judith Wright was strong. The two of them were eventually married in 1962. They had lived together on Mount Tamborine since the late-forties – an unconventional relationship for the time, McKinney still married and unable to secure a divorce. In a letter to McKinney, Wright describes going for a walk with her father and telling him about their relationship – 'it was rather awful but he is really doing his best to understand'.<sup>49</sup> Wright called her life with McKinney 'non-conformist'.<sup>50</sup> This also serves as a fair description of his thought and ideas, which had such an influence on her. 'Politics', she argued, 'are not the important thing'; they were just the 'froth on top of the cauldron', but not 'what makes the water boil'. The 'really important thing' was to 'find out why the water's boiling', but it was also 'really difficult'. But this was why McKinney was so important, because, she said, 'he *has* the clue. Though probably no-one will recognise that fact for another fifty years'.<sup>51</sup>

Georgina Arnott says that Wright's youthful challenge to intellectual authority – which was manifest even in childhood in her compulsive reading and failure to act as little girls were supposed to act<sup>52</sup> – 'married well' with McKinney's concerns. 'Dominant Western intellectual approaches', he argued, relied 'too heavily on reason, and overlooked emotional perception. All knowledge offered by university departments was constrained by this limitation'. Alternative sources of knowledge needed to be sought,

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<sup>48</sup> Jack McKinney to C.B. Christesen, 29/12/1943, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 220.

<sup>49</sup> Judith Wright to Jack McKinney, 'Sunday night', 1946, in Clarke and McKinney (eds), *With Love and Fury: Selected Letters of Judith Wright*, p. 27.

<sup>50</sup> Judith Wright to Kathleen McArthur, 'Saturday', 1953, Judith Wright Papers, Box 78, Folder 568.

<sup>51</sup> Judith Wright to Kathleen McArthur, 'Saturday', 1953; emphasis Wright's.

<sup>52</sup> For an account of Wright's childhood reading compulsion, see *Half a Lifetime*, p. 49.

away from the ‘abhorrent intellectual frameworks’ of academic institutions.<sup>53</sup> Living together on Mount Tamborine, ‘practically’, as she said, ‘self-sentenced hermits’,<sup>54</sup> the two of them conjured philosophical theories and poetic forms outside the mainstream currents of intellectual debate (another way she was similar to Clare, living as she was in provincial isolation, apart from any sort of literary society). Those who resist the mechanization of thought and feeling, she asserted, are ‘left outside’, becoming ‘odd-balls’.<sup>55</sup> ‘Currently we are excited about a book called *Dianetics*’, she wrote enthusiastically to her friend Kathleen McArthur, ‘by one Ron Hubbard... It’s a totally new way of tackling psychological problems, a kind of lay therapy, and it really sounds like something to us’.<sup>56</sup> It was the intellectual influence provided by sources such as Hubbard, the Church of Scientology’s founder, which directed McKinney’s ideas, in turn guiding Wright as she advocated feelings over thought, emotional connection over intellectual reason. It illustrates why some considered him a crank, and why academia’s doors remained closed to him.

McKinney was, in Wright’s words, ‘a practically penniless wayside philosopher’ when she met him.<sup>57</sup> Twenty-three years older than her, a First World War veteran, farm labourer and father of four children, they met through Clem Christesen. At the outbreak of the war she was in Sydney, working for the University, before moving back to New England to help her father with his war work, where she began a correspondence with Christesen, the tyro editor of *Australian Letters*, sending him four poems in 1942 and expressing admiration for his magazine.<sup>58</sup> At this stage, her poetic voice and ideas nascent, the national literary vision provided by *Meanjin* held allure. The two exchanged friendly and admiring letters for the next two years as Wright, desperate to get out of New England, offered clerical support to Christesen. *Meanjin* was based in Brisbane, hub of the war effort, and Wright moved there in 1944.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Georgina Arnott, *The Unknown Judith Wright*, Crawley, WA: University of Western Australia Publishing, 2016, pp. 150–1.

<sup>54</sup> Judith Wright to Kathleen McArthur, ‘Saturday’, 1953.

<sup>55</sup> Judith Wright, ‘Invention and interpretation’.

<sup>56</sup> Judith Wright to Kathleen McArthur, 25/7/1953, Judith Wright Papers, Box 78, Folder 568.

<sup>57</sup> Judith Wright, *Half a Lifetime*, p. 209.

<sup>58</sup> Judith Wright to C.B. Christesen, 29/7/1942, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 356.

<sup>59</sup> She helped financially, sending *Meanjin* small donations (letters of 23/2 & 1/9/1943); her letter of 15/1/1944 shows her continued enthusiasm for the magazine and her support of his ideas; Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 356.

Queensland's capital, in her description, was a rundown place, full of soldiers on leave and prostitutes, the houses shabby for lack of paint, the dearth of soap meaning everyone and everything smelt, cockroaches and rats running rampant. Christesen had been energised by the war, but Wright's Brisbane is one where her brother Bruce is bogged down in red-tape in his army job, a sense of futility permeating the ramshackle city in a manner resembling the ennui described by Horne in his wartime memoirs.<sup>60</sup> For her the war (as we shall again see later) was a symbol of decay, not hope.

By coincidence, McKinney's first contact with Christesen was in the same month as Wright's: 'I have just been introduced to *Meanjin Papers*', he wrote, congratulating the editor on his 'hardihood in launching your frail barque onto such troubled waters'.<sup>61</sup> The two became friends, Christesen putting McKinney up when he was in Brisbane, and lending him books and journals.<sup>62</sup> McKinney sent the editor his writings, which, he said, were a response to Christesen's sense of urgency.

You see, what I'm now trying to do... is something in response to your plea that the situation is urgent and something wants to be done quickly before the whole show goes to smash. You infected me with your urgency – and then you left me in mid-air.

McKinney expressed dismay that it was taking Christesen so long to read his 'stuff': 'I know you've been flat out all that time, but you see Clem, *if* I have the solution (and I certainly have) then it should be worthwhile making an effort to get an idea of the nature of that solution'.<sup>63</sup> Christesen agreed to publish McKinney's manuscript, *Toward the Future*, but correspondence between the two through 1944 and 1945 illustrates how he dragged his feet. McKinney's claims for his ideas were startling – quoting poets such as Rilke, Eliot and Lawrence in support of them, he asked: 'is the connection obvious, or is it

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<sup>60</sup> Judith Wright, *Half a Lifetime*, pp. 176–81.

<sup>61</sup> Jack McKinney to C.B. Christesen, 7/7/1942, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 220.

<sup>62</sup> Jack McKinney to C.B. Christesen, 18/12/1943, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 220.

<sup>63</sup> Jack McKinney to C.B. Christesen, 29/12/1943, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 220; emphasis McKinney's.

only that I have the clue and so can see it?' He said that, having this 'clue', he was able to be 'spectator as well as participator' in the 'tremendously interesting world situation', and thus 'watch the whole complex situation taking form'. Emotional involvement, he said, 'shuts off understanding'.<sup>64</sup> McKinney saw himself as the lone possessor of objectivity; able, tucked away in a remote Queensland shack, to observe harrowing world events with a disinterest others failed to muster.

Christesen published McKinney's essays during the war years. 'Face to face with the Universal Mystery', he wrote, 'thought has run itself into a cul-de-sac of pure reason'. He advocated the role of the poet in such a circumstance: 'out of the atomism of experience' the poet must, through 'feeling', express 'a new vision of the unity of experience, a unity embracing the whole man'. As a corollary, the poet must also 'become the butt of the less-sensitive through whom the spiritual current of the age passes as a muddled stream'.<sup>65</sup> Within a few years McKinney would allocate Christesen to this class. The 'plight' of the world was due to the 'repudiation of the Universal Vision', approached through history, he asserted, in two 'fundamental' ways – 'namely, the Platonic dictum, that 'knowledge is Reminiscence', and that sense experience is not admissible as an element of knowledge'.<sup>66</sup> However, McKinney's epistemological contribution was that the senses *were* an essential part of understanding, and the chief role of the poet in the 'intellectual environment' was to show this, to 'replenish' the 'life of the spirit' at the 'fountain of Eternal Truth'. In a time of crisis, 'the poetic gift becomes not a mere personal possession, but a profound moral responsibility: on him who possesses it falls the ancient mantle of poet and prophet'.<sup>67</sup> Others, like Clark, were not afraid to take on this role of prophet – the historian was no poet, though. Did Wright

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<sup>64</sup> Jack McKinney to C.B. Christesen, 27/1/1944, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 220.

<sup>65</sup> Jack McKinney, 'Poet and thinker', *Meanjin*, vol. 2, no. 2, Winter 1943, pp. 36–7.

<sup>66</sup> Jack McKinney, 'Approach to the Universal Mystery', (rough) manuscript, undated (early- to mid-1940s), Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 356.

<sup>67</sup> Jack McKinney, 'The poet and the intellectual environment', *Meanjin*, vol. 2, no. 3, Spring 1943, pp. 46–8. One other essay of McKinney's published by Christesen was 'The poet and the modern world', *Meanjin*, vol. 3, no. 2, Winter 1944, pp. 74–80. McKinney's preoccupation with the role of the poet is easily seen.

see herself as a prophet? No, she was too modest for that. But she did see the role of the poet as being of vital importance. Were her ideas in this direction influenced by McKinney? Yes.

McKinney pestered Christesen to push on and publish his book – he even offered to pay out-of-pocket expenses if it would expedite the process.<sup>68</sup> But the editor was ambivalent. He told McKinney that he needed to get the manuscript read by an ‘expert’, but, unsurprisingly, given McKinney’s repudiation of (and ostracism from) the academy, felt an academic would be dismissive. He himself was unconvinced of McKinney’s theories:

And I really do find it difficult to understand what it is you want us to do. Are we merely to render ourselves receptive to the self-adjusting spirit of the age? Are we to get our minds to work to master the tendency to atomistic relativism? ... Are you saying reason has destroyed itself and therefore we want more reason? Or a better acceptance of life? And are these two things or one? That I should be left in a state of uncertainty after so many readings would perhaps suggest that there is much that is left unclear. Or that I am particularly stupid.<sup>69</sup>

Christesen was becoming exasperated; obsessed with doubt, or so Wright claimed, he went cold on the publication of *Toward the Future* because it was outside the conventions of the academic mainstream.<sup>70</sup> In McKinney’s last letter to Christesen, sent at the same time as Wright’s relationship with the editor was starting to sour (discussed in Chapter 2) he said that ‘for some reason the real significance of *Toward the Future* eludes you’; significance, he contended, that made its publication ever urgent. The role of Wright in the development of his ideas was made clear: she was, he said, ‘digging up all sorts of

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<sup>68</sup> ‘What amount would cover it – a fiver? a tenner? what?’; Jack McKinney to C.B. Christesen, ‘Thursday’ (circa October 1945), Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 220.

<sup>69</sup> C.B. Christesen to Jack McKinney, 12/4/1945, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 220.

<sup>70</sup> Judith Wright, *Half a Lifetime*, p. 201.



stuff' in support of his thesis.<sup>71</sup> He argued that 'the gift of the poet is to *feel* the truth that cannot yet be thought'.<sup>72</sup> 'The Moving Image', said Wright, was inspired by such ideas: McKinney had showed her how Western thought 'had now reached its limits in the development of the intellectual analysis of our world-picture'. The next development, she said, 'logically ought to be the swing towards the feeling-intuitive or emotional view of the world'.<sup>73</sup> She called this (citing Erich Heller) 'the truth which resides in the imagination and in a precise vision, rather than abstract formula'.<sup>74</sup> The imagination is of primary importance; so is the precision of observation, the close attention paid to flora, fauna, the seasons, the warp and weft of the natural world. McKinney had introduced her to Carl Jung:

Like Jung, he (McKinney) thought that much personal breakdown was in fact a search for other ways of viewing the world (religious rather than materialist or rational) and that art, as an expression of the feeling-side of man, could act as a kind of bridge towards the next development, and into the neglected world of inner-feeling.<sup>75</sup>

White had also been heavily influenced by Jung. Brady says that both writers explored 'the deep end of the unconscious'; both were 'Moderns', as described by Jung, standing 'upon a peak, at the end of the world, the abyss of the future before them'.<sup>76</sup> Both, too, were anti-intellectual. What McKinney termed the 'intellectual environment', or Wright 'intellectual analysis', had forced a 'separation between man and world', and the aim of Wright's poetry was to close this, to make 'progress' towards the 'feeling-side'.<sup>77</sup> This could be achieved through the psyche: 'not a question mark', said Jung, 'but a door that opens upon the human world from a world beyond', putting the individual in touch with 'strange and

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<sup>71</sup> Jack McKinney to C.B. Christesen, 'Tuesday' (mid- to late-1940s), Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 220.

<sup>72</sup> Jack McKinney, 'The poet and the intellectual environment', p. 47; emphasis McKinney's.

<sup>73</sup> Judith Wright to Shirley Walker, 10/8/1975, Judith Wright Papers, Box 32, Folder 238.

<sup>74</sup> Erich Heller, 'Goethe and the idea of scientific truth', cited by Judith Wright, 'Meaning, value and poetry'.

<sup>75</sup> Judith Wright to Shirley Walker, 10/8/1975.

<sup>76</sup> Veronica Brady, citing Carl Jung's *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, in *South of my Days*, p. 135.

<sup>77</sup> Judith Wright to Shirley Walker, 10/8/1975.

unrecognizable realities'.<sup>78</sup> Writing poetry 'became a safety-valve': 'rationality', 'the struggle to make a living' and the 'great machine' were not, she asserted, all there was to being human.<sup>79</sup> Living in seclusion with McKinney, raising their child, Meredith, and exploring her poetic voice with the aid of his ideas, Wright asserted a different way of living, one that could lead to renewed understanding of the land.

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<sup>78</sup> Carl Jung, quoted in Veronica Brady, *South of my Days*, p. 138.

<sup>79</sup> Judith Wright, 'Poetry as a bridge', manuscript of lecture delivered at Asian Literary Congress, undated, subsequently published in *Hemisphere*, Judith Wright Papers, Box 32, Folder 242.

iv) 'Woman to man'

Much of Judith Wright's power derived from her ability, as a woman, to confront an overwhelmingly male world and tell it how it had gone wrong. This is certainly what she believed. To become 'identified with this country', and 'to know ourselves' not as 'exiles', but as being 'at home' in Australia in the 'proper sense of the term', required a different way of looking.<sup>80</sup> In 'Woman to Child', from her second collection *Woman to Man* (1949), she readily identifies herself with the land, the earth:

I wither and you break from me;  
Yet though you dance in living light  
I am the earth, I am the root,  
I am the stem that fed the fruit,  
The link that joins you to the night.<sup>81</sup>

As a woman and a mother she exists in a realm of feeling that is not *like* nature, but *is* nature. Critics, she said, had clearly been 'uneasy with the feminine emphasis' of *Woman to Man*.<sup>82</sup> Shirley Walker stresses how, in contrast to her first collection, 'there is little here to remind the reader of the heroic and almost exclusively male tradition of pastoral empires, of bullockies and bushrangers'. Instead, the poems focus on a 'specifically feminine realm', one of 'fertility and generation', with 'indigenous images' often providing 'the external correlative for these concerns'.<sup>83</sup> Wright emphasises love: 'not only a physical compulsion' contributing to the continuity of life, says Walker, but also 'a powerful creative force, the life force, which moves through and orders the entire natural world'.<sup>84</sup> Brady says that Wright was exploring the 'feminine economy', in which meaning is created through the 'intuitive and bodily',

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<sup>80</sup> Judith Wright, 'Australia's Double Aspect', in *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry*, p. xxi.

<sup>81</sup> Judith Wright, 'Woman to Child', from *Woman to Man* (1949), in *Collected Poems*, pp. 28–9.

<sup>82</sup> Judith Wright, *Half a Lifetime*, p. 261.

<sup>83</sup> Shirley Walker, *Flame and Shadow: A Study of Judith Wright's Poetry*, St Lucia, Qld.: University of Queensland Press, 1991, p. 39.

<sup>84</sup> Shirley Walker, *Flame and Shadow*, p. 40.

representatives of the natural world at odds with abstract reason.<sup>85</sup> For Wright, poetry had always been feminine, strongly equated with her connection to the land, a ‘maternal presence’ (says Brady).<sup>86</sup> When she returned to New England during the war she was thus able to ‘find herself and her voice’, rebelling against the ‘masculine’ work of Kenneth Slessor or R.D. Fitzgerald – ‘tough’ and ‘glittering’ and ‘self-absorbed’.<sup>87</sup> Wright’s poetry was different: outward-looking, seeking to make connections, engaged with love, with other people, with the land and nature. In ‘The Prospector’ (1955) she said that the land ‘is to be won by love only’.<sup>88</sup>

‘Popular outcries against modern poetry’, she said in the same year as the publication of *Woman to Man*, sprang from the same impulse as ‘a fear of the dark or a hatred of women’. Such reactions were irrational. But the poet must confront these, ‘upsetting the last perilous scrap of balance’, ‘prodding at the conscious life of the world, like a recurrent nightmare’.<sup>89</sup> The poet must be the ‘always-uncomfortable reminder that a truth does reside in the imagination that cannot be comprehended in abstract formulae’.<sup>90</sup> This was Wright: the ‘recurrent nightmare’, the ‘always-uncomfortable reminder’, harassing conventional, scientific, male-dominated Australia. Unbalancing this world, she changed the angle of seeing, and thus a new understanding could be shaped. She was carving out new territory in ways none of the cultural nationalists (mostly men) could manage, struggling to break free from the patriarchal understanding of an Australia dominated by men. As a colony, men had far outnumbered women, a key element in shaping Ward’s Legend and Phillips’ Tradition.<sup>91</sup> Clark’s ideas had little room for women, either, as we have seen. White showed empathy, and Wright in particular praised his portrayal of Elizabeth Hunter in *The Eye of*

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<sup>85</sup> Veronica Brady, in part citing Helene Cixous, *South of my Days*, p. x.

<sup>86</sup> Veronica Brady, *South of my days*, p. 89.

<sup>87</sup> Judith Wright, *Half a Lifetime*, p. 148.

<sup>88</sup> Judith Wright, ‘The Prospector’, part IV of ‘Seven songs from a journey’, from *The Two Fires* (1955), *Collected Poems*, p. 136.

<sup>89</sup> Judith Wright, talk given to the Barjai Group, Brisbane, 1949, unpublished manuscript, Judith Wright Papers, Box 32, Folder 238.

<sup>90</sup> Judith Wright, ‘Meaning, value and poetry’.

<sup>91</sup> See Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend*, pp. 94–5 for statistical evidence of ‘the famine of females’ in the nineteenth century Australian bush. Geoffrey Blainey says that the first year women equalled men in numbers was 1916, and then only because so many men were fighting in Europe; *The Tyranny of Distance*, pp. 174–5.

*the Storm*, ‘one of the truly great portraits of women, fit to rank with Anna Karenina and Emma Bovary’;<sup>92</sup> (this despite David Marr’s contention that neither Wright nor White ‘greatly admired the work of the other’).<sup>93</sup> But for the most part liberal intellectuals maintained the male-dominated status quo – the gender of most of the subjects of this thesis underlining the point. In *The Generations of Men*, Wright sought to redress the imbalance by showing the strength and influence of her grandmother. Ultimately, however, May Wright’s successes were used to consolidate the patriarchy of the Wright family. Her granddaughter could never hope to inherit the land as her brothers could.

It took a great deal of strength and courage for Wright to challenge authority in this way, to disappoint her father and go her own way, to compose poetry that asserted a female vision of the world in the face of the conservative society of Menzies’ Australia.<sup>94</sup> In this context, McKinney’s importance is magnified by the equality of the relationship he and Wright enjoyed. Theirs were an ‘equal heart and mind’;<sup>95</sup> lacking, said Wright, ‘the misunderstandings and oppositions I had come to feel were part of the relationships between men and women’. She stresses their equality, describing him reading Virginia Woolf’s feminist work *A Room of One’s Own* with ‘intense enthusiasm’.<sup>96</sup> He told her that he used to think ‘that it was the artist who was to supply the new sense of values’, but ‘perhaps the male mind isn’t suited for the job at all – lacks the delicacy of balance, the fineness’. He believed, in an era when new ideas saw the ‘final phase of the old system of values’, that women had ‘found their footing’.<sup>97</sup> Wright was the

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<sup>92</sup> Judith Wright, ‘Images of women in Australian literature’, undated manuscript (mid-1970s), Judith Wright Papers, Box 32, Folder 242.

<sup>93</sup> David Marr, in *Patrick White Letters*, p. 310. White had been scathing of Wright’s poem ‘Turning Fifty’ (1966) in a letter to Geoffrey Dutton (26/2/1967); he also took exception to Wright’s assertion, upon winning the Britannia-Australia literary prize in 1964, that ‘nothing novel had come out of Australian letters since the forties’. As an aside, Marr notes that White’s grandfather ‘once owned the patch of New England where Wright was born’. The two campaigned together against nuclear weapons in the 1980s.

<sup>94</sup> Menzies, though, was a fan of Wright, writing to her (18/11/1956) to express his admiration for her poem ‘The Hand’ – ‘I hope you will allow me to say that, allowing for the differing techniques dictated by time and circumstance, Keats would have been proud to have written it!’ ‘This note’, he concluded, ‘is not an expression of patronage; it is an expression of gratitude.’ Judith Wright Papers, Box 28, Folder 211.

<sup>95</sup> Patricia Clarke and Meredith McKinney (eds), *The Equal Heart and Mind: Letters between Judith Wright and Jack McKinney*, St Lucia, Qld.: University of Queensland Press, 2004.

<sup>96</sup> Judith Wright, *Half a Lifetime*, pp. 239/42.

<sup>97</sup> Jack McKinney to Judith Wright, quoted in *Half a Lifetime*, p. 243.

breadwinner of the family – McKinney totally reliant on her, spending his days reading and formulating his theories.<sup>98</sup> His conception of a new emotional understanding of the world as the thing most needful came to be about the female vision he believed he had learnt from his partner, rather than just the artistic one he had outlined in the early-forties.

Wright's divergence from the cultural nationalists can be seen in her attitude to the war: seemingly such a galvanizing force for Christesen and his writers, Wright equated it with drought and destruction. The war was 'the eroding gale' that 'scatters our sons', while the 'sick dust' of the eroded land itself 'is harsh as grief's taste in our mouths'.<sup>99</sup> She hated Hope's poem 'Australia', bristling that 'a poet born as late as the twentieth century' could 'stigmatize a whole continent' by 'cladding it in such 'drab' and 'monotone' tones, 'the field uniform of modern wars'.<sup>100</sup> She saw this as the worst of the cringe, composing a reply:

We've made a desert: obviously  
we must confirm this altered state  
and make a new ecology  
with thorn-bush and the prickly-pear.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Wright emphasises McKinney's extensive reading programme in the western philosophical canon as he researched his ideas; see for example *Half a Lifetime*, pp. 206–7. He never held down a job when they lived together, but he was handy around the house. English poet John Betjeman, who visited the pair on Mt Tamborine, described McKinney's 'stimulating company' when he wrote a letter of thanks to Wright (16/11/1961), saying that 'if ever I want to keep awake at night, I shall try to work out how he devised the hinge of that gate so that it always swings back into the middle. It might well be my first steps in philosophy.' Judith Wright Papers, Box 28, File 211.

<sup>99</sup> Judith Wright, 'Dust', from *The Moving Image* (1946), *Collected Poems*, pp. 23–4.

<sup>100</sup> Judith Wright, 'Foreword', drafted for projected book on Hinchinbrook Island, unpublished, undated, Judith Wright Papers, Box 31, Folder 237.

<sup>101</sup> Judith Wright, 'To A.D. Hope', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13/11/1965, p. 20, Judith Wright Papers, Box 31, Folder 232. Wright actually liked Hope, who stayed at Mt Tamborine, after which she wrote to Kathleen McArthur (9/9/1954) that 'rather to our surprise we all got on like a house on fire', although she hoped 'we did not seem too primitive and uncouth, for he's rather a fastidious fellow and I couldn't help looking from his fingernails to ours with a lot of shame'; Judith Wright Papers, Box 78, Folder 568.

Docker said of Hope that he could not ‘relate himself to the Australian society and nature around him’, a criticism reflecting Wright’s.<sup>102</sup> Whilst men could only imagine a dreary country, fetishizing war and failing to understand the unique Australian environment, women writers were praised by Wright for ‘reimagining human life’ and pursuing a broadly ‘biological, rather than technological, view of life’.<sup>103</sup> She advocated poetry as the voice of ‘biological man’, resisting progress and pursuing the new goals of conservation – the cure for the ‘hostility’ between Australians and their landscape.<sup>104</sup> Women were the poets of the natural world, men the poets of the technological world – and Wright was scathing of the latter. She knew that in pushing this agenda she antagonised male critics who loathed her presumption: she was ‘amused’ when one claimed that ‘when I didn’t write as a woman, I wrote as a bitch’.<sup>105</sup> Such was the aggression and misogyny Wright had to contend with when she trespassed out of traditional female territory; and such were the parameters of literature so zealously guarded by the male establishment in mid-twentieth century Australia. She broke these down with the force of her poetic voice.

Thus confronting authority and tradition, she welcomed the new (as long as it was not part of destructive ‘progress’). She praised ‘New Australians’ (the wave of post-war immigrants from Southern Europe) for their perceptiveness and fresh perspectives, believing they could help revitalise Australia.<sup>106</sup> Likewise, as she grew older she did not become afraid of youth. She professed her admiration for the Beatles – ‘they are quite a good influence on the young: look at the way they insisted, on their American tour, that their concerts be unsegregated’<sup>107</sup> – saying that the sixties protest movement frightened the old because of the threat it posed to their source of power, ‘the institutions which are based on all the things

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<sup>102</sup> John Docker, *Australian Cultural Elites*, pp. 43–4.

<sup>103</sup> Judith Wright, ‘Women writers in society’, draft manuscript, undated, Judith Wright Papers, Box 32, Folder 243.

<sup>104</sup> Judith Wright, ‘Poetry and the needs of biological man’, draft manuscript, undated, Judith Wright Papers, Box 32, Folder 242.

<sup>105</sup> Judith Wright, ‘Women writers in society’.

<sup>106</sup> Judith Wright, quoted in Marjorie Stapleton, ‘Imagine a poet winning a \$5,000 prize’, *Australian Women’s Weekly*, 16/12/1964, p. 13, Judith Wright Papers, Box 31, Folder 232. This interview was published after she won the Britannia-Australia prize in 1964.

<sup>107</sup> Judith Wright, quoted in Marjorie Stapleton, ‘Imagine a poet winning a \$5,000 prize’, p. 13.

the young are protesting against'.<sup>108</sup> Despite her privileged background, Wright had struck out as a woman and as an individual. She loved her conservative father, and was close to him, and she loved the land she came from, but she was unafraid to live her life in her own way. She showed great bravery as she killed her 'first snake'; likewise, the life she led with McKinney took courage in the face of the conventions of the day. Still, those conventions could be stultifying. In 1960 Stephen Murray-Smith invited her down to Melbourne, expenses paid, to speak at a reception designed to raise funds for 'the struggling quarterlies', and 'so that people may meet you'. But she had her ageing husband to look after, had to get her daughter to school every day, had to look after the chickens and cook the meals – 'housewives', she said, 'are firmly tied', declining her first trip to Melbourne since 1937.<sup>109</sup> For a woman it was harder to play a full role in the literary scene, and we have already seen the toll taken on Wright's friend, Nettie Palmer, as she tried to develop a meaningful literary career whilst running a household, bringing up two daughters, earning an income and supporting a demanding husband.<sup>110</sup>

Wright said of Albert, her grandfather, that 'he was never able to reconcile the two worlds that existed side by side within him'. One was the world in which a man must be 'respectable and successful'; the other a 'dark lonely world', in which he was 'haunted by the dingoes howling and the last struggles of the child he had had to disown and crush in himself too early'.<sup>111</sup> Forced to leave school at fourteen, a once bookish boy went on to live a remarkably tough life carving out the much-desired respectability and success in remote Queensland and New England. The life of the mind was driven out of him by masculine Australian reality, and these struggles meant true understanding of the land could not be achieved. Instead,

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<sup>108</sup> Judith Wright, 'The Age of Aquarius – and Queensland', manuscript for chapter in book on censorship (Sun Books), undated (1960s), Judith Wright Papers, Box 31, Folder 237.

<sup>109</sup> Stephen Murray-Smith to Judith Wright, 2/5/1960, and Wright's reply, 7/5/1960, Stephen Murray-Smith Papers, Box 201, Folder 1.

<sup>110</sup> See Chapter 3.

<sup>111</sup> Judith Wright, *The Generations of Men*, p. 26.



Australians had settled for an ‘over-sentimentalized’ emphasis on ‘mateship’.<sup>112</sup> Likewise, she contended that ‘to sentimentalize women is to despise them, and there was a lot of that, particularly in Lawson’.<sup>113</sup>

For Lawson, read Australia. Asked in a jokey *Bulletin* piece of 1972 for her definition of a ‘manly man’, Wright, rather typically we might say, responded: ‘Jung’. He was ‘capable of being an all-round person’, she said, ‘and that means not being afraid, if you are born masculine, of expressing your other side’.<sup>114</sup> Part of Australia’s problem was the inability of Australian men to embrace their ‘other side’. The obsession with masculinity, a philistine condition, retarded the nation’s development. Christesen’s call for a ‘virile’ national literature was an illustration of this, itself an echo of the obsession with ‘proving’ Australia’s worth which we see in the hyper-masculine *Bulletin* of the federation era. Vance Palmer said that Archibald’s paper ‘rippled with gaiety, democratic feeling and masculine humour’, and in so doing expressed ‘the whole burgeoning life of the country and revealed it to itself’.<sup>115</sup> Such a vision excludes women (as well as so many others) – Wright’s vision, on the other hand, embraced *everyone*, including women and the Aboriginal people.

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<sup>112</sup> Judith Wright, ‘Australia’s Double Aspect’, p. xx.

<sup>113</sup> Judith Wright, ‘Women writers in society’.

<sup>114</sup> Judith Wright, interviewed for ‘What’s a manly man?’, *The Bulletin*, 30/9/1972, Christesen *Meanjin* Archive, Box 357.

<sup>115</sup> Vance Palmer, *The Legend of the Nineties*, p. 106.

ii) Aboriginal Australia: Unlocking the true 'climate of feeling'

Oodgeroo Noonuccal (previously Kath Walker) was a great friend of Wright. One of Indigenous Australia's 'first and most successful leaders' and 'their first writer',<sup>116</sup> she was an Aboriginal activist, environmentalist and poet – an example of what could be achieved, and what Wright herself aimed to promote and help give voice to through her writing and subsequently her activism. She was not trying to *create* a voice for Australia, because she believed that voice already existed, and had existed for thousands of years, alive in the likes of Oodgeroo. She told Nettie Palmer that 'very little emerges' in Australian poetry 'above the struggle for a voice and a point of view', and that as a result 'most that has been written until now has not been truly adult'.<sup>117</sup> To expend time on 'finding a voice' was a waste of the poet's energy – the cultural nationalists had it wrong. In fact, what was required was 'a change in our ways of looking and feeling, a change that would express some of the strange spirit of this country'. This, she believed, had proved 'too hard for us', with white settlers' poetry remaining 'imposed', not 'indigenous', in a way that was 'crippling to art'.<sup>118</sup>

Wright cited poems – 'Sanctuary', 'At Cooloolah' (both 1955) – in which, inspired by Jung, she was trying to get under the skin of the country and find the hidden realities lurking there.<sup>119</sup> In the former, a wildlife sanctuary and its ancient trees are brutalized by a modern road, leading 'into the world's cities like a long fuse laid'.<sup>120</sup> The destructive symbol of the road echoes her story 'The Spring'. In 'At Cooloolah', she contemplates the lake where she and McKinney had bought a shack, defining herself as one of the 'conquering people':

Those dark-skinned people who once named Cooloolah

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<sup>116</sup> Judith Wright, 'Kath Walker', manuscript for *National Times* article, undated (1970s), Judith Wright Papers, Box 31, Folder 237.

<sup>117</sup> Judith Wright to Nettie Palmer, 18/12/1953, Vance and Nettie Palmer Papers, Box 11, Folder 103.

<sup>118</sup> Judith Wright, 'Poetry in a young country'.

<sup>119</sup> Judith Wright to Shirley Walker, 10/8/1975.

<sup>120</sup> Judith Wright, 'Sanctuary', from *The Two Fires* (1955), in *Collected Poems*, p. 139.

knew that no land is lost or won by wars,  
for earth is spirit: the invader's feet will tangle  
in nets there and his blood be thinned by fears.<sup>121</sup>

She identified these poems as one reason why she subsequently became involved in the conservation movement.<sup>122</sup> In them, she underlines her belief that the 'invaders' lack the spiritual engagement with the land possessed by Aboriginal people. The two things – conservation and Aboriginal rights – go hand-in-hand: destruction of the land and the Aboriginal culture indivisible. Both are a destruction of the spirit.

Wright's understanding of the word 'indigenous' is so unlike that of the cultural nationalists. She understood the Aboriginal claim to the term, and that Ward's and Phillips' Lawson-esque ideal, or Clark's and White's philosophical one, were not the same thing.<sup>123</sup> And in Wright's view, as we have seen, the tension Smith identified as being the basis for a distinctive 'Australian' art was far from creative, it was in fact destructive. The transplantation of European sensibility into antipodean conditions – what she called Australia's 'double aspect': 'the reality of exile' versus the 'reality of newness and freedom' – could not engender an Australian tradition, but would only retard its creation.<sup>124</sup> The 'attitudes that helped us to conquer and settle this country' now stood in the way 'of our developing a truly creative community here'. If the cultural landscape 'is barren', she said, 'it is for reasons inherent in our history and circumstances', in 'the ruling climate of feeling' – and this needed to be changed.<sup>125</sup> 'Time is a moving image of eternity', said Plato in the epigraph to Wright's first collection, and in a poem such as 'Bora Ring' (1946) she attempted to fix this 'moving image' and show what had been lost – the ancient climate of feeling.

The song is gone; the dance

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<sup>121</sup> Judith Wright, 'At Cooloolah', from *The Two Fires* (1955), in *Collected Poems*, p. 140.

<sup>122</sup> Judith Wright to Shirley Walker, 10/8/1975.

<sup>123</sup> Phillips and Ward persisted in calling their Australian Tradition and Legend 'indigenous' – see Chapters 1 and 6.

<sup>124</sup> Judith Wright, 'Australia's Double Aspect', p. xi.

<sup>125</sup> Judith Wright, 'Art and national identity', *Because I was Invited*, p. 185; Wright's emphasis.

is secret with the dancers in the earth,  
the ritual useless, and the tribal story  
lost in an alien tale.

Only the grass stands up  
to mark the dancing-ring: the apple-gums  
posture and mime a past corroboree,  
murmur a broken chant.

The hunter is gone: the spear  
is splintered underground; the painted bodies  
a dream the world breathed sleeping and forgot.  
The nomad feet are still.

Only the rider's heart  
halts at a sightless shadow, an unsaid word  
that fastens in the blood the ancient curse,  
The fear as old as Cain.<sup>126</sup>

The dreamtime has been forgotten, and the Aborigines have been silenced. It would seem that the past has been obliterated by the 'alien tale' of white settlement, but the moving image of eternity – perhaps even *older* than Cain – snags the rider who stumbles on the old ritual site, the Bora Ring, and the power of the 'ancient curse' remains. Was this some small sign of optimism, that the connection to the land that had existed for so long had not vanished after all? In Wright's remembered childhood such optimism seemed impossible. She had seen, if not understood, the marginalisation of Indigenous lives. Aboriginal people were but 'a few dark shadows visible occasionally on the fringes of our lives', she says

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<sup>126</sup> Judith Wright, 'Bora Ring', from *The Moving Image*, in *Collected Poems*, p. 8.

of those years. They ‘survived in scattered enclaves’ on the margins: ‘beyond the steep fall that led down to the coastal ranges, on the Armidale dump, and in more or less clandestine camping places’.<sup>127</sup> Her father, when she was back in New England during the war, took her to the place where a group of Aboriginal men, women and children had been driven off a cliff in revenge for the taking of some cattle.<sup>128</sup> She memorialised this place and atrocity in her poem ‘Nigger’s Leap, New England’ (1946):

Did we know their blood channelled our rivers,  
and the black dust our crops ate was their dust?  
O all men are one man at last. We should have known  
the night that tided up the cliffs and hid them  
had the same question on its tongue for us.  
And there they lie that were ourselves writ strange.<sup>129</sup>

It was evident from her first collection of poetry that Wright understood the need for a new conception of the nation to fuse the Aboriginal story with the white story – the Aborigines could not be hidden away, they could not be forgotten, their stories needed to be remembered, and the terrible things done to them were as much a part of the white story as theirs. The Aborigines who were murdered could not be erased from history, least of all because their story was ‘ourselves writ strange’. ‘Some day’, she wrote later, ‘histories will be written giving (frontier) encounters their proper recognition’: she understood the role of truth-telling in the national idea.<sup>130</sup> White Australia needed to learn from the Aborigines, for whom, said Wright, ‘every part of the country... every mark and feature is numinous with meaning’.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Judith Wright, *Half a Lifetime*, p. 33.

<sup>128</sup> Veronica Brady, *South of my Days*, pp. 92–3.

<sup>129</sup> Judith Wright, ‘Nigger’s Leap, New England’, *Collected Poems*, p. 16.

<sup>130</sup> Judith Wright, *Half a Lifetime*, p. 74. See Mark McKenna, ‘Moment of Truth: History and Australia’s future’, *Quarterly Essay*, Issue 69, 2018 for the importance of history and truth-telling in Australian identity.

<sup>131</sup> Judith Wright, in Stephen R. Graubard (ed.), *Australia, The Daedalus Symposium*, North Ryde, NSW: Angus & Robertson, 1986, p. 32; cited in Veronica Brady, *South of my Days*, p. 433.

This culture exists outside European concepts of time and space, embracing every form of life and seeing the land itself as a living, breathing thing to be respected and cared for.<sup>132</sup>

White people failed to grasp this, although they had tried to use Aboriginal culture as a way of defining the nation, most notably in the shape of the Jindyworobak movement. This group of poets used Aboriginal stories and imagery to push a nationalist message. Much-maligned by their contemporaries, they were attacked for ‘exaggerating’ Aboriginal influence ‘into a theory of culture’, thus ‘fleeing from the modern civilisation which is now Australia’.<sup>133</sup> Hope said they ‘played at being primitive’, misrepresenting Australia as ‘the country untouched by the white man’, and seeing ‘the Australia we have made’ as an ‘artificial and facetious thing’.<sup>134</sup> The focus on Aboriginal tropes, in these critics’ estimation, undermined modernity, therefore arresting Australia’s ability to develop a mature culture. The insecurity of the Australian writer is laid bare – what was Hope doing but cringing? Today, however, the Jindyworobaks are criticised for what we term cultural appropriation.<sup>135</sup> Wright, for her part, rebuffed nationalism and noted the often uneven output of the ‘Jindies’, which was not always ‘in the best of taste’. But she said that she respected Rex Ingamells (founder of the Jindyworobaks in 1938) and supported his movement for its ‘recognition that the long-despised people had a value in themselves, and that the culture they possessed had something to give us and the world’.<sup>136</sup>

Nevertheless, the Jindyworobak vision is contrived and superficial, its links with P.R. Stephensen’s conservative nationalism ‘hardly appealing’, as Docker points out.<sup>137</sup> On the one hand,

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<sup>132</sup> McKenna describes a 2016 presentation by Warren Foster, a Djiringanj man from Wallaga Lake in southern New South Wales, to a group of local historians in Bega, in which he graphically illustrated the Aboriginal concept of time using the metaphor of a circle, as opposed to the straight line representing chronology favoured by ‘whitefellas’; ‘Moment of Truth’, p. 62.

<sup>133</sup> A.H. McDonald, ‘True art and false culture: a comment on the Jindyworobak controversy’, *Southerly*, vol. 3, no. 2, September 1942, p. 21.

<sup>134</sup> A.D. Hope, ‘Culture Corroborree’, *Southerly*, vol. 2, no. 3, November 1941, p. 28.

<sup>135</sup> Helen Doyle says the Jindyworobaks used Dreamtime culture ‘affirmatively but pessimistically, as the vestiges of a ‘dying race’; ‘Jindyworobak Movement’, in Davison, Hirst and Macintyre (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Australian History*, p. 358.

<sup>136</sup> Judith Wright to Roland Robinson (poet), undated (1965), Judith Wright Papers, Box 28, Folder 211 and in ‘Aboriginals in Australian poetry’, *Because I was Invited*, pp. 146–7.

<sup>137</sup> John Docker, *In a Critical Condition*, p. 26. Ingamells and Ian Mudie both joined Stephensen’s Australia First Party – see Adrian Caesar, ‘National Myths of Manhood: Anzac and others’, in *The Oxford Literary History of Australia*, p. 162.

argues Adrian Caesar, 'it is possible to view the Jindyworobak ambition to incorporate Aboriginal words into their poems as an attempt to displace or de-centre the language of the colonising power and produce a distinctively Australian language'. On the other, the Jindies were tellingly linked to Social Darwinism and the key figures – Ingamells, Ian Mudie and James Devaney – were all urban dwellers, living in Adelaide: their links with the bush were tenuous at best.<sup>138</sup>

Wright, however, lived in the bush virtually her whole life, and her poetic vision, far from being contrived or superimposed on the landscape, is organic (although far from the race view of Henry Lawson and his ilk). She believed that an important question for poets to ask is 'what is nature?' This is because 'poetry works in and is based on language, and language – to an extent perhaps only linguists can realise – is based on the natural world and our response to it'. Therefore, she said, 'our thought too is based on landscape'. Australian poets of the English language had battled with this from the start: the history of Australian poetry, she asserted, 'has been one of quarrel and attempt at reconciliation'. Such a reconciliation – a 'general' one – might be seen in the poetry of Charles Harpur (perhaps Australia's first white poet) who 'superimposed' Wordsworth's 'lakes and mountains and light-effects' onto the Hawkesbury and Hunter regions.<sup>139</sup> But Wright, whilst admiring Harpur, did not endorse this idea: trying to adapt tropes transplanted from another, wholly different, world was bound to a failure that would not just be artistic, but spiritual. It was an illustration of the inability of white Europeans to understand the continent. Australian art had to be more, it had to have deeper roots, and a much more profound reconciliation.

As Edmund Campion has remarked in a review of *The Cry for the Dead*, landscape is now 'a major character' in Australian history.<sup>140</sup> This was one of Wright's important legacies. To impart character onto

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<sup>138</sup> Adrian Caesar, 'National Myths of Manhood', pp. 161–2.

<sup>139</sup> Judith Wright, 'Poetry and landscape', rough manuscript of lecture, undated, Judith Wright Papers, Box 32, Folder 240. Charles Harpur's dates: 1813–68.

<sup>140</sup> Edmund Campion, review of Judith Wright's *The Cry for the Dead*, *The Bulletin*, 1981, quoted in Tom Griffiths, *The Art of Time Travel*, p. 108.

the landscape, investing it with spiritual depth, was her goal, in the same way as Clare had made characters of trees, animals and rural lanes in his poetry.<sup>141</sup> Seamus Heaney says of Clare that he removed ‘every screen between the identity of the person and the identity of the place’.<sup>142</sup> Such ‘screens’ had also been removed by Indigenous Australians. To do so was to understand the land at a far more profound level. It was an emotional and empathetic understanding. In *The Cry for the Dead* she cited the explorer Thomas Mitchell, who had described the Aborigines’ ‘intensity of existence’ – healthy, active and spiritual, they lived in a way she wished to emulate.<sup>143</sup> Likewise, Bate describes Clare’s ‘intensity of feeling’ in the fields around his village.<sup>144</sup> It was through this way of living – connected to the land, living *with* it, rather than *off* it, caring for it and not exploiting or ruining it – that white Australians could find a self-knowledge in tune with their continent, and hence an identity and a national idea. Unlocking this ‘realm of feeling’ would enable Australian culture to become mature. Aboriginal people, for too long marginalised and kept in the shadows, as Wright remembered them from her childhood, could show the way.

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<sup>141</sup> As described by Simon Kövesi, ‘In Our Time: John Clare’, BBC Radio 4 broadcast, 9/2/2017.

<sup>142</sup> Seamus Heaney, quoted by Jonathan Bate, *John Clare*, pp. 556–7.

<sup>143</sup> Judith Wright, *The Cry for the Dead*, p. 23.

<sup>144</sup> Jonathan Bate, *John Clare*, p. 29.



iii) Conclusion: Showing the way 'in our struggle in the country of the mind'

Judith Wright adapted different ways of thinking (or 'feeling', of course) to her fellow intellectuals and writers. She was not anxious about the seeming superiority of the Western tradition; nor could she see any sort of tradition being manufactured out of pastoralism, or 1890s radicalism, or any other imported conditions. Far from it. Contemporary critics, stuck in patterns of thought both derivative and alien, could only comprehend ways of seeing that were at best irrelevant, at worst annihilating. They were beholden to a mindset that saw Australia, not raised up, but threatened. This was 'Australia's tragedy', and by 'investing the landscape with meanings it lacked in the eyes of previous generations' Wright hoped to rectify the situation.<sup>145</sup> 'We haven't changed our inner landscape far enough to be able to accept Australia quite naturally,' she said. Spiritual well-being was closely aligned with ecological well-being. Devastation of the environment and of the culture and lives of Indigenous Australians corrupted human happiness and understanding: 'since man has become the master of nature, nature reflects him faithfully'.<sup>146</sup> What was happening on the Great Barrier Reef and at mining sites across Australia therefore spoke ill of her fellow Australians. Through a poetic imagination influenced by her partner's outsider ideas and Aboriginal culture, transforming into activism as she grew older, Wright pushed to alter this perception of Australia.

National theories or ideas had failed, Wright contended, because they did not make this connection with the land. Love for one's country – patriotism – is embedded in the Aboriginality of the land, *not* in the opposition to Britain. Therefore, the shadow cast by Home could be obliterated. After all, the Aborigines had been present for thousands of years before the British arrived – an alien culture need have nothing to do with Australian identity. The only viable alternative, the Australian Legend, had been used 'falsely and shallowly' – over-optimism about the 'nature of Australian man' meant that 'we have

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<sup>145</sup> Fiona Capp, *My Blood's Country*, p. 56.

<sup>146</sup> Judith Wright, 'Poetry and landscape'.

lost something in our struggle in the country of the mind'.<sup>147</sup> The subsequent vision was insubstantial and immature. To be considered thus was of course just what the cultural nationalists did not want, but the problem was they still looked to the same old images and ideas, failing to carve out anything capable of dragging Australia from its philistine (and masculine) rut. It took a poet and a woman, an erstwhile ally who had trodden her own path, to find the way.

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<sup>147</sup> Judith Wright, 'Australia's Double Aspect', p. xxi. Note that over-optimism about Australians was Clark's criticism of radicals, too.

## CONCLUSION: Still Searching for a National Idea?

The cultural cringe did not vanish in 1972. In fact, it continued to prey on the minds of intellectuals for many more years. On the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Phillips' essay, *Meanjin* ran a series of short essays in which contemporary commentators mulled the continued relevance of the cringe: the essay was lauded as 'seminal', not just a comment on its own time, but a 'prophetic' document.<sup>1</sup> Despite the passage of time, Australians, it was opined, need to 'engage in *more* introspection and *more* dialogue about national identity'.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, not everyone has agreed with John Howard's pillorying of the surfeit of national introspection. Meanwhile, the increased confidence of the nation is seen as cringe-worthy in itself – 'the antidote to cultural cringe... is unreflectively self-congratulatory, neatly nationalistic, singular rather than plural'.<sup>3</sup> Such ideas constitute a re-hash of Phillips' 'strut'. Australia is still, apparently, in the grips of 'an arrested adolescence obsessed with measurement', a sort of 'national psychosis'.<sup>4</sup>

Likewise, Horne's criticisms are echoed today as commentators lament 'the politicians and the bureaucrats who are so unsure of themselves that they let down the artists and the country';<sup>5</sup> and Richard Flanagan, recent winner of the Booker Prize, flays the Turnbull government for proposing the withdrawal of parallel importation restrictions and territorial copyright, saying such a move will return Australia to 'what we were fifty years ago: a colony of the mind'.<sup>6</sup> The concerns – bleak prospects for the local publishing scene and dominant shadows cast by bigger nations and cultures – seem remarkably similar to those of the forties and fifties, and the problems assailing the still indigent *Meanjin* only emphasise

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<sup>1</sup> Adrian Martin, 'Shared Shame', *Meanjin*, vol. 59, no. 3, 2000, p. 32.

<sup>2</sup> Natasha Cho, 'Whingers, cringers and loyalists', *Meanjin*, vol. 59, no. 3, 2000, p. 37; emphasis mine.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Kalantzis, 'Cultural cringe and its others', *Meanjin*, vol. 59, no. 3, 2000, p. 40. See also: Chris Wallace-Crabbe, *Beyond the Cringe: Australian Cultural Overconfidence?* (Trevor Reese Memorial Lecture), London: Sir Robert Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Brian Castro, 'Cultural Cringe', *Meanjin*, vol. 59, no. 3, 2000, p. 38.

<sup>5</sup> John Montgomery, 'The strange tale of the Lucky Country, the cultural cringe and the flight of the Tall Poppies', *Art Monthly Australia*, issue 215, November 2008, p. 35.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Flanagan, 'Be under no illusion: Malcolm Turnbull wants to destroy Australian literature', *The Guardian*, 19/5/2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/may/19/be-under-no-illusion-malcolm-turnbull-wants-to-destroy-australian-literature-election-richard-flanagan>; accessed: 23/04/2018.

this.<sup>7</sup> One wonders if the current editor is as eloquent in firing off grumpy missives to his friends as his predecessor was. Can it really be true that there has been *no* improvement in cultural conditions?

No doubt it would sadden Phillips to know that fifty years after his essay, and beyond, the same diagnosis is being applied to Australian cultural woes. It is true some argue that, rather than a cringe, we are seeing a ‘cultural creep’ as Australian arts and letters are exported to the world.<sup>8</sup> And modern Australia, having seen unprecedented economic growth and the establishment of arts institutions and universities unrecognisable in their numbers and funding to what was around in the forties and fifties, feels a long way from the time when Tyrone Guthrie crossed the world and suggested that any Australian professional theatre company would have to spend some time learning the ropes in England before it was in a fit state to perform at home. But grandiose claims for the current state of homegrown culture are undermined when one considers that the exports often celebrated are in the fields of popular culture. And as we look back at the paucity of cultural life and feel that the past really is another country, we might consider that while the condescension of posterity has been cruel to the subjects of this thesis, the cultural nationalists especially, nevertheless the likes of Docker, penning their attacks from the halcyon days of the Whitlam era when the Years of Unleavened Bread seemed to have been left behind, need not have been too smug: they soon found themselves living through the nightmare of the Dismissal. Change has been slow and hard, and many years later Les Murray could still at once celebrate what it is to be Australian whilst chafing under the ‘crippling strain’ of having to live as a poet in Australian conditions.<sup>9</sup>

In the final analysis, one wonders whether recent Prime Ministers, like Menzies before them, have felt the barbs. How much has culture meant to governments, then or now? And can intellectuals actually effect change? What impact did the likes of Phillips, Christesen and Horne have then, and do their

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<sup>7</sup> See: Judith Armstrong, ‘The *Meanjin* funding cuts: a graceless coup?’, *The Conversation*, 17/5/2016, <https://theconversation.com/the-meanjin-funding-cuts-a-graceless-coup-59455>; accessed 25/4/2018.

<sup>8</sup> Nick Bryant, ‘Cultural Creep’, *The Griffith Review*, Edition 36, April 2012, <https://griffithreview.com/articles/cultural-creep/>; accessed 1/4/2018.

<sup>9</sup> Les Murray, *The Quality of Sprawl*, p. 73 – referenced in Introduction.

successors have today? And why should the bulk of Australians not enjoy their high standard of living and material comforts, and judge Prime Ministers such as Menzies and Howard on their capacity to deliver it? John Keegan has said that the problem with the history of ideas is ‘the failure to demonstrate connection between thought and action’.<sup>10</sup> And so again we return to the problem that here was a small group of intellectuals, talking to each other, in many ways isolated from the wider society around them, ignored, derided and dismissed (despite the ongoing obsession with their preoccupations). They were passionate advocates, but when they sought to convert thought into action – in the shape, for example, of greater state support for the arts – they found themselves stymied.

Still, in the end the Whitlam Government did provide what they wanted, and while the nation-building zeal that gave *Meanjin* its edge might now seem passé, it also gave to the critics of that era a convincing narrative they could use to great effect. Reading the first issues of *Meanjin* now, one is struck by the clarity of its voice, the purpose and power of its ideas, the sense that here was a group of writers and thinkers who wanted to make things happen and improve their world. The local spark that makes reading those writers of interest to this day has been eroded, and we are left wondering whether perhaps, when he penned his apology for provincialism, Phillips was on to something after all. Literary cachet is still derived from the perception of universal cultural value, and Christesen certainly believed this, but Phillips’ focus on the local was not without merit. As novelist Tim Parks has remarked, might not the best books be the ones that ‘stay at home’, connecting with ‘so much you already know, rearranging it in new ways’?<sup>11</sup> D.H. Lawrence, who seemingly could write so much about a place he barely knew, achieved this through ‘amplification’: ‘the broadening experience of the given facts’. Using personification to ‘amplify landscapes and objects till they shine with aesthetic and emotional significance’, he brought to

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<sup>10</sup> John Keegan, *The Face of Battle*, London: Pimlico, 2004 (first published 1976), p. 29.

<sup>11</sup> Tim Parks, quoted in John Mullan, review of Parks’ *Where I’m Reading From: The Changing World of Books*, *The Guardian*, 14/11/2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/nov/14/where-im-reading-from-changing-world-of-books-tim-parks-review>; accessed 23/04/2018.

the landscape a sensitivity and understanding that could create something meaningful.<sup>12</sup> This is why he held such appeal for Clark, Horne and White, giving them a way to see Australia anew and transform their environment.

The concerns of the cultural nationalists might seem dated, the literature they revered hackneyed, but their commitment was admirable, and today's vanilla, globalised culture is not what they would have had in mind as they yearned for maturity. Clark's preoccupations might seem preposterous to the modern reader; but his aversion to materialism feels prescient. The irony of Horne's voice seems most in tune with the modern conversation, and his relentless skewering of the second-rate and substandard has plenty of application today. White remains the nation's sole winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, yet commentators often pick up on his supposed unreadability, and debate whether he was 'anti-Australian'.<sup>13</sup> Surely however, White's relentless self-criticism, his honest and forthright self-examination, underlines the message from the archives: we cannot be too complaisant. It is not all that long ago Horne could compare Australian cultural life to the parched dust of the drought-stricken country blowing away in the wind, and while White was a contrarian and the harshest of critics of Australia, he was also a creative talent of global standing, a man who could produce art to be read in a hundred years' time.

To this day, an intellectual or literary understanding of the country is not in tune with mainstream conversation in Australia. This is surely the case in many countries, but as we are told we have arrived at a 'moment of truth', that the time is ripe for a new conception of national identity based on the proper recognition of Indigenous Australians and of what really happened on the colonial frontiers,<sup>14</sup> the reality appears to be that there is little in the way of political will to make these things happen. Anzac Day continues to dominate as a symbol of nationhood, and the Aboriginality of the continent is pushed to

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<sup>12</sup> Jill Franks, Introduction, D.H. Lawrence, *Sea and Sardinia*, London: Penguin, 1997 (first published 1921), p. xxv.

<sup>13</sup> See: 'Is Patrick White anti-Australian?' seminar at the Sydney Writers' Festival, 19/5/2012; for one example of many articles mentioning his 'unreadability', see: Angela Bennie, 'The problem of Patrick', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26/5/2007, <https://www.smh.com.au/news/books/the-problem-of-patrick/2007/05/25/1179601665216.html>; accessed 27/4/2018.

<sup>14</sup> Mark McKenna, 'Moment of Truth', *Quarterly Essay*, no. 69, 2018.

the margins. Polls suggest the ‘coming republic’ is no sure thing.<sup>15</sup> We can however, still learn from Wright, who saw the connection to *place* in Indigenous Australians that others had failed to appreciate, and who understood that Australia was far from the ‘empty’ continent described by her contemporaries. The fostering of a new ‘climate of feeling’, rather than a ‘community of sentiment’, suggests a way of understanding the plurality of modern Australia, whilst also acknowledging its history. That plurality – or lack of it – is the lacuna at the heart of the cultural nationalist ideal, and it is why it no longer seems apposite for the modern, diverse nation. Meanwhile, the endless seminar continues, and the echo chamber of academia remains a phenomenon intellectuals know all too well, with politicians remaining happy to flaunt their tin ears when it comes to intellectual ideas. Australia may not be the cringing nation of yore, but the ‘search for the national idea’ continues to be a source of fixation. Perhaps such searches are always doomed to frustration and failure: national identity has many shades, and the cultural maturity so yearned for by A.A. Phillips and his friends is just a will-o’-the-wisp.

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<sup>15</sup> McKenna refers to the ‘coming republic’ in ‘Moment of Truth’, p. 66; recent polls have suggested the lack of appetite for a republic – see: ‘Young voters cool on republican push’, *The Australian*, 10/4/2018, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/newspoll/young-voters-cool-on-republican-push-newspoll/news-story/925a21d5f471064f62ca1c363756d7ad>; accessed 25/4/2018.





## ABBREVIATIONS

*The following abbreviations appear in the text:*

ABC	Australian Broadcasting Corporation
AETT	Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust
ACCL	Australian Council for Civil Liberties
ASIO	Australian Security Intelligence Organisation
CLF	Commonwealth Literary Fund
CPA	Communist Party of Australia
EAM	Encouragement of Art Movement
EEC	European Economic Community
NLA	National Library of Australia
SORA	Studio of Realist Art
UNESCO	The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation



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