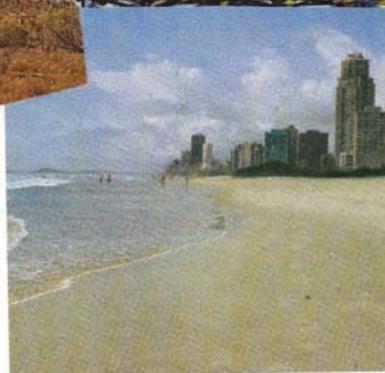




CHESTER EAGLE
OZTRALIA



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OZTRALIA

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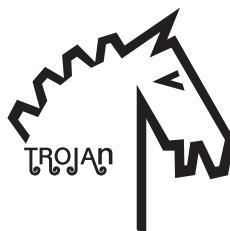
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OZTRALIA

Chester Eagle



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This book is dedicated to all the writers quoted herein.

Contents

Introduction	1
The land (1)	8
Bernard O'Dowd's Australia	21
The Land (2)	23
That poem again	34
The land (3)	37
Regional diversity: black people	47
The land (4)	50
Regional diversity: white people	59
The land (5)	62
O say can you see ...	72
The land (6)	75
My dear old Swanee ...	81
The new timidity	86
Getting them out	94
The secular faith	101
Owning ourselves	107

Introduction

I have to explain the title of this book, but first, I want to quote a poem. It's by Bernard O'Dowd, of whom more later, it was published in 1903, and it's called, with the normal spelling, 'Australia'. It begins with a string of questions:

Last sea-thing dredged by sailor Time from Space,
Are you a drift Sargasso, where the West
In halcyon calm rebuilds her fatal nest?
Or Delos of a coming Sun-God's race?
Are you for Light, and trimmed, with oil in place,
Or but a Will o' Wisp on marshy quest?
A new demesne for Mammon to infest?
Or lurks millennial Eden 'neath your face?

Whether or not the concluding sestet answers the questions is something to be considered later: here is how O'Dowd finishes:

The cenotaphs of species dead elsewhere
That in your limits leap and swim and fly,
Or trail uncanny harp-strings from your trees,
Mix omens with the auguries that dare
To plant the Cross upon your forehead sky,
A virgin helpmate Ocean at your knees.

This poem affected me deeply when I was a young man and I suspect that it has influenced what I have to say about the country where my life has been lived. I've quoted it here because I think it only fair for readers to know what underlies my discussion, but also because this book is, for me, a mutual undertaking and I hope that you, dear

reader, will be reaching your own conclusions at the same time as I offer mine.

Now the title. Europeans had long speculated on the void in their maps where the Great South Land was thought to exist; they'd heard travellers' tales, and invented others back at home: *Gulliver's Travels* and *Robinson Crusoe* come to mind. Once navigators began to chart the south seas, the region they were opening up moved into a special place in the thinking of northern people. 'Austral', from the Latin *australis*, means southern or belonging to the south; the name Australia followed logically.

Logically for northerners, that is. One of the hardest things for any group to grasp is that what they see when they look at somebody else is not necessarily what those being observed think about themselves. We all prefer to be subjects rather than objects because it's more empowering. To carry a name given by outsiders can be a burden; hence the wish of formerly colonised people to resume earlier, pre-colonial names for their places; it's a way of taking back from the once-possessive gaze of those who came, who named, and thought they owned.

The word Australia, then, the name of the south land, carries within it or attached to it the implication of an observing, studying, identity in the north. I see no way around this. And yet, from very early in the British settlement of our country, there has been resistance to this northern gaze, a feeling that the thing developing here at the bottom of the world (the *antipodes!*) was not entirely as it looked to those with northern eyes but had characteristics and perhaps an integrity of its own. It was as if its identity was something known to itself, which might or might not be clear to outsiders.

However, when I speak of an identity 'known to itself', I am treating the matter too simply. Things are always more complex than they might be because it is natural for us to have two or more, perhaps several, systems of thought operating in our heads at the same time. The very first settlers, on the New South Wales coast in 1788, had no

understanding of the land they were claiming. They were Englishmen, brought by boats to meet a destiny that had yet to declare itself. They had European thoughts in their minds, and when they looked at the aborigines, they saw them as almost off the scale when measured in civilisation's terms. They were naked, black, primitive ... except, of course, they were considerably more. They understood the ways of the place where they lived, they were extremely healthy until whitefella diseases took effect, and they were sure of themselves. They stretched the whites along a continuity from those scorning to those admiring. They could catch fish and spear wallabies. Some of them learned to follow the tongue of the new arrivals. Some of them wept when they saw convicts lashed.

It was not the European way to assess native peoples by considering that they might have built a civilisation as developed as the European on a different base entirely; the superiority of the European judgement had always to be maintained, and was, even though native trackers were taken along by exploring parties, whose lives often depended on the understandings of the black men, especially their ability to hunt, and to find water. It seemed that the natives built nothing and their manufactures, such as they were, were simple. To urban Europeans, heads full of Paris, Rome, London and Vienna, the aborigines had nothing, yet they saw things, they noticed, they made distinctions well beyond the powers of the newly arrived. This might have forced the invaders to a modest appreciation of their own defects, and often enough it did, yet the civilisation flooding in with every shipload of new settlers, with every advance of the various colonial boundaries, was sure of itself, and it's interesting to consider why.

The initial answer is simple enough: newcomers to the new country brought with them the certainties of the old. The confidence of the settlers was boosted (perhaps *rebuilt* is the word) with every new shipment of ignorance. If we look at photos of an Australian city in, let us say 1880, we see people dressed in clothing too elabo-

rate, and too thick, to be other than ridiculous to our contemporary understanding. Those earlier settlers were still in a process of adaptation, something which we today can see whenever we look at recent arrivals from places which make different statements in their forms of dress. Will our African settlers, our middle-eastern settlers, adapt their clothing to the Australia they've adopted, or is it already suitable, setting new norms for those of us whose origins are in other places? Time alone can answer that.

So I am discussing the suitability of ways, of customs, for places, and Australia has a great variety of the latter, from the bottom of Tasmania pointing towards Antarctica to the tip of Cape York, stretching towards the waistline of the earth. This raises a considerable question to which I shall have to return at a later time, about the remarkable consistency to be found in the variety of aboriginal cultures spread across a vast land and the almost equally remarkable lack of major regional diversities in the whitefella culture which has developed here since 1788.

But enough of that for now. Let us return to Bernard O'Dowd. His life stretched from 1866 to 1953, but if he is remembered today, it is probably for his sonnet 'Australia', the book *Dawnward?* in which it appeared (note the question mark), and an address given in 1909 to which he gave the title 'Poetry Militant'. Poetry, he said, should have as its purpose the best interests of the human race, and the need for poetry militant was 'nowhere greater than in this virgin and unhandicapped land of social experiments, embryonic democracy, and the Coming Race, Australia.' Australian poets should be 'essentially poets of the dawn – poets whose function is to chart the day and make it habitable.' Poets of the dawn, charting the day and helping to make it bearable for those who had to cope with its heat and burden, to use a phrase popular around the time when O'Dowd began to write. Poets of the dawn. That question mark after the title 'Dawnward' expresses a permeating doubt, repeating the questions running through the sonnet I quoted earlier. Would Australia live up to the expectations

of those who wanted most from it, or would it fall back, infested by Mammon in the way of a paddock overrun by weeds? O'Dowd could ask the question but couldn't finally answer it. A decade before 'Australia', a party of several hundred people, led by the Utopian socialist William Lane, had left Australia for Paraguay in a crazy-brave attempt to start again because Australia had already failed the optimists, the perfectionists ... call them what you will. William Lane had been in Queensland at the time of the repression of the shearers who'd burned down twenty-odd woolsheds, he'd reported the trials of their leaders and he'd seen enough to make him think that such promise as Australia may once have held out was there no more. The task of creating the Utopia which Lane et al set sail to reach was left, in Queensland and elsewhere, to those organised, unionised, workers who created the Australian Labor Party, an organisation already far from its origins and moving further every day.

Perhaps I am being unfair. It's not possible for any age to pick up an issue as it was understood a hundred years earlier. If the times have changed then those who live in them cannot be the same. One can see this clearly enough whenever people try to 'recapture' the spirit of the Eureka Stockade at Ballarat in 1854. One can respond to a reconstructed miners' flag, or sketches of the rebels taking an oath of resistance on bended knee, without knowing quite how, if at all, their actions connect with us today. It may be that their passion offers only a ghost of meaning and that what we feel for them is not brotherhood, but a sense of loss, and separation. We might like to feel their passion of righteous indignation, but we can't, because things are no longer as simple, as black and white, as the miners believed.

So, at the end of the nineteenth century, and the beginning of the twentieth, there was abroad, among strands of the educated classes (many of them workers who'd taught themselves by reading in Mechanics' Institute libraries, and the like), the challenging question as to whether or not Australia would reproduce the divisions of wealth, class and privilege familiar from Europe, or whether

some new, fairer society could be created. Bernard O'Dowd, with that question mark hovering in his brain, hoped that it could. Even to raise this question would seem to be flying in the face of the fact that the Australia O'Dowd was considering was a creation of, a part of, the British Empire, and for me to re-raise the question flies in the face of the situation Australians find ourselves in now – that we are a minor outpost of the American Empire and that for the most part we do what it wants because it keeps us safe, it helps us to remain prosperous and because ... well, really, we can't think of anything else to do.

To be!

What are we, what have we ever been, except a subservient part of two great empires?

When one feels despondent, and I am writing at a time when the optimistic, idealistic strand in the country's history has never been weaker, it is easy to feel that we are and never have been any more than an offshoot of the ruling empire of the day. Yet empires wane, and when they weaken, in the rebalanced vision so enabled, it can become clear that much had been developing on the level of subsidiary voices, of cultural shoots and strands that have largely been overlooked because they have been thought of as minor. Something had been going on all the time, waiting for its chance to break into the light. The essays in this book are an attempt to identify these subterranean influences and activities, and to try to persuade you, dear reader, to think along similar lines. The battle is never lost until the humiliating treaty has been signed, and this book is my way of saying that such a point has not been reached, and never should be. I am, I think, an unrepentant O'Dowdist, believing that the idealism, the naïve utopianism of his generation, is one of the finest strands ever to enter Australian life ...

Aus-tralian? Oz-tralian? I've called the book Oztralia because I want to identify those features and influences that lead us to think of ourselves as independent, having in our own control at least a fair

measure of the forces which will shape us. When will this formative period be over? When will we know?

My answer is that when we don't care, when we can't see that it matters which way we look at it, when, that is, we have no questions in our minds about our identity, then, then, it won't matter what we call the place or how we spell its name. I think that means that I am trying to write myself out of a job! Australia, Oztralia, I salute you; let's get down to work, beginning with the land itself.

The land (1)

It goes on forever, but since we have to start somewhere, let's come ashore in Sydney Harbour. We're cheating slightly because the first settlement was at Botany Bay, beneath the flight paths at today's airport, but drinking water was short and the sand flats not very hospitable, so the boats moved out and in again and a great city had its humble birth. My generation grew up with a picture of Captain Arthur Phillip and a party of soldiers raising a flag to show that wilderness had been claimed. The British had landed!

As a New South Welsh schoolboy I was taught that the settlement was landlocked for twenty five years, until Blaxland, Wentworth and Lawson found a way over the ranges and saw the inland which they and their like, not the soldiers nor the convicts, would appropriate. The second purpose of Empire had overtaken the first. (As an *aide-mémoire* to the explorers' names we were told to think of them as LBW, as in 'leg before wicket', one of the ways a cricketer can be dismissed in the great game which still bonds the former empire. Boys and girls of my generation were encouraged to think of B, W and L gazing westward at the infinite possibility of the land they had uncovered.) Earlier attempts to get through the ranges had failed because would-be discoverers had stuck to the streams, but the trio of 1813 had gone up the dry ridges, where the slopes were manageable, instead of the watercourses, which led to cliffs they couldn't climb. The early settlers hadn't been smart enough to ask the blacks, who probably wouldn't have told them. Why give away an advantage like that?

The blacks must have been bemused by the newcomers, people who knew so little yet rejoiced in an overwhelming confidence when, as far as the blacks could see, they had only a restricted range of tricks beyond the native understanding. Their ships had brought them to Sydney, they had deadly guns, and they had a range of treatments for illness – but they were a sickly lot anyway, wearing clothes which the climate didn't require; perhaps, as it seemed, these were mainly worn to affirm divisions of status which were obscure to the native mind. They needed to write things down, as if fearing that their thoughts might slip away without notation. Also, they built their lives around penalties as much as positives, and argued, at times, over distinctions between right and wrong for which even they, the whites, had the label 'casuistry'. They had a way of life which appeared to have lost its central simplicity, and this meant that you never knew where you stood with them, even though, the blacks observed, that was the whites' complaint about them.

Above all, they had notions of ownership which were not part of the black people's world, and they would enforce this ownership in the most brutal ways. As the whites spread throughout the land they massacred to establish control, and that was when their hypocrisy became apparent; everyone knew what had happened but when officials arrived, asking questions, nobody was willing to tell them. Law enforcement had been handed to a group who weren't trusted by the settlers, who were much more interested in spreading their grip on the land.

They landed in numerous spots and gave old places new and awkward names. Perth, Adelaide, Hobart, Brisbane. Melbourne, Geelong, Port Fairy. Newcastle, the Hunter, Twofold Bay. When the whitefellas' acquisitions were more personal, they often adopted black names, in whatever form their ears could register. One has only to look at a map to see the influences, the confusions, the respect and sometimes the fear of those who thought they were seeing for the first time. Esperance, Fregon, Seventeen Seventy, Murwillumbah,

Devonport, Yass, the Pilliga Scrub ... every name resonates with the nuances of minds trying to get around what they were seeing with only the most partial, and limited, understanding.

The country often looked more suitable than it was. Huge flocks of sheep were brought to graze in places where they first did well, then the vagaries of fertility and rainfall struck the settlers, often after a wool cheque or two from seasons before. Locusts ate the grass. Rabbits nibbled even the roots in the ground. Rain failed. Dust swept about in clouds. The promise of the early years evaporated. Banks resumed control, or left it to their subsidiaries, great companies trading in land and stock. Railways were pushed through to gather the wheat and wool, and they had to be paid for ... by someone, somehow. Nothing pays for itself.

Individual settlers learned bitterly, or happily, from their experiences but the financial needs of a commercial empire had to come first, and the system was a greedy one. We now come to another Australian paradox. Tiny numbers of black people had roamed over vast areas, their very incapacity (in European terms) preventing them from ruining the land. The whites were not so restrained, and did terrible damage. The paradox I referred to is that the land selection acts of the 1860s in eastern states introduced smaller land holdings, thus enforcing an environmentally inferior regime of ownership and use. One might expect (and one might be disappointed!) that a station running from one watercourse to another might manage its stock in such a way as not to overstrain the land, whereas a farmer on a block of one square mile (a common selection size) simply had to manage repayments, improvements and living expenses from whatever could be extracted from the tiny holding.

Tiny by Australian standards, that is; possibly quite large by those of the British Isles, where soil and rainfall were more reliable and better understood. The European farmers brought to Australia another restriction built into their minds: the straight line. This, instead of the

eco-system, was the way the land was divided. Divided: it's time to look at this concept, this enforcement, this mistake.

It seems to me that the Australian land requires a certain natural socialism, as I shall call it, if it is to be managed well; if, that is, humans are to discipline and restrain themselves sufficiently so as not to wreck the land which – another paradox – they came to love. When I speak of discipline, I mean that those managing the land need to think of their properties, not as they look when they are doing well, but as they are over the span of nature's cycles ... and what are they? A new sort of concept is called for here, and it will depend on what human activities are carried out on the surface being considered. Nor is the surface all. Water moves underground, and water tables rise and fall, so that the greenness of the grass on any given day is not the only indicator of health. Birds, animals and types of plants all have something to contribute, and the patterns of these statements won't necessarily lie within the fences, or even the road alignments of the civilisation superimposed. In this sense the blacks' understandings of the land need to be revived wherever possible, and added to what we whites can perceive; there may be an addition of wisdom along that path. It seems to me also that once ownership is restricted then almost inevitably responsibility, or capacity for responsible thinking, is on the verge of being curtailed also. A land subdivided into tiny holdings is, in terms of environmental and social responsibility, a land grievously divided.

Back to those who opened up the land, optimists, punters, visionaries, fools, cautious, practical, hard-working people full of hopes and endurance, the shock wave of the European intellect facing something that it thought it could understand, looked on by the remnants of an earlier civilisation, on the way to being destroyed, but surviving here and there, and watching in amazement as the clever-greedy people over-reached themselves, but, let us never forget, often with success. The European is more adventurous than the native, more restless, more likely to step over the boundaries which

kept the native in such a restricted, if brilliant, adaptation to the place where he lived.

Queensland, Western Australia (several kingdoms in itself!), South Australia and the Territory which was once its northern half, what a mighty spread of land is in those words. How much despair, success, ambivalence and uncertainty too! So many of those first settlements in South and central Australia were pitched beyond the limits of the possible. In a word, they were creations of optimism, desperation, hope and carried out in that emptiness created by ignorance. The first settlers decided to give things a go, and they did, leaving the wreckage of their buildings for today's visitors to inspect; the modern tourist, in an amiable blend of whimsicality and scorn, reflects on how far those settlers were from anything they knew, anything beyond letters or the preachings of pioneer reverends, which might sustain them.

What did sustain them? Tales of success, presumably, when it came; bravery; fear; determination to remain superior to the broken down tribals who were never far away; the agony of failure, that pit into which nobody wanted to be thrown. In the wealthier states – New South Wales, Victoria – successful settlers built homes, homesteads, of some grandeur once the early struggles had been consolidated. In the other states the order of construction is a little clearer: first, huts and early homes, then the communal buildings – schools, tiny churches, pubs, of course, a police station, maybe even a lock-up, a shelter where the community could gather, then, if the area prospered, a town hall. Perhaps a few shops, one of them called an emporium. Gutters, kerbs, a railway station and a post office; the township was a statement to itself that something had been achieved. Memories of the British Isles, and the other places where the settlers had come from, hovered over the dusty villages of the plains. Teachers came and went from cities, doctors too; the cities set the standard for the townships, the townships for the properties, and beyond the coastal cities of Australia loomed the greater places of

Europe being represented, re-presented, as well, as poorly, as proudly as possible, by the places being built out here. Australia became a wealthy place – money from gold, wheat and wool – and this money allowed it to buy, to import from Home, the luxuries we hadn't got around to producing ourselves.

Our most gifted people went to England, to Europe, and the wealthy, if they could find reliable managers of their Australian stations, went back for periods of two or three years, perhaps even longer. By the time of my childhood, families of long residence in Australia were a little scornful of those who thought of England as home, but this was perhaps an over-simplification on their part, as if they wanted something of great pain and delicacy resolved more simply than its nature allowed. Here is a passage from a book about a family once thought representative of the Australian pastoral expansion:

Through the first decade of the century, even with so much going on my father never lost sight of the fact that as soon as they could afford it they would return to England for a visit, as homesickness had increased with the years. ... At last, in 1910, they set sail ... When they arrived in London Mother stayed there for a few days to allow Father to go to Somerset to see his parents alone. They met him at the train and drove to Baltsborough. As they neared the village father could hear the church bells ringing out gaily and he was surprised as they were rung only to signify some major event such as peace being declared. When he looked at his mother in astonishment she said, 'But they're ringing for you, son. Because you've come home.'¹

Austin William Austin had been in Australia – Hay, Narrandera – for fifteen years. Other members of his family had come out too, they'd taken up properties, they'd built homesteads, excavated lakes, had shearing sheds erected, and fences ... mile upon mile. They, and thousands like them, had played great parts in the appropriation, the expropriation, of Australia, they had gained and lost by the experience, and they knew it. They had lost England as the centre of

their sense of normality. It was too small for minds that had accommodated the distances, the irregularities, the scale and scope of the land they'd adopted and adapted, and which, in its turn – the land is ever active in unsuspected and powerful ways – had done the same to them. The Austins, like all Australians, had been changed by the place they'd set out to alter.

I think I should pause there, dear reader, to let you consider, because everything I want to say in this book will be built on what I've said so far.

Perhaps now, before resuming discussion of the Australian land-mass, I can enlarge for a moment on the nature of these transformations that take place in the Australian mind. There are monuments all over the country, even in places almost deserted today, to the soldiers who served King and Country in the war of 1914 – 1918. The Great War. World War 1. Words chipped in stone speak of the men who went away. A little consideration tells us that their nobility, sacrifice and love were expended because they were still British enough to feel that they had to take part in the mother country's battles. Why else would they go so far to risk their lives? Yet today, after the sacrifices have been considered and reconsidered a great many times, it is felt that the soldiers were the most Australian of Australians, and emphasis has been shifted from the causes for which they fought to the way in which they did their fighting. Australians are very proud of their soldiers. They believe in them. Our soldiers, in the act of being colonial, proved us to be otherwise. Or so we say.

Back to the land. Where shall we start this time? In the centre, of course, where the country is harshest, and offers least. Back of the backest beyond, somewhere past the never-never, is the heart once thought to be dead. What a wonderful place! Dotted here and there are pools of water, seeping from far underground, and birds, animals and humans link these life-giving places, so that if you knew all the movements of tiny, track-making feet, or the flapping and scurrying of wings large and small, you'd be in touch with the move-

ments of everything living in a place superficially harsh, but tender in its colours and its appeal. Tracks join the places of water, and the black people trod them, the soles of their feet hardened. They rested when there was no point in moving, their minds unlimited by those great concepts of the foreigners, time and space. Time? They had all there is. Space? There was so much that it needed no measurement. Nobody's ever asked them, as far as I know, what were the major concepts supporting their existence. Almost the only aboriginal idea of significance to enter the white man's thinking is that of 'the dream-time', and nobody quite knows what this means. It seems to intimate an anti-historical outlook, an indication that the forces that brought the earth as we now know it into existence are still active today; that is, that we are, in a way, participants in, as well as inheritors of, creation. Creation. The religion of the intruding Europeans gives the credit for this to God, who did the job, it is said, in six days and rested on the seventh. To the native people, though, the great forces are still in the sky, in the land. This, it seems to me, is more credible, or comprehensible to the European mind in the centre of our country than on the coast, where the land is a little more like the Europe where our thinking came from. The centre is something else.

The centre is where huge rocks and eroded ranges tell us we're nothing. It's a message that Europeans don't like to hear, so the rocks, the vast entablatures and plateaux, the rings of upbraided planet-skin, confine themselves to the silent messages they convey if we let our minds and our eyes open a peep. Water drains down slabs of rock higher than a battleship's side, water dribbles out of holes so far above us that we imagine nothing but birds of prey ever enter them, although if water's there we know that won't be true. Water is life, and water is focal, whether it's dribbling from what would be the tenth or eleventh floor if the rocks had lifts inside them, or it shows itself only to the eye that's quick enough to realise that two lines of redgums, fifty metres apart, in a bed of well-washed sand, indicate a river of hidden water. Life is never quite what it seems, in central

Australia, and is therefore a rebuke, an insistence that the whitefella must alter his ways of thinking because they were developed elsewhere as a response to other circumstances. Central Australia is the inversion, almost complete, of the realities that are real at the edges of the land we dwell in. How can we think of it as one land when it keeps telling us different things?

This is puzzling. The variety is obvious, from the red deserts of the west to the fern gullies of the south-east, from the rainforests of the north to the sand surrounding Uluru, from the harshly incised Bungle Bungles to the horizontal scrub of Tasmania, the differences are so great that one would expect regional variation at least as great in dress, manners and above all language, yet these differences are not there. Never have been, as best we can understand the aboriginal past, though whitefellas must enter this territory with care. Even these tribal, familial, *echt*-regional people were in contact with each other, trading materials and ideas over huge stretches of the land. They appear to have taken it for granted that they would understand each other, and they did, just as we today expect a dollar, or a courtesy, will have the same effect at a petrol station in the north as at an airport in the south. One has only to consider the immense variety, and range, of the migrants entering Australia in the last sixty years to realise the diversity, the fragmentation, this might have created ... yet it has not been the case. What is the mysterious unifier of Australian society? (Think of all those gold diggers, years ago, that were swallowed to form our body social.) An intolerance, a refusal to accept differences that are too great? An unwillingness on the part of migrant children to continue the behaviours that make their parents different? An insistence by those controlling the economy that those who want money have to play by the common rules, no matter how different they may be at home? A subtle rearrangement whereby settlers are encouraged to maintain their ethnic differences – identities, that is – so long as they show, by the way they earn their money, that these differences, the old-identity-forming practices, have become

decorative rather than fundamental, that is, the wider society observing them can see that the arrivals, the adaptees, are going through a life-changing twist whereby they realise that things that were once fundamental are fundamental no longer and that so long as they offer an empty form of honour to these old practices then their chances of adaptation to the new are fairly good.

You wouldn't want to fail, when you'd come so far to succeed!

But I have drifted from the land to the ways whereby we live in it, and it's time to let the deeper theme reassert itself. Where and how shall we ask it to do this? In suburbia, of course, the once-despised areas where the Australian population has its interplay with life, in those ... teeming, I want to say, but they're not ... places where the Australian citizenry makes a life for itself while demanding spaces far bigger than it can buy. The block of land, the apartment, the suburban bicycle track, the bus stop, the areas pressing upon the corner milk-bar until Coles and Woolworths crowded in: there is where we will place ourselves now for our next consideration of the land.

The first thing we see is the spread. Long gone are the days when the poor were cramped in wretched houses while the rich had ample blocks. The two-storey 'mansions', as they were called, which once set the well-to-do apart, are now built for everyone. Even cars have rooms to themselves, as do children, with television and computers in areas that belong to them and the friends they have over. Cleaning and gardening may be hired out but those who perform these tasks are servants no longer, but members of a service industry, perhaps well set up in their homes too. Something has gone from the Victorian world, and something has gone on existing, and it's not easy to say what it is. My best guess is that the constant is the idea that ownership more or less equals individuality. The greater the area of your decision-making, the more important you are. How does that sound?

The spread, when we look at it more closely, involves a contradiction; the individual existence is made possible by communal services

which bring each and every one of us our power, water, and take away our sewerage, drainage, rubbish (what isn't recycled), and offer access to our properties via the roads which are there for all. The modern Australian city is a quaint mixture of arrangements whereby services can be brought to the individual while offered simultaneously to all. This, you may say, is what a city has always been, but our country has attempted a new balance, I think, of the demands and the solutions, whereby individuals have the greatest possible areas in private ownership in a rough and by no means always satisfactory balance with their equally strong need to have access to everything else. The axle grease for this unlikely combination is the car, which, representing mobility, is on the side of individuality; this is why it needs to be privately owned. The car is our society's strongest evidence of the individual's right to pull up stakes and move, while the house, necessary as it is, makes us ambivalent because it ties us to it – to pay it off, to maintain it, to be as pleasantly sociable as we can with those who know us, and to use its resources for the balanced and ever-loving business of bringing up our children. The home suggests to us that we could be better than we are while the car offers us the petulant, angry and possibly greedy means of escape. 'Fuck'em!' we can say, and tear off down the road!

So the modern city is the embodiment, the built structures, of the tension between the individual and the social which is always being redefined and never finally resolved. What about the land on which it's built?

The land and the meanings it would impose have to be suppressed for a city to be established. Yet even this statement is too strong, endless though the city may seem while the land is almost invisible. It's hidden under buildings, bitumen, traffic signals, power lines ... the whole caboodle! Much as it might like to be producing the same old plants it grew for centuries, its occupants, its owners, have other ideas. They turn it over, add fertilisers, and grow anything their dreams have brought into their minds. Anything they've read

about in magazines, heard on radio, or envied when they inspected gardens on display. Roses in this bed, camellias there, bamboo on the other side of the fence. Veggies – tomatoes, cauliflower, beans twining their way up sticks, these poked into the earth because we feel like it (poor earth!), and fence posts, whole armies of them, in their lines! City land is regimented, and called on to be everyone's servant, collecting oil drips from engines here, proudly producing orchids over there, yes, at the front fence, on display. In a well-regulated suburb, our gardens, our homes, our lives, take on the life of a window display, set before the public to entice or persuade, and the underlying land, once capable of making statements on its own account, is too chopped and split into tiny pieces to have coherence any more. Only an occasional patch, on high land somewhere, or overlooking a river or a bay, manages to retain a little of its former power. For the rest, the land has been subdivided, ruled, mapped, divided, used within an inch of its total capacity.

For a reminder of what it used to be, it looks to the sky, where the rain falls from, the wind, the sunlight and the clouds scudding across the blue. Even the birds remind the earth of the freedom it's lost since a city has been pressed upon it. The birds, of course, find their way into the heart of cities, reminding us that there were pathways and patterns of movement before traffic got control. City residents move about in their trains and trams and buses and their endless flow of cars, trucks and vans; a city, normally thought of as a distribution of buildings delineated by a plan, a map, is perhaps better understood as a circulation system, never daring finally, or absolutely, to sleep, in case waking turned out to be too hard. Thinking of a city in this way makes us ask where the heart, the brain, the ultimate motivator is and there's no answer except to locate a little of it in each and every one of us; a city is, finally, those who live in it rather than the physical legacy of what they've done, let alone the land that it sits on ...

... except, of course, that the land has the last word on value: land is valued as opportunity, as proximity to important functions, and

you pay for it accordingly. So in a capitalist society land is valued not so much for itself but for the money-making opportunities it allows. This, as stated earlier, is almost the opposite of the way land forces us to think about it elsewhere, but land loses much of its power to restrict us once we crowd on it, overwhelming it with the logic of the way we make money and move it around. This, perhaps, goes some of the way to explaining the strange feeling of loss and acquisition that city dwellers experience when they leave their cities behind and drive into the countryside they know, and then the further distances where they're not so sure. Driving out of our cities, we have a feeling of loss, and possibly a further feeling that we are gaining in some way, or should be, but we're not properly attuned to whatever it is we're gaining so that sometimes the feeling of loss accompanies us for days, and vast distances, until our little movement across the land begins to feel positive, exploratory, again, and we don't want to turn back. Ever! That's when the land is reclaiming us, and we're submitting, allowing ourselves to be smaller, less important than we thought we were when we were rulers of our city block (rates due quarterly, other bills every second week). If we were still in Europe we wouldn't have this ambivalence, we'd simply be moving from one population centre to the next, with the countryside never out of control. Easy! Or so we thought, back in those pre-lapsarian days before we, like the Austins years ago, submitted to the land.

I propose now to look more closely at Bernard O'Dowd's poem, and then to take this discussion further, if I can.

1 Page 69, *Memories of a Riverina Childhood*, by Joan Austin Palmer, New South Wales University Press, Sydney, 1993

Bernard O'Dowd's Australia

Rereading Bernard O'Dowd's poem a century after it was published, I have to say that it is not as satisfying as I once thought. My criticism is of the concluding sestet, which does not get us anywhere. The opening octet, with its five question marks, has force: the questions are incisive and the approach to the reader direct. The questions, though, imply that an answer should be forthcoming, but when O'Dowd attempts to offer one, he can only find a tangle of images, a cliché or two and a central infelicity with words. O'Dowd no doubt felt that a sonnet was a concise form, its very requirements imposing a discipline which he may have felt he needed; I think the test of his decision to make his poem a sonnet is to ask whether it couldn't stop after its eighth line:

Or lurks millenial Eden 'neath your face?

Did he have anything further to say?

Answer: not much at all. I referred to a 'central infelicity'; it is the grammatical construct 'The cenotaphs ... mix omens with the auguries ...'. The poem would be better without 'the cenotaphs', because there is a contradiction – a confusion – between a cenotaph and the picture of indigenous creatures leaping, swimming and flying. The idea that these species are dead elsewhere confirms the notion implied by 'cenotaph' but doesn't sit well with their active state in the Australia of 1903. One feels that O'Dowd wishes to offer hope and, bless him, vision, but to make such an offer he draws in the notion of 'the Cross', and the less than tolerable notion of a virgin helpmate Ocean. This last implies a laughable gender balance in human affairs

and it also harks back to ancient and ever-dubious ideas linking woman and the sea as a force of ultra-motherhood, an idea we could well do without, in my view.

It's also interesting to note that O'Dowd, in setting up his choice for the nascent Australia, can find almost nothing southern to put before us. The Sargasso Sea, Delos, Mammon, millenial Eden and the concepts of time and space all have their origins in the northern hemisphere, and even the word Cross is ambivalent; it is certainly the southern hemisphere's stellar configuration that he is asking us to picture, but the word draws some of its power from the cross on which Christ was crucified. Enter the ideas, the mental world of the northern hemisphere, again.

For all that, the poem is challenging. Can we do better, or are we doomed to repeat our European, our human, past? If we want to do better, where should we look for ideals, goals, aims? O'Dowd doesn't really know. I have a feeling he doesn't want to specify anything definite because if he does it will be clear if we fail (the criteria of success haven't been met) and even more clear if we succeed (the goals have been met and so what?).

O'Dowd steps over this problem by keeping his forehead high, his eyes trained on an unstated 'vision', and offering a sweeping condemnation of what's gone before. Better, I think he would say, to keep the future undefined and therefore possessing the potential for good than to limit it by defining procedural goals and steps. Uncertainty is nobler, better, than anything definition can provide. I ask you, would you set sail for Paraguay with such a man? I'll have the Queensland shearers any day!

The land (2)

That it goes on forever is one of the things we like about our country, but we are not alone in that. Canada has frozen areas to contrast with our dry ones; Brazil has the Amazon jungles, though it's losing them. The Russians have Siberia to one side, and the Chinese have the two Mongolias, not to mention Tibet. How Africans are affected by their central spaces, I cannot say. How are we affected by ours?

This is a difficult enough question in itself but it becomes more difficult once we attempt, not only to answer it but to evaluate the thinking of those who've made a home in Australia since white settlement in 1788. That is, if we say that occupation of a certain part of our country has affected us in such and such a way, are we really describing an effect of the land, or are we describing the attitude that we brought to the occupation? This may seem a pedantic point but I remember driving through parts of southern Victoria after my first trip to Europe, and I was astonished at the effect my recent journey had made to the way I saw. What would, a few weeks before, have been a well-settled district now seemed unfinished, its pioneering phase by no means over. Humans had certainly been active but one was aware that they had *done things* to the land without making it entirely their own, as humans had in Europe. Patches of bracken had regrown in the paddocks and fence posts had started to rot, their wires sagging when rusted. Posts and trees had been blackened, here and there, by fire. Homes on the properties varied from the new and prosperous, with vehicles a-plenty parked in loose assembly, through the declining but still upright to those in irreversible decline. One quirky marker of confidence and therefore prosperity was the

sort of shelter the farming families had erected for children's bikes at the point where their kids caught the bus to school. Something of the children's prospects seemed to be expressed in the liveliness, or rust, of these little constructs. Having once been a ride-to-school kid myself, I realised I was looking at an aspect of my own past with new eyes, and that going to Europe had changed my way of seeing what we were and what I myself had been, years before.

Vision is as much in the mind as in the eye. What a trip to Europe had shown me was that Europeans expected the land around them to exist for their use, the adaptations necessary having been made centuries before. Humanity, they felt, had been described by the thinkers of the Christian religion, though this in itself had been called into question by the writers of the age of enlightenment, and the scientists who followed them, particularly those interested in evolution. Debate on these matters took place inside the mind of mankind, and the movement of the various battles of ideas could be followed because there had been such battles before.

The Australian land challenged this. It wasn't ready for the settlers' animals and it wouldn't easily cede the dominance, the lack of resistance, that the settlers hoped for. Drought followed flood followed drought. Fire wiped out anything and everything, but followed up by contradicting despair with wondrous regrowth in the blackened forest. The social order supporting the architectures that came with the settlers gained no resonance from the seasons that flowed over them. Buildings that looked at least halfway decent in Sydney looked grandiloquent by the time they reached Bathurst, and no more than delightfully defiant on the banks of the Darling at Bourke. The grandest things the settlers built were made of trees, such as the poles and decking on the Murray River waterfront at Echuca, the log jail in Omeo, or the simple bridges carrying railways to forest settlements like Walhalla; I'm speaking of the noble timber constructions spanning gullies (replaced by steel when the lessons of the 1939 fires had been absorbed). Fire is part of the pattern of a eucalyptus forest,

and European man simply isn't prepared to concede this when he wants to build. Paradox again: the more we learn to love the bush the more we want to live in it, when common sense, that rarity, would tell us to build somewhere safer, and make visits to our beloved places when we feel the need.

In a way, of course, this is what we do with our cities, but there are plenty of foolish exceptions, like towns built on the floodplain of the river they cluster about, or places that have trouble getting rid of their sewage. Some people find it easy, and some very hard, to restrict themselves so that nature's advantages are shared by all. New subdivisions insist on placing themselves on the very thing that makes a location attractive. Result? Something that was wondrous is at least partly destroyed so that it can be enjoyed by a few. The problem is ownership. People find it hard to accept that a view of a coastline or access to a bay is best maintained by preserving it for all, which means making buildings sit well back. We need, I think, a poetry that keeps our feelings, and the statement of them, shared. Privacy has gone too far ...

We were speaking of the European imagination, and its encounter with the land in this country of ours. The topic is huge, and difficult to control. It may be best if I restrict myself to a few examples in order to suggest the sorts of things I have in mind. I'll start with cathedrals. Australian aborigines never built anything of this sort, whereas their invaders were proud of the spires and vaults of their homelands, in particular the flying buttresses and stained glass of the gothic period. European Christianity found a language for itself that emerged quite quickly from its Romanesque antecedents and then developed over the next few hundred years, though perhaps never surpassing its twelfth century peaks. The language was architectural; stone stood on stone, ever higher, because a cathedral was aspirational, that is, the building, as it rose above the earth, was reaching towards heaven. At once we see that European Christianity was concerned not only with meanings but with metaphors to express them.

Not for nothing was the body of a church called its nave, from *navis* a ship, for congregations were perceived as journeying towards the deity they worshipped. The nave was oriented so that the rising sun illuminated the glass above the altar, and the setting sun the windows above the portal. Transepts on either side reminded those who worshipped of the cross on which their saviour had died. Another of the gothic glories is the way in which, down the years in which the style matured, the areas of glass were expanded so that the light, pouring in, was evidence of the divinity shining down from another world, contiguous with this one, though not of the same order, ever-present, articulating the existence of God, and demanding a renewal of the congregation's spirituality if they were to live in harmony with the numinous world filtering itself through the great stained glass into the gloom where mortals lived and prayed.

When Europeans looked for evidence of a comparable spiritual life among the natives, they saw none. The blacks really were inferior, they decided. The evidence of spirituality was the building of churches and the blacks had none. Therefore ...

The Europeans, wanting to experience spirituality intensely, had built it into certain locations, identifying it with a church, both architecturally and socially. That spirituality could be omnipresent would have been something which, for the purpose of argument, they might have conceded, but in terms of daily existence they took it for granted that the spiritual needed a special place, set apart, maintained, where the church and its teachings held sway. This was foreign to the aboriginal mind. What they had in its place is not easy for us to know, today, because much of it has been destroyed and also because the black people, shocked by the wilfulness of the whites' ignorance, became reticent about sharing. You tell one white person because they're sympathetic, that person passes it on and before long your secret is being used to destroy you. Or whites would talk about things in front of blacks who hadn't developed to the point where they had a right to know, or the community a need for them to know.

This leads us to the second of my discussion points re differences: I speak of secrecy, initiation, rank. The knowledge, the inner lore by which aboriginal societies operated, was layered, remembered, passed on when younger minds were deemed ready to receive. All this took place in an oral tradition and commonsense would suggest that much must have been lost and reinvented many times over when things work in such a way. I do not think it disrespectful to say this. A written culture lays itself open to the drawbacks of legalism, while an oral culture, looser in its definitions, perhaps, may also be more adaptable and ready to reinterpret for changing circumstances. Initiation of the young males was and is the way we whites normally approach the black society's way of preparing their young for adulthood, but there must have been other structural aspects of the process, not least of which must be a question over the degree to which male rituals and male 'leadership' actually controlled the behaviour of aboriginal societies. One has only to think of ridiculous photos of black men wearing metal plaques saying 'King Billy' around their necks to perceive how the intruding white society assumed that the aboriginal people *must* have been patriarchal in a simple and rather silly way. Whites might have recognised the dignity of individual blacks but were much less willing to concede any validity to their social arrangements, of which, normally, the whites had no understanding. Precedence and procedure are much more complex matters than the use of restraint or simple, nulla nulla-wielding power! There is also the difficulty raised by the fact that notions like rights, obligations and shades of acceptability appear not to have been managed by the aboriginal people within the terms of understanding used by the newcomers. Systems of thought tend to be impenetrable to minds unused to them. I am thinking in particular of those deeper, more sombre layers of meaning adumbrated by the central stories of a culture. In a lifetime of reading I have looked at any number of aboriginal 'tales', from everything to do with creation to accounts of matters such as the origin of fire. None of these stories has ever

affected me in any serious way, that is to say, I have never – call me ignorant if you wish – felt that the account I was reading was in some way imaginatively useful.

Contrast this with, let us say, the innumerable dramatic and or musical settings of, again let us say, the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the purpose of his father, the almighty god, in sending him to earth. At once the ground becomes clear. Mankind is in terrible darkness, needing to be redeemed, and to that end the almighty sent his son to earth to live, teach, and eventually die for the mortals that god so loved. Familiar? Yes, we've all heard it many times. The inner necessities for such a belief system are imprinted on us in ways that most of us hardly understand. How could we possibly know how the black people saw the world? Common sense would suggest, again, that they must have told the whites some at least of what they needed to know, but found them without understanding, for the very good reason that cultures find it diabolically hard to understand the inner logics of other cultures: that, dear reader, is what *otherness* is.

Aboriginal societies appear to have been based on the development of their members, the preparation for learnings to be revealed to them, and the secrecies whereby things were sequestered until the time was right. In a society that built virtually nothing, this involved the necessity of being able to keep things, and knowledges, apart. Tjuringa, or carving sticks, with all their encoded messages, were kept hidden, not so much by the fact of inappropriate people not knowing where they were but from such people being forced to stay away because taboos, restrictions, were a necessary and normal part of daily life. This is not easy for a modern, democratic society to accept. Parliamentary government is an elaborate set of codes of behaviour for the management of human affairs, and it is only when one attempts to explain it to people from non-democratic societies that one can see how mystifying it all is, even though the insider may think it clear as crystal. Knowledge, now called 'information', is an

almost-currency today, which means that it is transferable and can be considered separately from the person whose mind and behaviour carry it. This is a distinction which the aboriginal people appear not to have made. Their societies were much tighter than ours, and for two very good reasons: they were far, far smaller, and their survival, their continued existence in a landscape not concerned with sustaining them, was rarely guaranteed for more than a few days. Successful hunting on one day didn't ensure success the next. Obvious, isn't it, but important too. Aboriginal vigilance was endless, and had to be; their awareness of everything else, those things which the whitefellas called 'nature', was the only thing that kept them alive, and was, therefore, inextricably mixed with those matters which the whitefella defined as 'religious', that is to say those levels of thought concentrating on what for the most part the human brain finds it difficult to know. For the black people, these matters were not transcendent, but everyday. The whites, observing them, thought they were childlike, lacking, all too often, in those personality layers which we call maturity, wisdom, responsibility ... The synthesis of these things which the black people made was a different one, and, as I have been saying for some time now, the synthesis was held together for the black people by a whole range of things which the whites would have regarded as mumbo-jumbo, despite their own inability to see that similar types of thought-behaviour held their thinking together too.

Let us speak now of water. It's the basis of life and nowhere can this be more true than on the driest of continents. Looking down from the air, movements of water are everywhere evident, as is its absence in most of these channels most of the time. Permanent water is a luxury, hence Australians' obsession with storing it in dams. It must be possible, we think, to bank up enough water to tide us through the meanest sequence of seasons. Yes, maybe, sometimes, perhaps. Australians respond to scarcity by having longer showers and more car-washes than the rest of the world; there must be something in us refusing the restraint we know we shouldn't avoid.

A green suburban lawn is a flaunting of idiocy which gains a reasonable amount of approval.

So water is short. This fact, obvious as it is, divides the white and the black civilisations that have controlled the Australian land. The blacks ranged their lives along the flows of water, above or below the surface of the land. The whites have dammed the waters, then moved it in pipes, channels, requiring it always to be of extraordinary purity as if all water is, or could be, used for drinking. Rural people have always known how profoundly they depend on storing water; one of my earliest memories is of my father and all the other farmers in our district knocking the rungs of corrugated iron tanks so they could judge the water level by the sound. They knocked the tanks with clenched fist; if the sound was dull, there was water, if resonant, none. It only took a few knocks to know which rung had water behind it and which had none. 'We could do with rain,' they said, on each and every occasion!

Whites like to manage water. They think of it in terms of rights, though this is farcical. Blacks know where it is and let their lives flow with it. The movement of birds and the tracks of animals were ways of seeing further than the eye allowed; the inter-connectedness of life was obvious to the black people in a way not available to the modern urban dweller. As a once-country person I am often surprised by the inability of city people to realise the effects of the demands they put on the country surrounding them, notably for water. There isn't all that much to be had.

Anybody who glances at a map can see that much of Australia's water runs the short distance from our eastern mountains to the sea; this leads people to dream up schemes of redirecting towards the inland. The Snowy Mountains hydro-electric scheme did just this. Every year or two somebody dreams up similar arrangements for turning Queensland's coast-flowing waters towards the Darling River or the Cooper Basin, ideas one can only describe as well-intentioned! The black people, knowing how dependent they were,

lived where other things lived; they observed the habits of creatures, their habitats, and times of procreation, and they took what they needed. Whites are more inclined to force their requirements onto a recalcitrant nature without looking too hard at the effects. Whites act within a capitalist economy, notorious for not valuing anything until the raw materials involved have been submitted to 'value-adding' processes, when the ecological value of the substances involved may have far exceeded the value added, such as it may be. Whites also act out a sort of junior science lab experiment upon the world: if we irrigate this wheat/cotton/lucerne, can we increase productivity? Usually we can, so we irrigate, that is, we apply more water taken from, or brought from, somewhere else. This raises questions of how the water is brought to where it's required and the usual answer is in open channels, which means prodigious losses by evaporation, and once the water has been used to produce the desired effect, equally prodigious harm caused by salination. The trees that used to keep the water table down were razed to create the open spaces needed for grazing or the cultivation of wheat/cotton/lucerne. These problems are certainly soluble but the first question to deal with is to identify how the problem arose in the first place, and this is when the attitudes of the black people can teach whitefellas something if they're prepared to learn. If it is natural for the European invaders to say, this is what I want to bring about, so how do I make it happen, then it is equally natural and valid to say, in the aboriginal way, how do things work because I know I have to fit in with them. It seems to me that we are looking at an uncommon, perhaps rare, way of doubling our mental capacity to deal with the world we live in, and our path towards this doubling of capacity is to realise that both the white and the black approaches to the matter are useful, and further they are complementary. Both, I think, are needed.

Let us move on to fire; it's the natural follow up to water, and, if Australia is the world's driest continent it's also the most fire-prone, particularly in those large areas where the eucalyptus tree is domi-

nant. Ah, the eucalyptus! The smell, the sight of it in any other part of the world sends an Australian's heart home. Identity is in the tree, rather than any flag or song. The trees, no matter how distinctive individually, take on character from each other; their effect is in the vista, the massing, the way they cover huge areas in relentless waves. They are also profoundly expressive in the way one species gives way to another at a slight change in soil, slope or ground water. The last of one species may be in touching distance, or stone's throw, perhaps, of the first of another, a sharpness of delineation which we don't associate with the cumbersome spaces of our land.

The eucalypt, though, as we all know, is one of the most combustible of genera. Its leaves release gases which burn, on hot windy days, far ahead of the trees from which they have been released. A eucalyptus forest on fire is one of the most dangerous places on earth, achieving a perfection of destructability, a whimsical, fickle release of forces beyond restraint ... until there is no more fuel, and all is quiet again, leaving only smoke and a smell which nobody who has known it can forget, a purged yet powerful reminder of the forest that was, and the forest which will grow again.

The black people appear not to have been frightened of fire, though they must have been wary of it once it was loose. This brings us to the difficult question of how much we can know about forest fires and regrowth before white settlement took place. Lightning strikes must have caused fires and, apart from rain, there was nothing or nobody to put them out. The bush must often have been alight, burning until fuel ran out or rain fell. As far as we know, the black people's intervention in the balance so struck was to light fires in order to regenerate the grasses on which kangaroos and other creatures fed; new growth was an enticement to these creatures to feed in places favoured by their hunters, a neat trick which we are told was usually successful. The blacks had no fences and even in places where their encampments were permanent or semi-so, they repre-

sented no great loss in the event of them being burned. The blacks could use fire without fearing its effects.

This is not so for whites. Our civilisation specialises in erecting and preserving. Everything we make or build takes its place in our systems of value, of worth. A dollar sum can be placed on anything. We insure. We put up signs: Keep Out! or Do Not ... ! We regulate. We build fences, dams, aircraft hangars, soaring bridges and skyscrapers that look down on gothic spires of earlier times. Our heritage is built and has to be preserved. This separates us from nature, so, perversely in my view, we feel a need to build in places where we aren't particularly secure. Holiday homes stretch along bush tracks, we enjoy the walks and the wildflowers, and we rush for safety when fire gets loose, as it does, every summer. The eucalypt has evolved in a remarkable way which the modern house has not learned to emulate! The scorched tree waits a few weeks until rain has fallen, then puts out new shoots. Its central core, its trunk and root system, have lost their leaves so they grow some more. Recovery is quick, and spectacular to the once devastated beholder. Unfortunately, we don't yet build in the same way, with a core that can be preserved and add-ons that are easily replaced. Humans, even white European ones, could live in the bush if they lived according to its ways, but that's a state of awareness, and humility, which we haven't yet attained. The land knows how to live with fire but its recent arrivals have been slow in adapting. A few more centuries may be needed!

The theme of almost all the remarks in this section is, I think, of Europeans being pressed towards reconsidering their dominance over nature by some of the many strictures which living in this land enforces. The place has ways of its own which we ignore at our cost.

That poem again

We'd better get a couple of questions out of the way. Is man perfectible? No. Is man improveable? Yes, certainly, though much depends on the scope of the improvement you seek. I think human nature can be likened to a vast trading area: you can have almost anything if you pay a price. You can do without jails if you have a social morality – rules that cannot be flouted – of sufficient force. The best way to do this is to limit the capacity – that's to say the thinking – to imagine anything outside the rules. I am serious, and you will accuse me of wanting to bring back censorship, which I normally oppose. Rather than deal with this, I'll move on.

Why isn't man perfectible? It's an important question because idealists like O'Dowd and myself can't create an ideal society out of imperfect people. O'Dowd has spoken for himself, but I, I'm afraid, have to rat on the cause. Man isn't perfectible because mankind is a mass of contradictions. Man claims to be social but puts himself first. Man wants fidelity and lusts after its opposite. Man wants to make those closest to him happier than others further away. True? Do we not prefer to look after our own? Come, let's have no lies when you answer. Man says he wants the best for the long term but grabs advantage in the short. Et cetera. You've heard it all before, you know it already, but that doesn't mean there's any escape.

Nor does it mean there's not. Let's look at those questions again. 'Are you a drift Sargasso, where the West in halcyon calm rebuilds her fatal nest?' White Australia has been a fascinating experiment. The people who built it all came from earlier lands where either Mammon held sway or ideas of millennial Eden lurked beneath the

surface of the brain. They brought the ideas of the old world with them, including the aspirations of O'Dowd. Years passed and the settlers had children of their own, and it was commonly observed in early New South Wales that the native-born had a rude strength and confidence that had somehow sprung out of their relatively traditionless situation. Something new was being born. My reference to the Austin family, made earlier, indicates how this could be so. This new spirit tested itself against the old empire's ways and sensed that its variations gave it an advantage, particularly on the new base of the far-flung Australian land. If wealth came, it allowed refinement, but the means to produce it were not at hand, so those who had wealth imported what they needed, went home for a time, did without, forgot, or improvised. Or some combination thereof. An old society cannot be reproduced no matter how hard the attempt. Australia and New Zealand are not England and never could have been. Yet so much of the old society came to the new lands. Most notable was the institution of parliament, and the democratic spirit that informed it, and here Australia had an advantage in being at least in part a cast-off society. Those who might have been struggling for a vote at home made sure they got one here, and the compulsion to vote, when it came – an aspect of the convict society brought into the modern operation of the state – meant that Australia's practice of democracy was a little more thorough-going than it was elsewhere. *Anywhere else. One up for Australia!*

In a political sense, Australia chose its parents wisely. We were able to engage in a very useful and richly rewarding struggle for independence because nineteenth century Australia was one of the wealthiest places in the world and despite its sense of inferiority to England its confidence was considerable. When it set itself to do the things required of it as a part of empire, it could more than hold its own. When, however, we swing our attention to the country's attempts, such as they are, to separate itself from the American influ-

ence, we come across a different story. More of this anon; one more matter first.

O'Dowd offers rhetoric when, politically, we needs ideas. 'Are you for Light ... or but a Will o' Wisp on marshy quest?' What, politically, does Light represent, and whose ideas – not mine, that's for sure! – are as misleading as a Will o' Wisp? The Opposition, Mister Speaker, would have us follow them into a swamp! But the Gov'a'min, Mister Speaker, isn't falling into that trap! We're gunna ...

... we're gunna say that what we're gunna do is gunna be good for the people, and you'll know that because we've already persuaded them that what we want is what they want for themselves. Democracy is at least as much about persuasion as it is about the autonomy of independent minds, particularly in an age when electronic messages enter people's homes as freely as do newspapers, broadcasts and whatever pictures television shows us. The contents of the brain have become public property again, if they were ever anything else. So what is this wonderful new Delos to look like? New? Australia is already one of the older, more stable and successful nation states, something of a model, really, for those who've brought themselves into being more recently. With so much experience we've got a lot to say, and it may be time to relinquish the rhetoric that called ours the newest of lands, for it is that no longer. Our soldiers, our singers, our athletes ... blah blah blah. They are, bless them, the instruments of a dated rhetoric; they did us proud when gaining independence from the first of the great empires in our story, but they really won't do in our struggle to be out of the clutches of that other, newer empire that grips us now.

The land (3)

I want to talk about the sacredness of land. We are inclined to respect this idea when it comes from the mouths of blacks; it's a respect we feel bound to pay them. At other times, however, we feel disengaged. Land isn't sacred to us, though it may well be valuable as property, as the site for a mine, or even as a place where we can take tourists walking, camping, jumping in and out of buses and of course photographing. The economy must be kept ticking over!

What does it mean to hold something sacred? It means, I think, to consider it with a part of the mind where ignorance, knowledge, fear, love, and that weakness of the spiritual knee which comes from being in the presence of something known to be more important all come together. It's a part of the mind which modern mankind keeps away from, but it's there. Always. Civilisations deal with the sacred in different ways, turning it into rituals and practices of enormous variety. The sacred is normally surrounded by taboos, which makes it all the harder for people of two civilisations to understand each other, for, almost by definition, the mental techniques which one civilisation employs to gain some understanding of the things which they find most important only help to block the outsider looking in, trying to find out. The sacred normally has prior steps and stages by which it is approached, and if the people reaching out don't recognise these prior steps then they have no hope of arriving at the central mystery. The sacred, viewed as something ritually approached, is the construction of a mystery and let us not forget that what is mysterious to one may not be so for another, so that even the thing we are trying to discuss keeps moving in and out of definitional range, as it were.

So where are we? I have already referred to the gothic period as the zenith of Europe's spirituality; some of the windows, made to glow by the intensity of that other world behind them, are almost ferocious in their effect. As I pointed out before, this was the result of concentrating in one place the insights, practices, rituals and formalities of religion. Our own black people did something close to the opposite, which made it hard for whites to understand them. Their understandings travelled with them, over tracts of country that were sometimes vast, and covered on foot. There was no alternative to walking, unless you were small enough to be carried, and that couldn't last very long. Men and women had very different roles, and sometimes travelled a way apart, the men hunting, the women foraging. Most of what we know about this has come to us via male anthropologists, making it impossible to be sure of the balance of the black people's practices. Men only told men what men did. It is only in recent times when the black man's world has broken down and women have sustained their people that we sense that the balance may always have been somewhat different from the impression we had. We are again in the presence of that difficulty which comes from trying to understand a culture which kept understandings close to its chest. Knowledge, let's not forget, was only shared with those who were ready for it.

And that's not us! White people are not prepared to undergo the preparations and initiations that create a readiness for understanding. We don't see any sense in them. Our understandings are already formed. So what else can we do but sit on the outside of the black people's activities and express surprise when something they do – painting perhaps – impresses? There's not much else, is there?

One answer is that we can always look at our own reactions. Travelling round the country by four wheel drive is the Australian version of a pilgrimage, and I think the comparison is apt, because European pilgrims went either to the Holy Land (centred on Jerusalem), or they visited places made famous by saints; Saint Iago

(James) of Compostela was one. In such cases there was an end point, or focus, whereas Australia's aborigines moved about their country, with sacred places drawing closer or further away all the time. The European pilgrim, having made a pilgrimage, was 'changed' by the experience, which marked a turning in his/her life. The modern Australian traveller is closer to the black people's endless movement, and changing proximity to the sacred places of the land.

What are people like when they finish these round-Australia trips? Many, no doubt, feel they've accomplished what they set out to do, pack up their gear and go home. Others never want to do anything but travel any more. The journey, that metaphor for increased understanding, has no end that they can see. Movement is their appropriate state of being. The fixture of a home has become restrictive and they feel closer to something – mental health, perhaps; a desired state of mind – when they are moving all the time. The land is no less eloquent for being travelled across. In my experience – and I speak as a car driver, not a walker, in the aboriginal fashion – a day is not complete until all that was seen and traversed is recalled and its experiences put together again. For the purpose of trying to understand an un-located sense of the sacred, it is the mind that produces the notion that some place or area is exceptional in its effects on us, while at the same time this notion is only produced inside us when some place or area has had a palpable effect. We react to something which, in its turn, has affected us in such a way that we need to describe it or to ascribe to it a place in our broader understanding.

If the spiritual is, then, not so much a fixture as a presence, felt almost everywhere even though more keenly at some places than others, it becomes less burdensome, and it links less easily with the rights and wrongs of morality and judgement. The land as a source of spirit is a giving or withholding force rather than a force imposing judgement. Although it means stepping outside the European tradition to say so, I find this idea attractive. Couple it with a harsh (in many places) land needing great endurance and skill to survive in, and you

have, I think, at least part of the spiritual basis of a people who lived in relation to their land. It owns us, they always say; we don't own it. We're its protectors, they say, looking after it to ensure that we hand it on in good shape. Many white landowners understand this relationship with an area, because they have to deal with the same manifestations of the land, and they sense what it was like to be part of a tribal people, moving about in order to survive. Locked inside one system of thought – capitalist agriculture extracting crops and profits from earth – they can see well enough what it would have been like to operate within a different system. The land, and what they've learned about and from the aborigines, has taught them to think in more than one way, a desirable state of mind which this book is trying to develop, or make possible.

What, then, is the spirituality of land? What is spirituality of any sort? These are not easy questions, but we must try to find some sort of answers if we are to proceed. Spirituality is an awareness, I think, that the self is not all. At a simple level, it includes an awareness of our relationships with other people, a realisation that we are part of them and they of us. At a further level, it reaches a capacity to intuit, to apprehend, forces and presences in the universe which are not of our making or under our control, that is to say, it is an awareness of things beyond ourselves. The land, of course, is a prime example, unless we think we have it in our grip. We may think we have such control, but we don't. A change in the seasons, for better or for worse, can swing our fortunes wildly. The spirituality of land? As we travel about, especially on foot, on horseback or bicycle, we get fluctuations in our feelings; some places give us a negative feeling, while others make us feel good. You may want to challenge this. You may want to say that our reactions are too immediate, too subjective, to have any lasting validity, and if I say that farmers who've known a place for the greater part of their lives must know something about it then you may charge me with turning that particular farming family's personal history into a description of the spirit of the place.

I accept these criticisms without yielding my point: we can, I think, merge our personal experiences with the nature of a place, and I say this because I never visit the area where my father and his brothers and sister grew up without feeling that I have a profound attachment to that place without ever having lived there. It is somehow mine by virtue of an inheritance which I neither deserve nor possess any ability to reject. It's mine because of where I sit in a family line.

Please try to follow me. I want you to imagine a stretch of country, mostly pretty flat. It's in the Murray-Darling basin, and you can sense that by the grey haze of redgums on the horizon, drawing lines that give a temporary finality to the edge of any view. Foreground spaces, usually enormous, are filled with land which expensive machinery declares arable. Ploughs, graders, bulldozers, harvesting machines of one sort or another. Pipes, of course, fences, gates, and trees left here and there to give animals shade. Left carelessly, or with intent? Nobody ever knows. In fact, the people of this area are a quaint mixture of certainty and emptiness; ask them one thing and they're definite, another and they haven't the faintest. And yet they seem certain enough; they watch each other closely and alter what they're saying according to whatever's working at the moment. They're not frightened of new crops, new methods or machinery, because there has to be someone who knows, and they listen to them, ring them up and ask. People like themselves have been working out how to do things for generations, so, they reckon, they must have got a fair bit right!

It is conventional to think of white farmers as dominating their land, but there are limits to the truth of this. One has only to walk into a redgum forest, following one of the region's many streams, to sense that the whites are as dependent as the blacks ever were upon water. Channels lead away from pumps, and pumps sit on the rivers, the streams, the winding, wandering watercourses that dawdle, doodle, somehow drift, across the plain. Any pair of eyes, blackfella, whitefella, can see that the birds think this river country is marvellous. They fly about, perching in the trees that stretch their root systems into the

mud, and their branches over the brown waters where the fish that men and birds all desire are moving about, unseen.

But known. The black people knew their haunts, and it is only the more ignorant of the whites, jumping in to swim where there are logs beneath the surface, who injure themselves through an ignorance that the earlier people would never have condoned. Walking through these places, these boating, swimming, camping places, one has a feeling that the whites are a continuation of the blacks as much as a replacement, and now, today, we find that the blacks are no longer as hidden as they were, no longer willing to be pushed out of sight, but vocal, aware that their methods of maintaining and being maintained by the land are as valid as ever. They know that the whitefellas know that if they can't read the land, can't tell what will grow and what won't on this soil and that, if they can't read the potential of any place from the trees that grow there, the birds that flock there, the rise and fall of slopes, the sandiness or otherwise of soils, then they won't survive. The bank manager will be suggesting they come in for a talk pretty soon.

As he and his predecessors have done for years. The place does have a history, though not so much of it has been written down because the whites, like the earlier people, are aware that there's an extra restriction imposed by the written, the publicly stated word. Experience is sometimes better passed on as a sort of inhibitory cloud rolling in to obscure an action likely to have unpredictable effects. The caution which rural people share may be wise, may be foolish, but it's the prevailing custom ...

... as is the desire for improvement. Pioneering spirit lives on in this. Community halls are extended, bits added to one side. An elderly people's home is established, taking pride in the way it looks after people. Roses grow at its door. There are chairs on the verandah so people can look over the land where they once worked, drove, cooked, tended cattle, tended the youngsters they sent to the local school. They have memories, these elderly people, and they talk:

sometimes they have to be reminded. Growing old, they grow young again by recalling things done long ago; talk's movements make even the birds look a little clumsy. From the verandah, waiting for the call to dinner, the old people can see those birds, swooping towards the river and its subsidiary streams, in flocks as plentiful as ever, still, as always, making the humans wonder how they communicate, swinging this way and that as if a signal had been sent.

Perhaps it has. Humans have their awareness that they never knew very much, but it isn't safe to say so until one has reached this balcony, this point of understanding when we can admit our weaknesses. That is to say, people in sight of the end of life's journey can admit they've often wondered where they were or where they should go next. Honesty's not so hard when the exit door is open, waiting. Life can, at last, be seen as one, and central to the unity is the river, with its army of redgums marching with the stream. The land is so flat that almost any disturbance causes the flow of water to branch, this way and that, and branch again a hundred metres later, and again not far away from that. From the air, as the birds know it, and as the black people knew it in their minds, and we know it too, from our maps and aeroplanes, the watercourses are quietly energetic, drifting, circling, winding here and there, spreading themselves whenever snow melting in the mountains sends a rush downstream. A river is a journey from the mountains to the sea, and everything that happens along its course is affected by the country it's travelling through, just as the country itself is affected by the water wandering through. The flow of water is the country's pulse, though clocks and regulated time are the invasive measuring devices demanding to be recognised in the management of land, because time, the whitefellas say, is money. Rural people know this as well as anybody, but they also know that the measurement of time is usually short in span, ignoring the movement of generations, another flow of family life closer to the movement of the waters down those endlessly separating, rejoining, tree-shaded gutters making their way west as if they

remember teaching the black people how to understand movement and have decided they'd better honour the agreement made so long ago.

Does the land forget? Did it ever know anything? Has it any ideas? It certainly doesn't remember who worked it; that belongs to the families themselves. When I was small, I was often driven about the area I'm describing, in cars full of relatives. The cars always seemed to be slowing down, occasionally stopping, so that hands could point through windows at properties deeply settled in that redgum haze which betokens a stream in there somewhere, fish in the brown water, boats, pumps, fruit trees, and citrus orchards, oranges, lemons, grapefruit, wherever there are sand hills left by the river, long ago, long before the Eagle family or any other whites had arrived. If I reach back for what I heard as a child I hear members of the family named, with approximate years – very approximate, because there's always argument – of occupation. 'Why did he move?' I hear myself ask, and my father, or someone, says, 'He felt he could do better out at ...' and I hear the name of some other part of the district, differently placed in the twining curvature of trees, or perhaps a little further from the water, in a place where *Eucalyptus largiflorens*, the black box, is dominant. A change in species is a voice from the land. Sandy rises breed *Callitris*, the native pine, though if there's any water available then they've mostly been pushed out of the way for those citrus orchards, deeper green and with their flamboyant fruit. My family has farmed in most of the ways possible in this district, doing well at times, and struggling often enough. I am taken to the first Eagle homestead in the district, and the present owners invite us in, listening with interest to the stories my father and his sister tell. 'We've still got your father's bridge,' they tell the visitors. 'Come and have a look.' We go to a trickle of water many feet below the level of the plain. 'Doesn't look much now,' says father, 'but I've seen it spreading as far as you could see.' He looks around, and I wonder, child that I am, about those many dimensions that older people see,

and I don't. I don't know anything yet, and these older people do, because they've seen ...

... whatever it is that's happened in the years before I was alive. Years later I go back and photograph the bridge, I show it to my wife, it's a part of my identity I want to share; how can she know unless this past experience, with all its associations, is handed down. I feel connected to this continuity, if one can put those two words together, and I want her to feel the same. It seems to me – but I've been coming to my father's country since the moment I was conceived – that it's country that is easily understood, but that must be because I'm not aware of any separation from it. It has been ours 'since time out of mind', as they said in the England of the first Elizabeth. My family, unlike the Austins described earlier, have no memories of England. Nobody ever talks, and I suspect that nobody knows nor cares, about what we were back there, or even whereabouts back there we came from. Identification with the Australian land is complete. It's taken place inside the generations that committed themselves to the riverland, with its belts of trees defining the spaces between them, its memories of paddle steamers, of bridges being built and railways arriving, its stories about the opening up of land.

None of this is said to equate my family's memories with those of the black people they pushed aside – if they did; nobody ever said anything about that at Christmas lunches – but I am trying to describe the way in which a consciousness of what can and can't be done in an area, an awareness of who did it, where and when, can underpin connected family lives and hold them in a larger pattern, so that even the tragedies and failures that inevitably occur are softened in recall because, it is understood, there is a context, well known to us all because we can see it, we can travel around it, and talk about it – 'Where did they move to after they sold (station name)? Why ever did they go out there? That's a god-forsaken place to take a family!' ... there is a context which holds us all, story tellers, listeners, and those of their families yet to be born, in a tough but faintly reassuring way.

If I had to put a word to it I would say that it is, it was, a feeling that the inevitable, simply by being inescapable, was in some way kind. Kind? When the unknown becomes the known, it is, however cruel, something of a relief.

Memories, of course, are part of the human mind, the human way of dealing with experience, but when human beings know a place well enough to ascribe to it the memories they've had handed down to them, then, I think, a fusion is under way. The land and its people are growing connected with each other.

Regional diversity: black people

Some of what was purely aboriginal has become part of globally available folkware. The boomerang can be thrown by Germans, Swedes and no doubt others. Perhaps we will one day have a tracking event at the Olympics, and see the medals taken, in order, by a Russian, an American and a North Korean (spying nations might see a need to fund the development of skills!). The didgeridoo, also, has spread beyond its original base in Arnhem Land, and is sold in large numbers to tourists, some of whom must learn to breathe in the way required to set its tonal column vibrating. Didgeridoos are sometimes scored to play with orchestras, string quartets, and so on. The cultural remnants of aboriginal life, however central they may once have been to their own peoples, are now subject to globalising influences. Anything mixes with anything else.

It was not always so. Before the white invasion, black people lived in profound attachment to their areas, each group having contact with one or more adjoining peoples, with whom there was likely to be inter-marriage, reciprocal initiation arrangements, trade, and social contact when something, perhaps the availability of animals to be hunted, brought them close to each other. Tribes had fallings-out but when these were sorted out, contact resumed, and these contacts, these movements of influence, language and association, took place along certain pathways, sometimes known today as songlines. The languages of connected people had considerable degrees of similarity, or overlap, while other peoples, living close to each other, were not so connected. Which lines were most open, most used, and which barriers were rarely crossed has been reconsidered in recent years,

and the picture being developed is of a huge continent with several language and cultural groupings, and a variety of lifestyles, from extremely nomadic (the harsher areas) to relatively settled (near watering places, such as lakes).

How common, how dissimilar were these groupings? It's not easy for us to know, today. The question is essentially anthropological, and anthropology is an aspect of European thinking. The peoples of the outlying world have never, as far as I know, sent parties to Paris, Rome, London and Vienna to examine the natives of these cities in their various habitats; anthropology has been, essentially, an activity of some cultures directed outward at the activity of others, and whether you look or are looked at, whether you're an examiner or an examinee, is an important measure of your status. For all the careful methodology and human compassion of someone like Baldwin Spencer, based at the University of Melbourne, and his associates in the field (F.J. Gillen, Ernest Cowle et al), anthropology developed as a means for an expanding (European) civilisation to consider humanity beyond its frontiers; at the edge, as it were. No reverse anthropology has been developed, as far as I am aware, to consider the behaviour of the invaders, and yet it must have existed, it must have developed, in the campfire talk of the peoples whose lives were being disrupted.

I have spent some time establishing this point because we need to remind ourselves – we European Australians; I speak for myself, here – that when early writers, and settlers, described the black people they mostly did it from an English point of view. They were all dark, of varying hue; they lived off the land; they hunted in certain ways; their bushcraft was considerable; they initiated their young ... et cetera. The invaders described what they saw and the ruling principle of what they saw was difference from themselves. Differences internal to the original inhabitants, that's to say differences which the native people themselves would have thought significant, were for the most part unnoticed by the whites unless they had had the

chance to develop a deeper appraisal of what they were in contact with; this was not common, and what was gleaned by such observers rarely made it into print. The blacks were normally understood in terms of what was needed to control them, or at the very least, what was needed to prevent them being a problem. I think it fair to say that white Australia has rarely tried to develop an understanding of the earlier inhabitants in terms of trying to learn from them. What could one learn? Quite a lot, my book is trying to say; for the moment, then, we have to leave the regional diversity of the black people as an open question.

The land (4)

The reason we can think of land as having shape is that water flows downhill. Rivers seek out the sea, and if it's too far away, the waters evaporate, or go underground. Everything depends on that movement of water. Swamps and marshes fill up with fish, frogs, and long-legged birds. The sea defines the land. Humanity, liking to think of itself as dominant, has to find places where it can organise itself before it can settle. Why do we need our land to have shape? This may sound like a silly question but don't we all use maps to tell us where we are? Maps of our city, our state, the world? The oceans that encircle us and the countries we call our own? There are jagged peaks in the Himalayas where mountaineers risk their lives and trenches just as deep in the oceans which you and I can hardly imagine. We find places for ourselves in the places already created by earlier generations, and we're grateful to have most of our problems solved before we even move in.

We have to live somewhere, and make it acceptable; habituated, I think I mean to say. This habituation, as the word implies, takes time. White Australians are still getting used to the land they live in, and the process has slowed down greatly, I believe, after an early rush of experience in the first century after settlement, when an accommodation with the land was being hastily knocked out. Today's economy enforces nothing like the dependence on agriculture, or even mining, of nineteenth century Australia; people can operate within their cities, largely unrequired to come to terms with the land's habits, in their occupations, their jobs, at least. Whatever they may sense about their place, and its many and varied requirements of them, can be left

to one side in working hours, for most of us. The modern economy is largely about the creation of value, and this, as a moment's reflection would show, mostly takes place inside the mind. The modern economy is not so much a means to survive – that problem was solved long ago – as a means to create new wealth by using the wealth created earlier as capital. Capital cities are centres of capital! Do not confuse the two, but let them conflate themselves, so they can work together better. It is often said that in a modern economy it's quite possible for people to work from home, coming to the office only when needed. This is said to be a reason why rural unemployment should be disappearing; an office can be anywhere in the electronic age: the city, the bush, or in between. This never works out in practice, though. Why not?

It's simple. An economy is an endlessly self-generating mass of requirements (the demand side) followed by the satisfaction of these requirements (the supply side). To get wealthier, an economy has to become bigger. Involve more people. It's true that a city worker may decide to operate from a base in the bush, but such a worker remains part of the city's economy, though allowing a few dollars, perhaps, to dribble into the neighbourhood where s/he sleeps at night. The very idea that one can live in one place and derive an income from another is a measure of how different the modern world is from the one that Governor Phillip, his soldiers and convicts created, all those years ago. They would be truly amazed by the modern Sydney, could they see it now.

And they can't. They never saw it, nor foresaw it, because foresight is an act of the imagination, and imaginations are limited. Imaginations operate on the basis that life could be different from what's around us now, while the urgencies of economics – I mean dollars – force us to concentrate on what's in front of us. Being busy stops us from seeing. It's only when we lift our heads that we know where we are.

Let's make a journey, then, to see what we can see when we give ourselves some freedom. We'll start once again at Sydney airport, where those poor lost sailors, soldiers and convicts looked around; what sort of place was this? We've only to think back as far as 1788 to realise what layers of accretion have been spread across the land. Kenneth Slessor hadn't written Five Bells back then! White settlers hadn't pushed beyond the Blue Mountain barrier (see earlier remarks about B, L & W!) to reach the New England district to generate the experiences, the stories, and the separations which led to Judith Wright giving us the immortal South of my Days. The country's literature had still to be written, its lives had still to be led. The country's foolishness, in thinking that these whitefella lives and experiences were the first that mattered, and didn't need to be added onto, layered onto, all those millennia of earlier lives, had still – has still – to be overcome. Modern urban dwellers, by and large, aren't particularly interested in defining themselves in relation to land – apart from those suburban blocks mentioned before – but this attitude, unless overcome, means that the next major step in our nation's development can hardly be achieved. Australian civilisation is steadily shifting its base from its history – this means the European past, and the American present – to its circumstances, its places, the forces which the whitefellas engaged with in 1788 and the blackfellas who knows how many thousand years before that.

Slessor heard the water of Sydney harbour. He was obsessed with it. It was where his friend Joe had fallen off a ferry, his overcoat pockets full of beer bottles. He didn't have much chance. Did the ferry turn around? His body was never found. Slessor brooded for years, in his house overlooking Elizabeth Bay, before he made peace. Joe was gone forever. Five bells! Slessor wrote about Captain Cook, who brought his boat into Sydney harbour, and took it up the coast to Queensland - not named then - and ran it ashore at Cooktown – not named then – where he and his crew worked for days, fearful, as Cook's and Banks' journals tell us, that they might never get away.

They were on the other side of the world, and the natives' fires could be seen, smoking, ominously near. How dangerous were they? In their fear, Cook's party, I suspect, didn't see the wonder of the land they'd come upon. It seems to us, today, looking along a coastline as glorious as anything on earth, that they were the luckiest of men, but they were desperate, in trouble, and far from ...

... home, which, says the cliché, is where the heart is, but that's not quite right: home is that place which the mind has learned to love, and understand. Our journey – I speak for the whitefellas now, all of us – has only just begun. Take a trip to Cooktown, dear reader, and stand on the beach where Cook's crew brought the ship ashore, grateful to be alive, desperate to get away, look around you, dear reader, and give thanks, give thanks, give thanks ...

For what? For the chance to live in this most blessed of lands, and hear its voices ...

What voices? They're all around you. Listen.

Two women find the square-root of a sheet.

That is an ancient dance:

Arms wide: together: again: two forward steps: hands meet
your partner's once and twice.

That white expanse

Reduces to a neat

Compression fitting in the smallest space

A sheet can pack in on a cupboard shelf.

The poem's called 'Smalltown Dance'²; it goes on:

High scented walls there were of flapping white

When I was small, myself.

I walked between them, playing Out of Sight.

Simpler than arms, they wrapped and comforted –

clean corridors of hiding, roofed with blue –

saying, Your sins too are made Monday-new;

and see, ahead

that glimpse of unobstructed waiting green.

Run, run before you're seen.

Her subject's humble but Judith Wright sees a great deal in it.

But women know the scale of possibility,
the limit of opportunity,
the fence,
how little chance there is of getting out. The sheets that tug
sometimes struggle from the peg,
don't travel far. Might symbolise
something. Knowing where danger lies
you have to keep things orderly.
The household budget will not stretch to more.

Wright knows what's in her subject because she knows what's in herself.

And they can demonstrate it in a dance.
First pull those wallowing white dreamers down,
spread arms; then close them. Fold
those beckoning roads to some impossible world,
put them away and close the cupboard door.

Here's another voice; it's Morris Lurie³, one of our speediest minds; he's talking about the same thing, or seems to be.

Games with the mother are complicated and hard.
'Me! Me!' he cries.
The sister wants to too.
She wants everything.
'He did it last time!' she screams.
It is the back yard, the *vesh*, the washing, the sheets.
'Nu?' says the mother. '*Tuzummen?*'
Together.
He takes a corner, the sister the other one. The sheet is stiff from being outside. It is hard to properly hold.
'*Tzee!*' says the mother.
Pull!
You have to do it this way and this way and then this way and this way, across! Across! A side! A side! And you have to be quick too as well as seeing and remembering and even holding with two hands

and the mother with just one the mother is too hard and he drops as always yet again his corner.

'Silly!' screams the sister.

But the mother laughs.

A smile.

The mother is happy.

A game!

But no.

Suddenly it's enough, she's cross.

Because quickly, rushing, she snatches up the sheet, folding, the whole sheet, this way, that way, arms, hands, by herself, alone.

'Helpers!' she says.

So the sheets are not quite what they seem, and change according to the way they're looked at. Nothing new in that, but notice how skilfully these singers sing! Here's Helen Garner⁴.

'Hop in the car, Poppy,' said Athena. 'I'll whip these sheets off the line before it gets dark.'

The girl obeyed. She arranged the cello on the back seat and leaned forward to the dashboard so she could watch the two women approach the wire and unpeg the sheets. They faced each other, joined by the cloth, and raised their arms in unison, they shook the cloth and snapped it tight, they advanced and retreated until each sheet was a flat bundle in Athena's arms. Poppy saw that they were speaking, with pauses, but she could not hear what they were saying.

'Philip came to see me,' said Athena.

'To see you.'

'A couple of times.'

Elizabeth laughed with closed lips. 'Take you for walks, did he?'

'Yes.'

'Do you like him?'

'Yes.'

'He's always looking for new blood. Something new. A little thrill for that amusement park he calls his mind.'

Their fingers met formally at the high corners of the sheet. Elizabeth's relinquished, Athena's accepted. As they folded, as they spoke, the light left the garden.

The same thing can be seen in many ways; here's Olga Masters⁵. She's talking about a clergyman, Edwards, who's attracted to two sisters, Enid and Una, and has married Una. It is Enid who comes in at the beginning of this extract and folds the tablecloth with the minister who's not ready for either woman, let alone a dance with one while the other watches.

She came in when he began to pull the green cover off. Wordlessly she took the other end. He held his end under his chin and she walked to him with hers, touching his shoulders when the two ends met. She caught the fold touching his knees and she touched them too. She brought it up to join the end still pinned by his chin. He lifted his chin and she slipped that fold in and her fingers touched the cushion of flesh on bone. For a second he pinned her fingers too. Deeply pink she took the cloth across her arm and flung it on the table to finish with two more rapid folds and, not knowing where Una's eyes were, laid it on a chair back.

When she turned back he had the white cloth in its folded state on the table and she opened it with revolving hands moving to one end of the table while he moved to the other. He took his end and she hers and they raised it above the table, then let it fall and she bent towards him and he towards her, his brown hands and her strong knuckly ones sweeping and smoothing towards each other, their bodies going backwards to smooth and stroke the table edges, then coming forward again with fingers dragging at tiny creases, then back to run eyes, never meeting along the hemline.

Faces turned from each other he took the cruet and set it in the centre, and she sorrowful and absent stroked a corner two or three times more then slipped away to the kitchen.

One more voice, dear reader, from the south-eastern corner of our continent. This is Hal Porter⁶, bringing his mother back to life to do,

in Hal's mind, all the things she did, so regularly, with the days of her week.

She is Tuesday as she sprinkles pillow-slips, father's shirts, my sister's starched sun-bonnets, and the boys' cotton sou'westers, for her flat-irons. These have already been clashed down on the top of the kitchen range so hot that a mirage almost forms above its black-leaded surface. While the irons are heating, a peaceful overture to the rites begins. Mother and the washerwoman take each bedsheet separately and, one gripping the bottom edge, one the top, retreat backwards from each other, straining the sheet horizontally taut in a version of domestic tug-o'-war, inclining their heads to scan it for signs of wear, then, this done, mincing towards each other with uplifted arms to begin the folding. On the day of this grave pavane we invariably have for dinner a succulent hash made from Sunday's cold joint. This Mother calls a German Fry – a dish her Switzer father badgered her English mother into learning to make.

She is Wednesday, her hair concealed beneath a worn, old-fashioned head-dress, once her mother's, and called a fascinator, as she shakes the little fringed furry mats that lie before each inside door ...

The days of Mother's week ring down the years, courtesy of her son, Australia's sheets are folded in laundries and bedrooms, and by clothes lines across the land in a ritual not entirely forgotten, even today, when other rituals predominate; people starting cars, filling up with petrol, turning on their computers when they get to work each morning. Life, ever-changing in its practices, goes on. Writers, the voices of their land, are putting down their thoughts as best they can, trying to resonate with things inside them. Writers make us aware. Awareness is the first stage of the process whereby we add our complexities to the land. We are no more than the little bit we know about ourselves. The extracts I've put before you in trying to make this point have focussed on the same simple, domestic action; this has been done so that the quality of the voices can be all the clearer,

and our appreciation finer. I wouldn't be without any of these writers, whose styles have been shaped by what needed to find its way through their fingers, these voices, murmuring everywhere across a land once unknown, as it was to Cook and his sailors, but becoming known via those whose vocation it is, respectfully, and with awareness of the older ways that came before them, to set them down, resonating still, in the minds of those who live in, who share, this land.

- 2 'Smalltown Dance', from *Phantom Dwelling*, by Judith Wright, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1985
- 3 *Whole Life*, by Morris Lurie, McPhee Gribble, Melbourne, 1987
- 4 *The Children's Bach*, by Helen Garner, McPhee Gribble, Melbourne 1984
- 5 *Loving Daughters*, by Olga Masters, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1984
- 6 *The Watcher on the Cast-Iron Balcony*, by Hal Porter, Faber & Faber, London, 1963

Regional diversity: white people

There are twenty million of us now, spread over great spaces, so some differences must emerge – but ever so few. Hardly any, apart from those occurring because our newcomers arrive from so many different places. The Africans aren't the same as the Lebanese, obviously. But differences deriving from the particularities of places on our continent – these are hard to find.

The Style Centre of Macquarie University is always conducting questionnaires into usage of the English language, and I find them fascinating to fill in. What would I say? What seems right and wrong to me? I write down my answers and send them in. The next issue collates responses, putting them into age groups, and classifying them by states. There are differences between the states, there are differences according to age, but these never seem more to me than you would expect of a living language. People at the Style Centre, and writers such as myself, have the luxury of examining language, but most people have to use it on the run, preoccupied by things other than the words coming out of their mouths. Is it, therefore, to be expected, or is it not, that, Australia-wide, we use our language in much the same-sounding way?

Let me extend that question, taking it a long way further: if we go beyond language usage to things like business practices, the operations of law, traffic rules, standards in health and hygiene, et cetera, can we find any parts of the nation where people are radically different from elsewhere? (I was going to say 'the norm', but then that would advantage my argument with a little verbal cheating, would it not?) I think the answer is no, we cannot. There are quirks a-plenty,

I'm sure, but consciously, defiantly maintained differences between one legal or political jurisdiction and another there are not. The old days of states creating rail systems with different gauges as if they would never meet are seen as laughable today, and we have the luxury of being able to make agreements between ourselves without having to accommodate the wishes of neighbours who do things differently. Australia's isolation has been a benefit in many ways.

Why is this so? What social glue, what unconscious agreement, holds us together in a uniformity we appear to desire?

In early Australia, post-1788, settlers had certain constants: the presence and possibly the threat of blacks; the new-ness of the land and its ways; the colonial administration in Sydney, Hobart, etc; and the fact that the British Isles, the civilisation left behind, offered a sort of default position for minds in doubt. What would be done back home? The new arrivals, whatever their status, all faced the same challenges, all could see each other, and all had similar ideas as to what it meant to succeed. They formed also, if we read their documents and their letters, a highly mobile society, forever moving in hopes of finding more reliable rainfall, better grass for their animals. Men got into boats with few inhibitions, men overlanded cattle, horses, sheep, in a period when the road was as much a fixture as the town. Regional diversity could hardly develop when regions themselves were unstable.

And yet the regions firmed up fairly quickly; people became aware of the characteristics of their place. Gippsland knew itself apart from the Monaro, the Riverina from the western plains, out there from Cobar to Bourke; the south-west of Western Australia, forest and farming country, from the harsher places near Kalgoorlie where men went for gold, with water having to be pumped along a pipe to give them something to drink. People in their regional centres looked to their state capital (when they weren't dreaming up 'new state' movements) and beyond that to imperial London, where resided the minds controlling that system on which the sun never set.

An empire may subjugate differences but it's hardly likely to create them.

It is tempting for someone of my outlook to claim that the social glue referred to earlier, the unconscious agreement, was a product, in some way a fruit, of the land, with the earth affecting, shaping, the unconscious decisions made by settlers who weren't entirely aware, perhaps, of their reasons for doing things, but I don't think this argument can be sustained, nor is it needed. It's easier and simpler – and Occam's razor applies here, I think – to say that the strangeness, the newness, of the settlers' position made them yearn for some at least of the connections they'd known back where they came from.

For most of them, that was the British Isles. There was a normality, way back behind them, and it existed still, though far away. In a sense the settlers all shared the same historical past, and the same exploratory, developmental present: a new country was to be won, and shaped, and nobody else but them would do it. A regional culture, a breakaway from what surrounds it, a resistance group of families, has to have a separate awareness sustaining it, and this didn't develop in Australia; it never got the chance. Resistance cultures inherit their differences from the past, and they sustain them out of a pride in being different. Their knowledge of who they are doesn't coincide with that of their neighbours. Their existence rests on a separable history. There is a certain passivity about this despite the need for resistance to the dominant, surrounding culture, but passivity was one of the last things the early settlers in Australia could afford. They were agents of empire whether they thought about it or not.

We shall continue our discussion of the settlement of Australia and the development of its particular form of civilisation, on the basis that regional diversities are never strong enough to be more than marginal in the development of the way in which we live.

The land (5)

Years ago, in writing about my childhood on a farm in New South Wales, and realising that black people must have been displaced from the area, I wondered about them. They were supposed to have been profoundly attached to the land. They could not have been more attached to it, I thought, as a child and as a writer of nearly fifty, than the farming people I knew. The commitment of the people I grew up amongst to their occupation, their situation, seemed absolute to me, nor have I ever felt that the view I had in those days was wrong. Was it possible that the black people had been more deeply attached to their land than these whites?

I find myself wanting to answer that it was not, but there is an allowance I have to make; one social system may allow a greater unity of feeling, an intensity of emotion, on any given matter than another. To put this in the most obvious way, the black people who had once roamed the Riverina district had not had to watch events and markets in Sydney, Melbourne and above all London. Their lives worked themselves out within their own horizons and that must have made a difference to their emotional and spiritual lives. Nonetheless, the station holders and small farmers who had taken over their land had committed themselves deeply to it, the great cities on the edges of the country entertained a certain romance about country life, and the land itself, if it had a mind for consideration of such things, might well have thought itself to be loved.

How have Australians loved their land? What does the land compel from those who look at it, cross it on foot or by modern, motorised means? That is my subject, and I propose to deal with it

via a case study, the life, and family, of Stella Maria Miles Lampe Franklin and the places she had in mind in her pioneering saga, *All That Swagger*⁷.

This book is not well known today, having slipped behind *My Brilliant Career*, the book and the film, both still full of life. *All That Swagger* has a huge cast of characters, and it's dedicated 'to the memory of my paternal grandparents whose philosophical wit and wisdom and high integrity are a living legend of the Murrumbidgee.' The Australian river gets the first of many mentions on page 1, and then the author slips back to Ireland for a few indulgent paragraphs; Danny Delacy and Johanna Cooley, the girl who elopes with him, are leaving a fabled, fairied land, surrounded by seas and stories, for something that neither of them knows. Johanna tells Danny that what he has in mind is only a dream, and he answers, 'Everything is a dream till it is made come true. Come make this true with me, Johanna.' With brave words of this sort great undertakings begin. Danny and Johanna ship themselves to Sydney, they go inland, and they take up 'Bewuck', a deserted property, said to be haunted, on the Murrumbidgee some way to the west of where Canberra stands today. Danny longs for land, and when he gets it he has to clear it.

Guarding the illusive land were throngs of giants – the stateliest trees on the globe. Delacy was like an ant in the aisles of box trees and towering river gums, but he attacked them as an army, grunting with effort, sweat dripping from him. His slight form grew as wiry as steel; his hands were corneous and scarred with the work of felling and grubbing.

Danny's work makes things clear for him; Johanna's situation is less certain.

... work relieved her loneliness, intensified by the moaning of the river oaks, and the noise of the queer grey birds that threw laughter back and forth for miles, until dark and after. Their lusty guffawing, upon the smallest provocation or upon none, had a brow-beating effect on her; and she was mortally afraid that the bunyip would

rear his undescribed form from the fish hole, or the ghosts would cry in the crossing. These fears festered; she dared not confess them to Danny.

Danny loses himself, and finds himself, in his work. Johanna is never secure in her new existence, since it never provides nor seems likely ever to provide the elegancies she hopes for. In her native Ireland such things were to be found in wealthier and more cultivated homes but on the banks of the Murrumbidgee there seems no prospect of wealth, elegance or cultivation, ever. Johanna sees no hope, while Danny, for whom everything important takes place in the mind -- 'the moind, the moind' -- finds challenge inspirational in itself. No matter how hard he works at Bewuck he has his eyes set on 'a valley that the blacks called Burrabinga', further back in the mountains ...

'Utterly inaccessible,' Johanna would say with falling heart.

'Wasn't Australia inaccessible till Cook found it, and America out of bounds till the Puritan fathers settled it? No place is inaccessible if you have the moind to go there.'

He takes her there, and with them go their first two children – Kathleen Moyna and Della – and two black children that Danny has nursed back to life when their own people have given up on them – Maeve, Danny having no aboriginal name for her, and Doogoolook. A son has been born to Johanna and Danny, but has died while his father has been putting up a hut at Burrabinga, a place which frightens and depresses Johanna when first she sees it. 'Surely, Danny Delacy, this is the furthest extremity of the globe, and there is no further place to drag me but Purgatory itself.'

Worse is to come. Prices for cattle fall. The colony's economy is tottering. Danny decides to take his stock to Goulburn. They don't sell. He takes them to Parramatta, and manages to find a buyer. He heads for home – that redoubt he has made his own in Australia's deepest, highest mountains – but he's thrown by his horse, and is lucky to be discovered after a day in the sun, though his leg, damaged in the fall, is removed by a surgeon, so that when Danny recovers

consciousness, days after his accident, there is only a stump. As soon as he can ride again he takes off for Burrabinga, but when he gets there he discovers that disaster has struck again. The hut he built has burned down. Burrabinga is deserted. Johanna, after days and nights of anxiety, waiting for Doogoolook to get news of the disaster to the world outside, if he can, manages to saddle two horses and lead her devastated family to the outside world, carrying as she goes her dying daughter Kathleen Moyna, and a burden of loss, pain and desertion which she will carry with her for the rest of her life. When, finally, she is reunited with the now one-legged Danny, she is firm. She will stay at Bewuck with such comforts as it provides but will never go deeper into the mountains again. They are for Danny alone.

This may sound like a typical pioneering story, and it is, but it is also an elaborate mechanism for establishing and characterising three locales of great importance in Franklin's own life: a property in the ranges west of Canberra occupied by her parents for some years; a dreary – for the young Miles – property near Goulburn to which her parents moved, and where she felt spiritually dispossessed; and the inner sanctum at Talbingo where she lived with her grandparents for much of the first twelve years of her life, in a state of blessedness – for she loved the mountains, as we shall see – and personal unity which she was never to enjoy again. Danny's Burrabinga is a representation of the Talbingo so desperately needed, no longer available, but formed in the mind with love and yearning, an idealisation perhaps, which Miles carried with her for the rest of her life. Miles' own yearning – for love, for a place where life had been perfect - can be sensed every time she gives us Danny gazing at the mountains where something not yet created can be sensed coming into being.

Danny travelled with a paean in his heart, his eyes towards the ramparts that swept southwards to Brisbane Plains – the Monaro of today. The dazzling clarified atmosphere imposed no border on distance but eternity, and had a liberating effect.

All That Swagger is a generational story, so Danny dies with a quarter of the book still to run, but his death comes after a strangely eventful day when he makes his way to the top of a long rise near Bewuck from where he can look back, once again, at his life, the obsessions that have filled it, and the mountains far to the south where he made his second, his spiritual, home.

Far away was the timeless, illimitable blue with the mountains prinked upon it and a presence palpitant with a thousand centuries of oblivion, behind which the sun was going down to Riverina to rise on old Ireland, now so near at hand. Poor Ireland! So scourged by conquerors and usurpers, that at best she could have afforded him room for a goat and the operations of a spade, but here was the glory of wide horizons, sublimely empty. He worshipped the pregnant peace of the piled ridges with their lore unlegended. Potential revelation hovering just beyond capture gave the locality its haunting magic.

One of his sons has to rescue him. He's put to bed, and doesn't rise to make the fire in the morning. A doctor comes, and finds nothing wrong, but Danny is only interested in 'a little conversation about important mysteries'. He is a soul getting ready to depart, and a few mornings later he fails to wake. Something in the book dies with him, though Miles Franklin, as we shall see, works hard to resurrect it.

At this point I think I should try to say why I have introduced *All That Swagger*, Miles Franklin and Danny Delacy into an attempt to describe and within limitations analyse the formation of a homegrown view of Australia. Perhaps the simplest answer is that that was what Miles herself was trying to do. Although she spent a good deal of her life overseas, she was always aware of the connection she had, the inheritance of family tradition and history which linked her to the opening up of one of the country's most withdrawn areas. Her grandfather had gloried in the sublime emptiness, as she put it, of the mountains at the bottom of New South Wales. As a child, her life had been filled with the life of the forest around her grandparents'

home. I might say at this point, and I hope you won't think I've lost track of my topic, that Miles was forever giving herself new names, *noms de plume*, artifices of this and that sort, the best known of them being 'Brent of Bin Bin', under which name she published no less than six novels. Another of her names was the strange-looking Ogniblat L'Artsau; strange, but if you read it back to front (with a little licence) you'll see that she was calling herself Talbingo Austral, identifying herself with those mountains in the south, that remote, hidden, rapturous place where she had learned to love her land. We must not think any the less of this love for the fact that it was so early in the history of settlement, nor that it came so late in the black people's occupation. She was in a direct line from the experiences which had given rise to that love in the first place, and it shaped the way she built her central character. Danny is not only a visionary, and a man of great courage, he is a man of virtue, seen in his whole-hearted acceptance of all sorts of human beings. He fosters Maeve the black girl and Doogoolook the black boy. He is just to his ex-convict workers, and earns the loyalty of Wong Foo, the Chinese cook, for the way he treats him. The only problem Danny can't solve is the feeling of exile that comes to dominate his wife Johanna, especially when it's time for her to die. She wants a priest but Danny thinks this foolish, and does nothing to bring one. When it's his turn to die he regrets that he didn't do what Johanna wanted, but knows it's too late; the human race rarely learns ...

Why have I introduced *All That Swagger*, Miles Franklin and Danny Delacey to my suite of essays? As a writer myself, I have a natural tendency to think that a nation's writers give the truest and deepest articulation of what the nation makes of its experiences. Hence the numerous quotations in these pages. A second reason is that I began this set of essays with a quotation from Bernard O'Dowd, and Miles Franklin is in my view a successor to O'Dowd in wondering whether the land of *All That Swagger* will be able to shape itself into something new, or will fall back into the evils so painfully

familiar to anyone who's studied the past. A third reason is that the art and architecture of a country create a history, an understanding, which may be different from what we are told by political and social historians, many of whom are not comfortable with the arts and their encoded messages. It is not generally recognised, for example, that the greatest of capitalism's failures, the stockmarket crash of 1929 and subsequent depression, happened at a time of very high confidence, as can be seen by examining the skyscrapers built in New York in the 1920s. (If you want to see confidence, take a look at the Chrysler building of 1929.) A similar confidence irradiates the final pages of *All That Swagger*, written at the time of the same depression. There is a necessary link, I feel sure, between the timing and the way Miles Franklin ends her story.

By drawing attention to the closing pages of this book I am taking something of a risk. Miles is to be found at both her best and her worst, and again I think the two are linked. The central figure in this final stage is one Brian Delacy, and he is given a favorable presentation. Stella Maria Miles Lampe Franklin wants to show us that the vision which was central to Danny's experience is still flourishing at the time she was writing. Brian has been sent to Sydney University by his mother, the widowed Clare Margaret into whom Miles poured her own capacity to love, and after Sydney, Oxford. He leaves Oxford without the degree that would justify his mother's hopes, but finds his way into the Royal Air Force, where 'he won his wings with expedition and wore them with the dash with which his grandfathers had clanked their silver-plated spurs.' Sickness finds him eased out of the Air Force, but he falls on his feet when he takes up with an American woman, also a pilot, and a decade older than he is. They decide to emulate the adventurous pilots who have recently flown from England to Australia. They do it, but they marry first. Brian is conscious of the Delacy family's proprieties. Some of the dialogue at this point of the book is collectable. They arrive in Sydney in what I imagine from Franklin's description is a sort of auto-gyro (very roughly, a

helicopter), and the family is there to greet them. Brian takes the elderly Delacy women for a flight, while Lola, who is pregnant, though nobody knows this yet, slips away to the hotel (the Metropole, for those who remember it!). Before long Clare Margaret, Brian's mother, feels the need to take Lola to the Murrumbidgee country where Brian was born. Lola is bored, but stays until she can think of a reason why they should get back to Sydney. Lola returns to the room she shared with Brian to discover that the wardrobe contains clothes belonging to Brian's twenty year old cousin – he was himself the child of cousins – Adrienne. Adrienne's perfumes and powders are on the dressing table. Oh dear oh dear oh dear!

Lola reveals herself to the lovers, Brian huffs and puffs, Franklin the novelist wriggles and squirms as she suggests sexual improprieties while at the same time denying them, and the reader has a look to see how many pages are left. Lola becomes unwell, a doctor is called – a female doctor – and the pregnancy is revealed. Brian's mind gets back on its proper rails. 'The greatest thing that has ever happened in my life,' he says. Adrienne, on the other hand, is desperately unhappy. A family member comforts her. Brian is unneeded for the time, so he gets himself into a plane and flies above the roads where 'old Danny and his Johanna had crept for weeks like ants under the mighty timber', and at last Miles Franklin is free. Brian soars above 'a sensitive land protected by phantom qualities, a land that would return to desert to cleanse itself of too dense a population, a delicate elusive land whose suns and floods could cleanse her from the stupid greed of wrong-headed commercialism; an eerie land of elfin flowers and animals, a land not to be bludgeoned but wooed, a land of vast oblivion whose past history might forever remain in the realm of conjecture.'

'Such was his land.' Franklin is proud of Brian, despite his foolishness a few paragraphs earlier, not to speak of hers. The aeroplane is the visionary tool that allows her to rise to her theme. Like the motor car thirty years earlier, it attracts lovers of the unknown, the

exciting, those who want to find new limits beyond the old. Time, as we now know, is going to incorporate the aeroplane into business (the Airbus!), or find any number of uses for it in war, but in the period when the fictive Brian and Lola, and tiny bands of adventurous men and women were making those first pathways in the air, it was still the future, the unknown, rising from plain earth to the province of dream. This is why Franklin claims the aeroplane and those who fly it as continuations of old Danny's mind. The moind! The moind! Australia glows in Franklin's rapture as Brian Delacy prepares to return to Sydney:

All too swiftly the day ascended and declined. The shadows lengthened from the cropped tussocks pimpling the hillsides. Perfume of wattle bathed approaching evening in delight. The bright landscape danced in air translucent and dazzling. The westering sun laying vesper offering on the rim of day, melted sky and mountains into a glory of filtered light and retreated to the core of a continent over which as yet man had no sure dominion. A land of distances, a land dependent on distances for preservation; a land gorgeously empty and with none of the accumulations of centuries of human occupation ...

For those of us who love the land as Miles did, it would be easy to end there or thereabouts, but honesty compels me to include what she says just before Brian Delacy takes his plane into the air again, when she sees some of the dangers inherent in man taking to the skies:

Critical days ahead with the machine as master, looming as the destroyer if manipulated to Satanic ends! But it was inconceivable that men would hurl themselves into the abyss when the way out was as clear and wide as the shimmering track of the departing sun.

These words were printed in 1936; three years later the European powers were warring again. Civilian populations were being bombed, armies were at each other's throats, Jews dragged into death camps,

and before long Japanese soldiers were sweeping through Asia, cruel and brutal, and Germans were dying in the Russian snow. Humanity had shown its hand again! Where, then, do the visionaries belong? Is there anything they can see for us, out there at the edges of what it's possible for humans to see, that's actually true, or capable of being brought from dream to reality? Can those things which the mind – the mind! – imagines be made to happen?

Yes, sometimes, occasionally, perhaps ...

It seems to me that vision is one of the most precious characteristics of being human, but it is only a step in a longer process whereby the imagination has its first, delicious, contact with something that's new, and yet to be made real. The reality, the incorporation of the vision into daily activity, will happen when it's ready, which normally means when it suits somebody to make it happen because it will help to make them rich. Humanity's greed and ambition are never to be kept out of the reckoning very long. And, since I have been discussing Australia – Oztralia – in terms of vision, where does this leave my argument? Is there anything left standing at all?

O say can you see ...

... by the dawn's early light, says America's anthem. Dawn is normally taken to be a time of hope, though those with some military history would recall that first light was the period of greatest danger for men in World War 1 trenches, the moment when they were most likely to be attacked. The darkest deeds were done as light re-entered the world!

My consideration thus far has been of the black and the white civilisations of Australia, and the white has been spoken of as an extension of the British empire. As we all know, this has changed until we are now as subservient a part of the American empire as ever we were of the British. Alas. I would like to see us emerge from this hegemonic slavery but do not expect to live long enough to see it. However, much as I may resent America's performance as the world's only super-power, one must remember that its influence on the rest of the world was not always what it is today. It's possible, I think, to see several descriptions of, or reactions to, America as having been valid in my lifetime. I want to sketch these in now, briefly, before returning to Australia as my subject.

The America that I first knew had already passed through phases that made it different from my own country. It had brought in slaves. It had fought a civil war which had the effect of freeing those slaves, legally at least. It had federated, as had our country, and it had faced much sterner resistance from its native people in the age of territorial expansion than our pastoralists and settlers faced, or at least admitted to. This expression 'admitted to' opens up one of the differences between America and our country which Australians were aware of:

they – the Americans – were so much more articulate. They revelled in what they did. Above all, they made films about what they did!

Films! Americans were supremely confident. It was perhaps the most attractive thing about them. Like us, they had a land of rolling distances, and these they crossed with trains – often heavily guarded, because there were Badlands – or, a little later, roads. America was the land of the car. European countries made cars too, but things were not easy for them on their tiny, tangled roads, whereas in America roads speared from horizon to horizon, oil companies followed them with their early-fashioned bowsers, roadside service stations with their jumbled merchandise made travel possible and then gave it an adventurous, folkloric character, and the nation was well underway to inventing itself as different from the Europe which had once thought of it as offspring. America was different, cheerful, hopeful, and the home of get up and go. Once an American decided he wanted to do something, it was as good as done. ‘Can do!’ was the beacon behind which clustered thousands of optimistic, raunchy American sayings. There was no stopping them. They believed in freedom, they had rolling rhetoric for their ideals, and they were surprised at anybody who let himself be checked by quibbles, as they would have described anything that blocked a man in any way short of a full-on legal suit.

The law was a battleground in America and Americans loved battles. We knew that from those films! Whites chased Red Indians and when there weren’t any, or they’d been cleared, then whites chased each other. Americans divided easily into goodies and baddies; every second film was about these two groups shooting each other. Cowboys seemed rarely to be concerned with cows. Horses were much more important and most important was getting a gun from a holster in time to shoot another man getting his gun from his holster. Shooting could be dirty (firing on someone unready) or chivalric (Draw!) A man’s honour, his nobility, even, depended on the way he handled himself when facing another’s gun. Guns were death; guns were everywhere. Death was handed out lavishly and everyone had

his own struggle. Nobody seemed secure, in American films. To win today's shoot-out was to be ready for tomorrow's.

Americans were wealthier than we were. Nobody in Australia seemed to know why; it was the way it was. We could, however, identify with what they did with their money. The palaces, paintings, decorations, the clothing, accents and infinite distinctions of European nobility and those who pretended to it didn't seem to exist in America where money bought you more and better. Wealthy men and their wives didn't seem to be different, merely wealthier. They had more of the folding stuff! You could see it in a film like *Citizen Kane*, where the grandest collections of ownership never amounted to more than folly. Wealthy Americans, seeking to create meaning from their money, crossed the Atlantic to buy things the Europeans regarded highly. Rich Americans could buy the stuff, whatever it was. They had the money, and even, occasionally, the taste!

Not all activity was at the top. The poor had a voice, especially if they were black. They played jazz! They made music of their own, and did it sing! Smoke-filled nightclubs filled with the sound of clarinets and saxophones. Phones. Everything had a voice. Americans were talkative, they had rights, they addressed anybody as 'Hay Mister!' They were free of circumlocution. Direct, as Australians thought themselves to be, too, but the Americans were more so. Australians normally regarded Americans as 'more so' in almost anything than we were. America didn't make Australia feel inferior, though; the way they did things, their outlook, was encouraging. They were free of Europe in a way we weren't, but their mores, the path they'd taken to be where they were, made us feel we might get where they'd got one day, with a little bit of luck. We didn't have their cheek, their *pizzaz*, but we could understand to some degree why and what it was that gave them their freedom, their success. They were ahead of us but their path was not so very different from the one we'd have to take ...

... when we were ready. That, I think, is the first of the reactions to America that I remember in my lifetime. After we've had another look at the land, we'll turn to the others.

The land (6)

People often say that the land was waiting. They mean it was receptive. This, in turn, means that it was willing to be treated as it was by opportunists who came to it with the European understandings already mentioned. To me this description has no validity beyond the need to justify what we've done to the place we've occupied, and humans are at somewhere near their worst when they feel a need to justify. Let no such people be trusted!

The land is neither passive nor active. Human dichotomies don't apply. Humans believe that possession gives us rights. This is a sustainable idea when our holdings are small, as in a city block, but unsustainable when we have to deal with the distances and spaces that our land rings us with. Hence that strange feeling we experience as we leave a coastal city and head inland. We're leaving behind the security of a system we made to suit ourselves, and we're being forced to notice that the land doesn't have such a system. What does it have instead?

Distance, space, soils, rocks and grasses, and manifold forms of life. Parrots, lizards, snakes. Brolgas, emus, kangaroos, and silences when nothing's observable at all. It has changes of weather for its clothing, season by season. It has flowers, from dainty bluebells (*Wahlenbergia*) to waratahs (*Telopea*). It has eucalypts, which means it has fire in its hair; these trees can't be stopped dropping leaves, branches, gumnuts, and they're fuel for fire when it comes. As are the gases eucalypts give off when their leaves start to burn; clouds of gas burst into flame far ahead of the fire that released them, and the flames so released spring from range to range until it can seem that a

whole state is on fire, top to bottom, east to west. Fires incite people, there is a lust to start them, to engage with them. Again and again, after every summer, people are charged with lighting fires and many of them are members of fire brigades, or volunteer fire fighters who couldn't resist the inner impulses to loose the enemy that is also the most deeply loved force in the miscreant's mind.

I've already said that the land affects us in ways we may not realise. If we plough it wrongly, we get dust storms. If we drain it badly, we get swamps, or rising water tables. If we clear it too sharply of its trees, we kill off its wildlife. If we do almost anything, it seems we do it to excess. How can we control ourselves? What limits should we put upon ourselves, in dealing with the land?

The answer of the black people was to live within its restraints, forcing it as little as possible, or not at all. European civilisation, now American, doesn't like restrictions of that sort, so what's to do? We're presently in a phase of being aware of the problem, but having only bits-and-pieces of solutions, which means we're making up a new way of treating the continent as we live in it, as we try to come to terms.

It's currently accepted that old growth forests should be conserved as much as possible. This is only possible if timber is grown in plantations, and such plantations are springing up everywhere, monocultures for the most part. *Pinus Radiata*, *Eucalyptus Globulus* (blue gum). This is certainly a step in some direction but the demands of the economic system are diverted rather than quelled. The timber is cut but it comes from somewhere else. It's produced instead of found. I find myself strangely ambivalent about this development, though I should be pleased. Let me explain.

In recent years I've observed that plastic, metal and glass are increasingly used for furniture. This can be smart, and can also be horrible. (What's new about that?) I find that a conservative streak in my mind wants to sneer at the modern materials, comparing them unfavourably with wood. I love the touch of wood, the patina

it acquires with age. Wood can be oiled. There are lacquers and polishes. Something of the tree lives on in the chair, the chest, the table, made from oak, mahogany, teak or more recently, the powerful species of eucalypt – jarrah, red gum, messmate ... One has only to see a long table made from these magnificent timbers to feel that humanity would be serving itself well if it never dined nor negotiated at anything less. Alas, there are too many people in the world. Most of them will be served, and be grateful for being served, on plastic, metal and glass. Making furniture from wood will go on, but it will increasingly be a custom with its roots in the distant past. Plastic, metal and glass will create, if they haven't already created, aesthetics of their own, and are seen in the offices, restaurants, shops and homes of the land, even in wealthy nations such as ours.

I mention this matter of furniture because the demands we make on our land to produce what we need originate in and on all levels of our minds, including the aesthetic. For each of us, the whole person is on show in what we ask of the land.

And in what we do to it. Roads are a case in point. Simple little tracks give access. They allow us to see. Driving slowly along them, we can be suitably respectful. Better roads mean higher speeds, though this may not be a bad thing. People want to get places. The test of a road is what a driver feels like after an hour of travel. If the effect of a four lane freeway, for example, is to enclose the driver's mind so that she sees nothing of the countryside, sees nothing but other traffic, then the road has overpowered the land it's crossing. A good road, a sensitive road, on the other hand, opens the eyes to the land and its trees, its farms or forests, its birds and everything else that lives there. The test is to imagine oneself walking through the place; does the traveller in her car see at least a fair amount of what walkers would see, if they were observant, and talking about the places they were passing through? A harder test to pass would be to ask the land whether or not it welcomes the people walking, or driving, on it; most of us would score lower than we'd like. But why not?

Humanity is inclined to think itself beyond the judgement of anything else except, excuse the cliché, a *higher power*. To think about this reveals something rather discreditable about we humans. We think it acceptable to ride roughshod over those who can't hurt us but feel a need to restrain our behaviours when they're judged by something more powerful than ourselves. Bullies know quite well where they sit in the pecking orders of power, and humanity thinks it's at the top of the earthly tree. Only the supernatural stands above us.

This is an idea we have to overcome. The land, nature, all the ecosystems of the world are making demands, sending signals, all the time. Mankind, or those of its members affected by the Christian faith, has traditionally regarded 'nature' – animals, trees, the fish in the ocean – as having been placed in position for the satisfaction of mankind's purposes. Mankind's natural inclinations were to look *up* to God and around himself for anything he wanted. This is changing and must change more. Just as we now have national borders, customs, passports and any number of other arrangements to deal with movement of people, goods and messages across the boundaries of those largely artificial systems we call countries, we will have to grow used to adjusting our behaviour as we move from one ecosystem to another. We will require it of ourselves when we are sufficiently humble. When we take pride in our own humility: that will be a magic moment, will it not, when it comes?

It will be an un-European one, certainly. European science, the European outlook, have conquered the world, with some assistance from their progeny, chief of these being the United States. English is the world language. When Australians travel the world we are prone not to recognise that the language we speak, and the confidence with which we speak it, signal our certainty that we belong to the Superiors Club. We're not the world's masters but we rank with them. We may have to pay for this superlative confidence one day but for the time we use it almost without knowing. I think it lies within the realm of possibility for Australians to adapt away from

the European/American assumptions of power, becoming a culture which uses the science, the technical and investigative skills of Europe within an outlook on the world derived from the much humbler, but radiantly admiring aboriginal acceptance of the world. One has only to see Western desert paintings to see some of the richness available to us if we can learn to see in the way of the people we used to think inferior. We have only to read the journals of our braver, and better, explorers, like Giles, and Sturt, to see how little they saw, brave men though they were. Brave, but not wise; a wiser generation of invaders would have gone humbly to the native people to see what they could learn, but the invading whites were consumed by their own superiority and to this day have learned little. The modern movement towards 'reconciliation' is really a surge of goodwill towards the black people – a welcome development, at least! – rather than a recognition that a two-way process might begin which would benefit us all. To put it a little differently, what I hear is a willingness on the part of the whites to let the black people *in*, rather than a willingness to admit that they have things to teach us which we badly need to learn. The environmental argument is the first step, here. Forty years ago, scientists began to see that industrial powers were polluting the world. Much has been done since then to clean up the processes of the developed world, and the work goes on, yet the transition has a long way to go. The day will surely come when power, energy, is obtained at or near the point where it is to be used, and vast landlines carrying electric energy from one place to another will be things of the past. People will congregate – that is, cities will be built - in places where power is available. I always recognise the assumption of human dominance when people suggest schemes whereby vast quantities of water can be moved from one part of the country to another: why don't the humans move to where the water is, instead of thinking that the opposite is what they deserve?

Answer me that!

Humans, even whitefellas, form deep attachments to place but one has only to visit long-deserted goldfields to see that circumstances can force people to move, and if one recalls camping holidays, with packing up and moving on an almost daily occurrence, one remembers how easy it is to form new attachments, and ultimately a larger attachment to the whole of the country traversed rather than to one favourite spot. All that is needed is to have connections with the larger area via stories, maps, our reading, the contacts we enjoy as we move about, and, perhaps above all, a feeling that our experience is growing with every day. These things, as Danny Delacy would have known, and said, are all in the mind. So the land, I am arguing, has a reality outside ourselves, and another reality in the minds of those who deal with it. For a civilisation to operate well, these two realities, or the descriptions thereof, need to be fairly close to each other.

Do they not?

My dear old Swanee ...

What was it about Americans? They had faith. One did not imagine them doing things with the ambivalence common among Australians. Once they committed themselves, they got things done. Roads and railways, as stated earlier. You had only to look at their cars to know that they were different from Europeans. Theirs were big, sometimes raunchy, sometimes family-feminine. They were cushioned, and sprung. You only had to put your foot down, and they'd go! They gave the young independence and gangsters mobility. Cops needed them too, fast and black. They both expressed and created the drama which was America. The Washington Capitol was enormous, especially when put beside the little parliament which served Australia from 1927 to 1988. America didn't boast too many cathedrals, but was known for its Grand Canyon, and Niagara Falls, exhibitions of nature untamed. It had a west which had been wild and a way of building Liberty Ships at a rate of one a day. When it entered World War 1, it tipped the balance, and its power was the determinant of World War 2.

This is perhaps the moment for a pause, because the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which brought about a Japanese surrender, was a turning point in the history of the world. Since the development of the atom bomb America has been a force to be feared, but it took the America-admiring parts of the world (we were always one of these) some time to perceive that the beast was developing a new, very different nature from the one we'd known. We continued to believe in the old America for years longer than we might.

What we believed was what they told us. Few Australians had studied American history, or analysed the way the country worked,

but we saw its results and, by and large, we liked them. Americans were mightily effective. Those mutinous streaks which, here in Australia, were forming to counter the dominance of England and its European counterparts – the arrogant, if amusing, French and the overbearing (if you let them) Germans – had developed, gone further, in the US of A. Whole industries depended on them having the guts to say they were going to do things their way. As they did. They seemed to have more energy for not being restricted at the top. Success bred success and it was energy that got you to the top, not your family line. Even with money, lineage didn't get you far in America because, from what one could see of their family sagas – and there were plenty – the riches of the first generation were squandered by the third. What did you do? You started again, or somebody did. There were fortunes flying around but they didn't stay in the same hands long enough for corruption to become debilitating.

Corruption was everywhere, though, which meant, if you thought about it, that it could be fought in that endlessly repeated, never-ending civil war called Good versus Evil. The Pilgrim fathers had engendered the mind sets, the internal conflicts, or so it seemed, of everyone that had come after. The line, the fence, the barrier between what was right and what was wrong, good and evil, was forever being asserted somewhere by someone. Religious groups objected to the teaching of Darwin's theory of evolution. Negroes still trembled in fear of their lives when Ku Klux Klan men burned fiery crosses at the edge of southern towns. Naked niggers had been strung up often enough. White Americans feared the sexuality of the blacks, believing the men to be grossly over-endowed and their women to be somehow super-abundantly able to turn sex into family warmth or shrilly excited gospel-worship. They could sing, those black people, and they had to be kept down. In this hostility of whites for blacks we see an example of how people, fearing something in themselves, transpose the feared aspect onto other people, in which new and convenient location they can struggle against it. Those who fear being

trampled on struggle all the harder to trample on others, treading them down in their own desperate efforts to get up.

Little of this was clear to America's many admirers in Australia, before, during and immediately after World War 2. America was the great protector to whom Australia turned when it was clear that England couldn't protect us any more. America had the strength, the right beliefs, the attitudes and confidence which we needed and in accepting their protection we chose to emulate. Our present problem might be said to have begun with the destruction of America's Pacific fleet in Pearl Harbour, December 7, 1941.

What did we know about them? Not so much, really, and most of it they'd told us themselves, in their films, principally, and their music. We had no other way to study them beyond their self-projections, and they were good at those. Wow! They swaggered, they danced, they blew trombones. How I luvya, how I luvya, my dear old Swanee! 'The Jazz Singer' was Al Jolson, with white teeth, black face, and style! Once he got back to his mammy he was never gonna leave her again! No sirree! There was no stopping them. They pushed towers into the air, creating records for height above sea level, and making them taller with radio masts because messages could radiate from skyscrapers. Even the French called them *les grattes-ciel*, showing that they were convinced. How could they not be? The Yanks put more building on a block than we did, or the French, the Germans or the British, because they seemed to have more business to do. An American builder said that anyone who built a skyscraper to last more than fifty years was a traitor to his industry; pulling them down and putting up new ones would keep him and his like rich. Forever! The workers were as special as the capitalists because they took lunch breaks on horizontal steel girders with the whole of Manhattan under their gently swaying legs, hats on, chomping on sandwiches of beef with tomato ... what was their word? Ketchup!

They had words for everything, and they looked like Martians (whatever *they* look like; the Yanks would find out one day, we had no

doubt) when they dressed up to play gridiron. Australian footballers were said to *strip*, but not the Americans who had helmets and padding that would have protected them in a bodyline series ... another thing they ignored, as they did most of the customs of older civilisations they were putting behind them as they created something new. Where would it end?

It was going on and on. They didn't fear failure because they didn't care what happened to those who fell by the wayside. They were warm and generous to your face, strangely heartless about those who dropped out of sight. Australians became aware, eventually, that America had a higher rate of imprisonment than almost any country that thought itself halfway decent. They slapped'em in jail! They had queues on Death Row and the end, when it came, was via the electric chair. A certain number of people were allowed to watch these executions, which must have been fearful. Clergymen, as dramatic as the rest of their system, prayed with the fated individual until the last. I remember my father making jokes about the condemned man eating a hearty breakfast. Did he mean bacon and eggs? Toast? A little more milk in his coffee, which was what they drank instead of tea? America, when you got to know it, seemed to be a juggernaut rolling forward with overwhelming momentum and taking little notice of what it crushed. Perhaps our systems did have a little more feeling, a little more sensitivity, than theirs?

The frightening thing was that they didn't stop with the bombs that had obliterated two Japanese cities. They went on, and built hydrogen bombs. They were frightened of the Russians and the Russians built hydrogen bombs too. The Russians – the Communists, let's call a spade the dirty black and diabolical device we know it is – were not only militarily formidable, they'd gone down another path in the relationship of money, business and society, and they challenged the American – wait for it – Way of Life! The Americans had a way with rhetoric and they quoted Lincoln at Gettysburg, their own constitution and some notable Supreme Court judgements with

aplomb. There was no greater certainty on earth. Many Australians still feel ashamed of our lack of rhetoric, feeling the comparison is in the Americans' favour. I respectfully disagree. Their rhetoric reassures them, preventing them from seeing what they've done to themselves ...

But more of that later. The Americans were in the unexpected position that in the aftermath of World War 2 they found themselves challenged at the very time when they should have been beyond it. An alternative faith was being propounded. Competition, according to the Communist Party, was not the dominant value that the Americans said it was. The challenger, what was more, had grabbed half Europe and was spreading ideas in Asia, where the world's teeming millions – *billions* was a word used rarely, then – lay waiting, in ominous readiness, perhaps, to swallow the Commos' poison. America had to be ready to fight.

America was ready to fight. It expected its allies to feel the same way, not that it cared much about them. It was busy equipping its Strategic Air Force so that at any moment, night or day, for years on end, it had a fleet of Boeing Super-Fortresses in the air, armed with nuclear bombs, flying towards the places where they might be dropped unless – unless – the pilots' orders told them to return without letting them go. America had become the most dangerous power in the history of the world, and Australians hardly knew, probably for fear of what they'd see if they looked. Australians clung to America because it protected them and if it protected them, it more or less had to be right, whatever it did.

Didn't it?

The new timidity

We enter now a period which is difficult to describe because there are contradictions all over the place. It's hard even to say when it begins but if I had to drive in a marker it would be at the time when Prime Minister Menzies tried to ban the Communist Party (1951). The High Court decided that the legislation was unconstitutional. Menzies responded with a referendum, asking for power to enforce the ban. The Opposition opposed him and the No vote won. The Communist Party of Australia continued to exist lawfully, but with ever-declining influence, until it splintered in the aftermath of Russian invasions of their European dominions. (The Communists were not beyond enforcing an empire of their own!)

So, in the matter of anti-communism we were both like and unlike America. We were affected by the hysteria which swept the US (that Un-American Affairs Committee, that Senator McCarthy and his henchmen, those lives wrecked because of allegations, true or false, that people had sympathies they were not supposed to have) but couldn't be persuaded to go quite as far as the Americans in dealing with those fears. Yet Australia sent troops to Korea, Australians knew where their feelings lay when British rubber planters in Malaya found their plantations attacked by guerrillas of the left, and Australia was active in trying to get America to involve itself in an apparently endless war in Vietnam where those wretched communists, who really seemed to be everywhere, managed to defeat the French. The hordes to our north that we'd always feared would be communist if we weren't careful. We agreed, even if a little hypocritically, with anything the Americans did to stop that. We sent our

soldiers, always the easiest thing to do because their fighting, the thing they were sent to fight, was kept distant from our shores. The enemy, the hostility, was kept outside ourselves that little bit longer, before it needed to be faced.

What is this period that I find difficult, and what's so hard about it? The period is the half century or so of American domination, of our willing acceptance of junior status in its empire, and it's hard to define, or characterise, because by some measures Australia's confidence, autonomy and way of presenting itself to the world – our ways of thinking about ourselves – have grown, and left far behind the slavishness we once displayed for Britain, while, at the same time, our avoidance of maturity has been, in this last half century, as bad as ever. I shall have to try to untangle these intertwined aspects of our development.

Perhaps the first point to make is that we made the transition from being a junior part of one empire to a junior part of another with remarkable ease. How this was done can most easily be seen in the long prime ministership of Robert Menzies, the most anglophile of our leaders. Menzies, as he grew older, was almost comic in his reverence for things English, both in England and in our own traditions. It says much about the Australia of his day that he led the country for seventeen years, dominant in a way no prime minister has been before or since. In his first period as leader, at the outbreak of World War 2, he got himself appointed to the British War Cabinet and spent months in England, out of the country he was leading. This, unthinkable to us today, was not the path chosen by Labor's John Curtin, who led Australia for most of the war, but for Menzies the separation of the empire into England and its colonies was untrue. The empire was the mother country, and he embodied this so keenly that most Australians, like him, looked backwards, over their shoulders, as a new age began to spread around them.

Asia was freeing itself of the imperialists. A new China had been born. The methods of empire, including its ways of doing business,

were not respected in Asian countries which had had them superimposed on their older traditions. More than that, even in the capitalist countries themselves, the nature of the economy and what it meant for the social lives of those countries was changing too. Mass production, mass consumption, two American creations, were universalising, and they were entering the home and the minds of citizens. The arrival of television (1956 in Australia) is often seen as the first great breach in the sanctity of the home, but radio, many years earlier, had done the same thing. It is natural to look to our leaders (as I did a moment ago) to characterise a period, but the ways in which people live, and the things they believe to sustain those lives, are subject to currents that are shaped in ways that nobody fully understands. Timid, nervous, conservative people are often embracing change and rushing with it unaware that what they are doing will undermine the things they say they need. Odd! But true. Australia, under Prime Minister Menzies, appeared to have a sure grip on its imperial past, but was changing as a country without fully realising. What had happened was that we had absorbed as much as we could absorb of English life, and we were ready to develop further; and, despite the flurry of increasing links with England, we were actually more interested in the new things. Innately, and somewhere out of sight, we knew that war in the Pacific, the Japanese extravagance, had brought to an end the days when Europe ruled the world. Something new would develop, and Australians were incurious. Only one of the contenders for the shaping forces of this new, emerging world made sense to us, and it was the confident, super-efficient, capitalist, cruel-but-clever ways of the Americans. They were the new leaders, the new wave, and we wanted to follow.

We followed. Their ideas came in with their films, their programs. Our own culture became a point of struggle, of defence. Culture itself became entangled with the market, ensuring the weakness of its position because if the market was fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, now twenty million people, and you produced films, books or whatever

for that market, you couldn't compete – *compete* – with the products of a marketplace many times the size. It made economic sense and that was one of the lessons of America: the economy led the way, stupid. One system of belief, the financial, ruled other systems of belief. The churches, as institutions of belief, grew weak, while faiths, as in America, waxed and waned, depending on how frightened people were at any given time by mass deaths when congregations – crowds – committed suicide en masse and under the influence of fiery, crazed, preaching. The end of the world was always at the edges of people's minds and the Americans were the new leaders in this field. The hysteria of their belief systems became normality and Australians, or anybody else affected by them, could only defend themselves by withdrawing into a nervous, cautious conservatism, sensing that although something was wrong there was no way it could be fixed; it had simply to be endured.

Faiths are not conquered by reason but by stronger faiths, and the dominance exercised by America is not primarily a matter of warplanes and battleships, missiles and bombs, but of the willingness of Americans, the need they feel, to arm themselves against the demons inhabiting their minds. Anyone wishing to counter, to reduce, the influence the Americans have in this country, or any other, must find ways to identify those demons for what they are, and then to drive them out, preferably by ignoring them in favour of a more balanced, humorous, dignified, inclusive, sane cultural arrangement. Sounds easy? Like hell it is.

Back to Menzies. Why did he want to ban the Communist Party? He thought it was subversive and he thought that membership of the Party would divide the loyalties of Australians because they would have to take orders from Moscow. He was largely correct on this latter point; the Party in Russia had every intention of controlling a worldwide movement by policy directions it alone would give. Menzies hated thought control emanating from sources that weren't his sources; that was natural enough. At the same time, there was the

paradoxical influence of a swing to multiculturalism, a diluting and diversification of the imperial ways to which Menzies clung. Australia was changing even as it resisted change. It was bringing about its own alteration even as it said it wanted to stay the same. Here is another paradox. Governments make decisions, and the changes that follow from those decisions can not, for the most part, be undone. Society is dynamic and shouldn't be pushed to the point where it breaks down, as it had in the 1930s depression. The generation that endured those years said depression must never return, or communism would be inevitable. Communism was the great fear of the wealthy nations in the postwar period because they could see why poorer places than their own might be attracted to it. Even for the wealthy nations it had its claims. For the wealthiest nation of all, the US, it had to be fought; that – fighting of one sort or another – was the American way. If we look at America's films, we see plenty of fighting (wars, Red Indians, cowboy shoot-outs), and their second strand is glamour. Glamour is almost more important than sex, indeed it's perhaps a peculiar way of manifesting nature's strongest force. Glamour is blonde, glamour is legs, glamour is flashing diamonds, glamour is spotlights on beautiful people swirling to a microphone in order to take control of a room of waiting, expectant hearts. Glamour fills a void, is the antithesis of the emptiness which people who would be confident fear. Glamour ...

... sweeps everything with it, and is therefore less subtle, by far, than its European counterpart, allure. Allure heightens desire, breaks down inhibitions, encourages the sensual soul; allure rewards as it deceives ...

... while glamour is a promise only. Glamour gives you nothing unless you believe in it. It is therefore an act of faith to submit. It's not necessarily, nor even particularly, feminine. It simply is. Glamour is like the gold that drew Americans to California in the 1840s; it hasn't many uses, but boy, what a motivator! What a driving, urging force!

Americans love to throw up glamorous figures – Marilyn, JFK – and Australians seem to need to believe them. Why is this?

Why is what?

I am at one and the same time trying to outline the ways in which we're captivated by the confidence – if it is – of America and the ways by which we might escape our acceptance of their superiority. They've no intention of letting us go. We have to think our way out of the hole we've dug. How are we going to do that?

I can't answer my own question, for the moment. It's too hard. Let's stay a little longer on the ways by which they capture our confidence. The most obvious is that they set goals, and they achieve them. Managerialism works, for them, bullshit as it may seem to us. And managerialism works because their society is set up to make it work. Efficiency and productivity are flags that Americans will always salute. Why is this so? Because the virtues underpinning efficiency and productivity have been established in those areas of life where few challenges take place. I mean the arts, entertainment, song. Dance, legs kicking high. The murmur of the voice before it starts to pump words into amplifying systems. Any analysis of power in modern societies could start, I think, with the questions who gets microphones put in front of them so we can hear them speak, and, who's given a way into that higher rank of the microphoned society where someone gets a mike to carry as they move around, spotlight following. Did the Americans invent this way of segregating, those whose words are heard and those who follow their lead? Perhaps not: they had predecessors, no doubt, but they've perfected the art, and the way to test this is to ask anyone what's wrong with the microphonic society and most, I fear, would be unable to answer.

So what is wrong with it? That's easy enough. It's undemocratic. It's a practice that empowers one voice over others. You don't see anything wrong with that? Oh dear.

If voices can't be heard, then they're not equal to those which can. Seems obvious, no? Democracy has been reshaped many times

over since the days of European royalties resisting it. Democracy triumphed in parts of the world, not least Australia (we can be proud of that) but it can be subverted, and it is, all the time. If you give people votes you need to control what they think. A more effective form of control is to ensure that campaigns to get someone elected are so expensive that only the rich can run! Ever thought of being President of the United States? If you come from a log cabin, forget about it; you couldn't even pay for a busload of cheerleaders, and you're going to need plenty of those. Again, have we gone as far as the Americans in this direction? No, we don't have the wealth and possibly not the inclination. There is a third way of controlling votes, or at least restricting the issues which will be decisive in the way people cast their votes. That's to get people to accept debt and repayments so large that economic issues are larger in their minds than any others. You have then only to frighten them with the possibility of interest rates rising, and their debts becoming so unmanageable that they'll have to sell half of what they own (at lousy prices because everyone's selling, not buying, see!) and you've got them pretty close to where you want them. What I'm describing is the rearrangement of things so that the political processes are kept out of any matter until they've been so shaped that the formal political processes only come into play at what I shall call the enactment stage. By the time a decision's required, the decision's already been made. It's a weakness of democracy that people think it can be trusted, and in many ways it can, but it's hard to defend it against those influential and clever people who can stage-manage things so that the matter of import to them is a *fait accompli* by the time a rubber stamp is needed. It's only possible to achieve this level of sophistication if you have the right people in the right stages of every process, so this means that incoming governments need to replace *their* people with *our* people; in countries with democratic forms, this art was perfected and most ruthlessly practised in the US of A. America. The world's shining light, the beacon of hope by which they have characterised

themselves, that lamp standing off Manhattan Island to attract the dispossessed, the unhappy, the wretched and forgotten of Europe to live in the light of the light of the world!

America has trained the world to look to it for hope, and its success has been incredible. The world's poor still look to it with envy, and the educated people of China, a country with a long and illustrious theme of painters and poets to illumine its existence, look to it too. America is revered in many countries because its people have what the people of the poorer countries don't have: happiness, freedom, choice, wealth, wealth and more wealth, and the confidence that is born of surety. America gives the world a message that it cannot fail ...

... yet anyone with a halfway reasonable pair of eyes can see that it has failed, at times in the past, is still failing, and will fail again. America is failing as I write, it seems to me, because it has invaded Iraq, a country it has no way of understanding: its very presence in the country attracts all the America-haters (there are plenty) of the Muslim world, thus allowing a surrogate version of the old crusades, and, if you think about it, a re-creation in another place of that old American favourite, the battle of good and evil. They've gone around the world, they've invaded a country where they're not wanted, and they've created, not peace, not a new society, but an old form of battle, one they need, apparently, so the drama in their minds can be mirrored in a world of bombs, shooting, destruction, wrecked buildings, hospitals where the human wreckage is wheeled around on trolleys, with cameras panning over bodies needing surgical attention. The Americans have landed. The Americans are here!

All of this is so far, for me, from the sort of visions which our country, Australia, gave birth to, allowed, in the late 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, that I struggle to see why it isn't easy to resist the American influence. Yet we can't seem to reject it. The reasons why this rejection is so hard to find must be my subject in the next of these essays.

Getting them out

Out of our heads, I mean; I don't mind them visiting, or even owning a business here and there. Out of our heads: my quarrel's with the Americans we've allowed into our minds rather than the people between New York and Hollywood, though they're culpable enough when it comes to spreading messages about themselves. We have to accept responsibility for what we believe, and we believe only too fully in the American promotion. I find my mind prowling the boundaries of this situation, looking for a place to attack. If the enemy had a jugular, I'd say go for it!

I said earlier that the timidity which is at the bottom of our acceptance of America can be given a starting point not long after World War 2 when America, and Australia also, located in the Soviet Empire the hostility, the antithetical existence, which it needed its enemy to possess. The odd thing about that time, long ago, is that it was also a time when Australia, after years of depression and war, returned to economic affluence. Financially, it was a time of hope, and the expectation that we in this country could live at a standard equal to, or better than, the standard of any other country, has never gone away. Regardless of the value of the Australian dollar, rising and falling, Australians are convinced that they, we, have the best life on earth. Quite a claim! Affluence, once it arrived, has stayed with us. We're used to it by now; it's expected. Yet affluence, I fear, is a new form of slavery. It's in the shortcomings of affluence as a way of life that we will find our vulnerability to the American Way, our inability to find a path, an identity, of our own. Quite a claim! Let me set out what I mean.

When a country enjoys widespread prosperity it is inclined to become lazy and self-indulgent. The prosperity is seen as being itself a sign of virtue, rather than good fortune. What is actually external is taken as being innate. This is an easy mistake to make, and it comes about because the rasping critique which is so necessary in human life has been dulled. Suppressed. Affluent societies are tolerant of criticism but don't take any notice of the critics because they know they don't count. The only critique that matters is the internal one of the stock market, and that's important! No company likes to lose ten or twenty per cent of its value in a day! While the numbers are looking good, though, nobody needs to care. An affluent, commercial society relies, if you notice, on statistics to tell it how things are going, while qualitative examination is out of favour. This means that the well-being of a commercial society is constantly measured – you might say it has its blood pressure taken every minute of the day – but its purposes, the reasons why it exists and the form in which it exists, are rarely considered. It is fundamental to the way that business operates today that the operation of the parts is scrutinised all the time, while the whole is taken to be doing well if the parts are running smoothly.

This, I think, is strange, and not very satisfactory, although it might be said that if any part of a system isn't working there must be a reason, somewhere outside the problematical part, and that reason needs to be located and addressed. Fair enough! The assumption, again, is that the system is sound and can be taken for granted. Perhaps. Every system is a way of operating that strange machine called human nature and I don't think human nature can be trusted very far without the means to check it as it wavers towards this or that excess. You may even say, by way of upsetting my argument, that the excesses can be the finer parts of human nature: earlier in these essays I referred to the gothic period of Europe's history, a period of excess if ever there was one, in northern Europe at least, even if not in Italy, where something southern moderated the zest for poking

needles into heaven: we, today, take tours through Europe to look in awe on the creations of that time, and are likely to be doing this for years, even though this respect is in itself something new. It's not so long since the revolutionaries of Paris, profoundly anti-clerical, stabled their horses and kept their stores in Notre Dame. The swings and roundabouts have turned a few cycles since then!

So we have a system which runs in certain ways – politically, thus; financially, so. We can measure its performances statistically, and we do. All we have now to do is to exhort people to buy and sell. Consume. Enjoy. Drive the retail sales figures up. Graphs tell all. Figures speak! Percentages and margins, as measuring sticks, replace the harder judgements that can be made about the quality of life, as it's described these days, or the quality of soul, or feeling. It's so much easier to think as we do than to work on the harder qualities to achieve – enlightenment, refinement, spiritual assurance, generosity to all who need it: a noble list to which all of us could add more with a moment's thought. If poverty can debase humanity – and it can – then affluence can slacken the incisive brain of mankind, allowing it to settle for means rather than ends in themselves. One has only to ask oneself what can't be measured statistically and one can see what we miss out on if we allow our state of affluence to be a goal rather than a halfway step. Thinking along these lines puts us in the position where we need to condemn the greater part of advertising (promotion, and the rest) as obscurantist exploitation of human weakness rather than a supportive endeavour to lift those struggling to better themselves.

I am the child of parents who were poor when I was young, but had great dignity, which they never lost. Nobody pushed them around. I take this to be the normal, desirable state of mankind, but I see its opposite around me, all the time, today. Persuasion has become one of the higher paid crafts, and I resent this. Persuasion overpowers what should be the independent thinking of people, coaxing them into letting their thinking be done for them. People give in, partly

because they know it will bring results (food on the table, goodies in Xmas wraps), partly because it's easier. Consciousness is the hardest thing for humans to bear. Sorrow, even pain, can be simple, but consciousness, awareness, that knowledge which we attribute to the gods, is always hard to carry because it can't be expressed by a limp, or a splint under the arm, its burden is felt in the mind, our most precious yet most vulnerable organ.

Let's go back to the question I couldn't answer before. If we've followed America into affluence, explaining it to ourselves in ways we've borrowed from them, how do we escape? How do we create another mindset, another worldview, that allows us to help ourselves to the benefits of prosperity while avoiding the slavery accepted by doing what the advertisers tell us? It's not an easy one, is it, but we need to try.

Here goes.

We were settled differently from America, and we need a different settlement with our own times. They need enemies, and I don't think we do. Or certainly not now, when vast numbers of Australians have travelled the world. Our days of fear should be behind us, but inferiority, that awful feeling of being not quite up to the level of others, is lurking still, despite the evidence of ever so many Australians in any number of fields. I remember being told by a Frenchman, years ago, that Australian doctors were the best in the world. 'You can trust them,' he said. Do we trust ourselves? Yes, most of the time, until that moment of comparison arrives. Put to the test, we still like to follow. In my view this is because our artistic standards have mostly been borrowed ones; our performances of *Messiah* or Mozart have always been set beside those of London, Salzburg or Berlin, and we've not expected ourselves to be that good. It is a mistake, however, to let ourselves be judged in that way. If we let other people set our standards it must be because we think they know their feelings better than we know ours. If this is the case then we are looking at artistic immaturity or some sort of corruption of standards. I think

both apply. The behaviours, the beliefs underlying the stated beliefs, that have normally been thought to be most Australian have mostly derived, I think, from the period when we were a part of the British empire, and they were rebellious, mutinous, or in some way unwilling to perform as expected behaviours. In this sense we can see our emergence from the English influences as being like the development of the child that must both imitate and reject its parents. Our relationship to the American empire is somewhat different, because they are not 'parents' in relation to ourselves, nor have they been, for much of the time we've known them, influences we've wished to draw away from. We have a lot in common.

Like us, they broke away from Europe, and England. Their independence had to be fought for, and they fought. One up to the Yanks! Like us, they opted for democratic forms and like us they saw themselves as being a land of hope, offering itself to the needy and the wretched of other places, but particularly of Europe. Like us, they saw themselves, for a very long time, as separate from the old world, and needing time to establish themselves in their new, better and evolving ways. Unlike the English, they could never be dismissed as the products of a land that was too small; their country was as big as ours, as challenging, as inspiring of a broad and generous affection. They loved their places and we could see why they would. Their attitudes in so many ways resembled ours. When they were cranky, or folksy, we understood them very well; when they were at their most dignified, we understood them too. Even more, we liked the fact that they accepted the diversity of human beings, from the most learned or refined to the most raucous or vulgar, that is to say they thought diversity was a virtue in itself and they didn't need to rank the diversities into class structures with tight bands around the upper levels and scorn for those at the bottom. They were essentially a commercial civilisation and that was a relief after the infinite constraints of Europe, the greatest of which was memory. All those centuries of wars, of Christianity at odds with human nature trying to

break out everywhere, those fortresses, those battlefields drenched in blood, above all those obsessions with the divinity of kings with all the attendant madnesses of ‘noble’ households striving to be number one!

The best of Europe was so fine and the worst so bad that it was natural, Australians felt for many years, to go the American way. For convenience’s sake I set the beginning of our time of subservience in the anti-communist hysteria of the early 1950s; this is also, I think, the beginning of our time of ambivalence about America, although Australian governments, from Menzies’ on, have mostly been unwilling to let any of the ambivalence felt in the general populace reveal itself in national policies lest the Americans themselves might notice, and punish us for not being whole-heartedly behind them. Today, however, we are at a point where, although our subservience is as great as ever, if not greater, we are as a nation somewhat more conscious, perhaps self-conscious, about it, and starting to look towards a time when we will have slipped the shackles, or at least a few of them.

Whenever I feel most despondent about our acceptance of American ideas, music, business methods and the rest, I remind myself to put America aside for a time and think about the many and varied ways in which Australia interacts with other places – China, Spain, India, Mexico, Malaysia … any place you care to think of. The effect is heartening; we seem able to manage our affairs with other countries quite well. We are, after all, one of the older and more successful nation states, we don’t have too many disgraces to hide from view, we’re remarkably undivided, we’re not up ourselves, as we say, and because we’ve never been dominant over anybody we’ve never found ways to inflate the value of what we possess. We live comfortably on a continent of great variety which also, as I’ve mentioned earlier, has a strangely uniting effect on us. In that phrase of our national anthem which everybody hates, we are ‘girt by sea’, an island nation – though what an island! – with that separateness, that detachment,

which island people have. Islanders have to sort themselves out, not respond to influences pressing on them from nearby. This is a strength and a weakness. Cultural autonomy is as much a curse as a blessing. Besides, there's so much to be understood, and celebrated, before we can have a rich and harmonious culture such as we admire in those countries that have developed it down the centuries. Our introduced culture sits on the wreckage and the persisting strengths of the world's oldest people, whose millennia of connection with the land makes the later, British-and-American civilisation look like a hastily applied lick of paint. The early white settlers saw it as their job to establish the superiority of their ways; considering the blacks, they thought it best to wipe them out, take their land, be kind (perhaps) to what was left, and collect anything worthwhile from native life and put it on display in a museum, somewhere. The day of the old was gone.

A more constructive way of looking at the same matter today would be to acknowledge the ancientness of the continent, the success of the aboriginal inhabitance, to canvass the differences and similarities of the two vastly disparate cultures, and then to help the two to merge, as must inevitably happen once a conquest has settled into a two-way acceptance. That is where the process of reconciliation between black and white Australia sits today. All this is said by way of establishing the nature of our interaction with America: *they* are not settled, fixed, because they are a developing country, in the throes of both creating and coping with the electronic revolution which is somehow *theirs*, as the industrial revolution belonged to England; they are not settled, or fixed, and neither are we. We too are moving with the modern world, and we are at the same time trying to find the courage to acknowledge that the black people were successful for thousands of years before we came. We move, as we must, into the future, knowing that we have behind us a very long and, to whitefellas, largely mysterious past. You may think that I am describing a difficult situation but I beg to differ: what I'm describing is, in my

view, a rich and exciting place for any human society to be. A past to explore, and gain from, a future to create. Bernard O'Dowd might recognise his position in ours today, might he not? If he did, he would be sickened by the all-encompassing power of the financial system of which we are a part. It's time to get an overview of the way in which this global system has us in its grip.

The secular faith

A global system? Can there be such a thing? Who operates it and where can it be found? One quails at opening up topics like these, so let's start in a simple way. Money, goods, and people can be moved almost anywhere in the world, and if anybody wants to track their movements, this can be done. Whether or not it *is* done is another matter; drugs, weapons and money are moved surreptitiously all the time, and occasionally brought into the open by police or customs. You can tell that an activity is well established if it exists in legal and illegal forms. Goods, money and people pass that test!

There's more, naturally. Health, the condition of our planet – *ours!*: that's a welcome new idea – the sharing of knowledge, the interchange of students, ideas ... these go on all the time. The holders of valuable knowledge like to make money from what they know but even they, at times, have to let the poorer peoples of the earth get some of the benefits. I'm thinking of medicines provided cheaply for African places that can't afford them at first-world rates. People who do things for profit find it hard to see why anybody should get out of paying. Which brings us to money. At this stage we don't seem to need a global money because the currencies we have are interchangeable; the rates for changing moneys allow a good deal of trading and manipulation, which are part and parcel of what we're creating, globally. Trading, of course, is all about getting what you want, or need, and that brings into play our value systems. What do we need? Lack? What's worth having and what isn't? Even the stuff we pay with, money, is hardly solid. It's many years since currencies were tied to that allegedly stable element called gold, and even today,

with oil as the underpinning of economies, currencies – money – can still be seen to trade up and down in an elasticised relationship with the underpinnings of gold and oil. Underpinning everything, however, is faith: payment will be received for goods consigned, the payment will be convertible into whichever currency is applicable for the destination where the money's to be used, all relevant parties will handle currencies under relevant financial rules. These are the rules of the game. Faith in the currencies will rise and fall all the time but the tables, the rates, the scales, by which their values are judged, these have to be believed. How else can business be done?

Thus far I have been speaking of the mechanics of global trade; it's time now to move to the centrality of that trade. This is where the influence, indeed the dominance, of America is most apparent. They are and always have been a trading nation. It's only now that their armaments and armed forces are so grossly excessive that the rest of the world is having doubts. Their aircraft carriers are the most overtly powerful things ever seen, if we except their Stealth bombers and their global satellite systems for listening in on every message circling the earth at any time. The whole world stands in awe of America's might or, to put it another way, the rest of us are scared. The military power is free to express and impose the elements of the faith which gave birth to the nation's commercial power. The two seem to go together. They're hard to disentangle, as much for the Americans themselves as for the rest of us. A military system backs a financial system, and vice versa. One is wise to treat both with caution. Australia has taken the easiest route, believing it to be the safest; that is, it's chosen to be the friendly, loyal subsidiary, arguing, if we ever *do* argue, only on ground that's almost entirely common.

Trade. It's moved from being an exchange of necessities to an activity deemed good in itself. Remember the argument, a couple of centuries old by now, between free trade and protection. Guess what? In America, both sides have won. The country signs free trade agreements while protecting those of its industries which someone

else can beat, such as Australia's growers of sugar cane. What they've done is called having it both ways, and nobody's strong enough to force it to be otherwise. The assertion I want to make about this is that America's power is its faith and its faith backs its power. It's very hard to split a dynamism into its parts, indeed it's possible that a powerful nation has no 'parts' to the way it operates; the best the observer can do is to find a number of ways of looking at, of trying to analyse, the same bundle of energy. The Americans have always been dynamic; it's almost the first thing the rest of the world learned to admire. Their political system has contained checks and balances because – way back in the time when they learned from their origins in Europe – they built them in. Another base reached by the Yankees! Political systems, alas, no matter how well they're put together, are capable of manipulation. There are nearly always ways to control them, and now the American system, though still operating lawfully and within constitutional constraints, has been taken over by the wealthy. This is not simply a matter of individuals in the White House, the Senate or the House of Reps; it's more importantly a matter of the agenda. America's interests are the interests of those who manage its considerable wealth, so any matter worth a few billion dollars matters more than the happiness or the aspirations of those who walk New York's streets in too many clothes for a sunny day because they're going to sleep, blanketless, on the footpath at night. So what is America trying to do? To be? Talkative though the Americans are, they don't seem to be debating their destiny these days; the political system has moved away from thoughtful debate to the business of getting somebody's group into power, and then pushing through their designs, so that the whole paraphernalia of symbols and statements about America – something they are particularly good at doing – is as much a matter of deception and deceit as of anything else. One can't take much notice of what we may call America's official rhetoric because so much of its real deployment of power and money in its own interests has been handed over to the military, the various spy agencies and

internal security bureaux. (Since the destruction of two skyscrapers on September 11, 2001, the CIA, once the bane of Australian intellectuals, has been one of the more conservative and better-controlled of America's numerous 'hidden' agencies!)

How has the American empire become so powerful? By weapons, armies, navies, missiles and the rest of it, yes. But they have the technology – that is, the means – to build all these things. That is to say, they have the will. They build them because it occurs to them to build them. The Russians did the same, not so long ago, but somehow their systems of faith collapsed, and America was left to rule the world. That is to say, again, their faith prevailed. Faith is confidence and confidence is faith. I remember reading an article in that quintessentially American journal *The Reader's Digest* many years ago, at the height of the Cold War with Russia. The question: given an intelligent Russian Communist, how would an American convince the Russian that the American system was better? One respondent thought this simple. He would simply take the Russian for a walk through a supermarket and show him what was on the shelves. What ordinary Americans were putting in their trolleys. The goods, the variety. The choice!

If that didn't convince him, nothing would!

Not even a planeload of bombs!

As a young man I found this argument infuriating and even today, more tolerant by fifty years, it's still intriguing, because I can't identify the chicken and the egg in this process of the creation of confidence. Things are made, grown, packaged, and put on sale. Why? Because they're sold. They're bought. People put them in their trolleys and pay. Then they wheel them out to cars that are bigger than they need be, and taken home (also, probably, bigger than it needs to be). The whole country rolls on wheels. Petrol's burned to keep them turning. The system's enormous, it's got to work, and those who are inside it have to keep believing. Faith is not a matter for the intellect to debate, it's a necessity if the nation's to function in the way it's been shaped to function. Armed forces are needed to defend it, the

armed forces need enormous bases, which have to be supplied, the canteens filled, the soldiers offered their favourite beers, breakfast cereals and shows on television to watch so their minds have got something to exercise (very lightly!) on. Everything that's necessary has to be supplied. Supply and demand is taken to be a fundamental law, and need, which can be felt and therefore defined very differently, is moved gently aside. (Start up a reading program for those that need it, would you Sergeant!)

The Russians lost faith in their system, and it collapsed. It had been standing on lies and murders for years. Good riddance. America's faith is as strong as ever ... or is it? Each of us creates, or seeks out, the enemy we need. America today has invented, and created, a new category of enemy, known as the terrorist. Terrorists eat away from within. Terrorists strike when least expected, therefore citizens wanting to feel safe have to have their guard maintained at all times, especially near airports! The aeroplane, one of mankind's more remarkable achievements (remember Miles Franklin's adoption of it as an embodiment of vision, a thing which was uplifting in a spiritual sense as well as a physical) is now as dangerous as it is necessary because it can be taken over by terrorists (the enemy: and the enemy is within, today, not outside the national boundaries) and used to destroy the thing, the society, we live inside. The modern American is not safe because the enemy, the terrorist, has entered his/her mind. This is a logical development from the anti-communist hysteria which energised America for half a century, and yet it's not easy to know how it will further develop, as it surely will. As I write, America is making generous efforts to assist those who suffered from huge waves at the north-western end of Sumatra. The Americans will do an amazing amount of good, because they are effective. They will most certainly help. Before too long, however, they will drift back to being blankly uncomprehending as to why anybody might dislike them. They won't seek out the disaffected in order to get a dialogue

underway, they'll continue their efforts to control and perhaps eliminate them, because ...

... because they are the people who gave us the western, the conflict, the shoot-out, as meaningful in itself. They saturated us, via their films, with sex instead of love. The outward, the saleable, the visible, instead of the spiritual, the thoughtful, the restrained and decent. They're not like us, are they, so why have we let ourselves become like them?

Owning ourselves

Why have we let ourselves become like the Americans? One could argue that we never quite outgrew the problematical aspects of being part of the British family, we simply transferred the difficult aspects of the relationship - those relating to our lesser status - to America, which meant, as I have said earlier in these pieces, that we were wide open to the darker forces in American society when these became apparent. You may agree with that or not, but for me the easier question to approach is *how* we've been overpowered, and it's been a cultural tsunami that's done it. American music, film, the sheer force of its popular arts, have done more to shape the minds of Australians than the efforts of our own artists, though they've always been there, building up a stream of understanding which has seeped at least a little way into the substratum of our society's mind. I mean you, dear reader, and myself, and everyone we know. The only voices we can rely on are the ones that seem to speak truly, and many of them will have worked and died before Australia had been heard of, that land that may or may not have existed in the blank spaces down there in the south! The only voices we can rely on are those that seem to speak truly, and we've had many of those in our country down the years. As a writer, it's natural for me to turn to those artists whose work I best understand, in hopes that what they've had to say will give us awarenesses to fill out our thinking and leave us feeling that there's little that we can't understand in a way we know to be ours.

The rough and tumble of early white history sorely tried those not strong enough to bear what it chanced to give them. Here's

Henry Handel Richardson⁸, dealing with the gold fever that struck her country in 1851:

This dream it was, of vast wealth got without exertion, which had decoyed the strange, motley crowd, in which peers and churchmen rubbed shoulders with the scum of Norfolk island, to exile in this outlandish region. And the intention of all alike had been: to snatch a golden fortune from the earth and then, hey, presto! For the old world again. But they were reckoning without their host: only too many of those who entered the country went out no more. They became prisoners to the soil. The fabulous riches of which they had heard tell amounted, at best, to a few thousands of pounds: what folly to depart with so little, when mother earth still teemed! Those who drew blanks nursed an unquenchable hope, and laboured all their days like navvies, for a navvy's wage. Others again, broken in health or disheartened, could only turn to an easier handiwork. There were also men who, as soon as fortune smiled on them, dropped their tools and ran to squander the work of months in a wild debauch; and they invariably returned, tail down, to prove their luck anew. And, yet again, there were those who, having once seen the metal in the raw: in dust, fine as that brushed from a butterfly's wing; in heavy, chubby nuggets; or, more exquisite still, as the daffodil-yellow veining of bluish-white quartz: these were gripped in the subtlest way of all. A passion for the gold itself awoke in them an almost sensual craving to touch and possess; and the glitter of a few specks at the bottom of a pan or cradle came, in time, to mean more to them than "home", or wife or child.

Such were the fates of those who succumbed to the "unholy hunger". It was like a form of revenge taken on them, for their loveless schemes of robbing and fleeing; a revenge contrived by the ancient, barbaric country they had so lightly invaded. Now, she held them captive – without chains; ensorcelled – without witchcraft; and, lying stretched like some primeval monster in the sun, her breasts freely bared, she watched, with a malignant eye, the efforts made by these puny mortals to tear their lips away.

Henry Handel Richardson opens her book at Ballarat on the eve of Eureka, and Richard Mahony, her subject, generally thought to be

based on her father, is a doctor who's found his way to the fields. There's gold a-plenty at Ballarat but fortune is uneven in its distributions; Mahony wavers between his new country and his old, never happy for very long, so that the book contrasts a country which for a time in the 19th century was the wealthiest in the world with the uncertainties of individuals struggling to find their way.

The wealth, as we know, didn't last forever, and in the 1930s Australia was a wretched country, its menfolk wandering wide and far, looking for work, food, shelter and meaning in a world that refused it as it refused everything else. Here are Marjorie Barnard and Flora Eldershaw, joining forces and taking their title from Shakespeare⁹: their central character is called Harry Munster:

If you did fight, what would you fight for? Just to keep things as they were? No good, no good, no good. To make a new world? But we haven't decided what new world yet. Such a large choice of things that didn't exist, worse than Christmas shopping. Liberty? Another pig in a poke ... There's going to be a war, so there must be a reason for it. A new sort of war, perhaps, fought for the Common Man, Everyman, the Man in the Street? It was his turn, he'd never had a war fought for him yet. Trouble was to find him. No one would own up to being the Common Man. Plenty of Unknown Soldiers. Suppose there would be another crop now. Rather pleasant. You'd lie there, anonymous, in a marble tomb, fulfilled, quiet, no more bother about being yourself, remembered and forgotten. If you could find this man and ask him what he wanted ... Harry. Harry Munster. He was Everyman. He'd known it the first time he'd seen him. At the dawn service on Anzac Day. Dark, worn face, tragic, uncomplaining. Nothing special, just a man. Fought for four years, came back, had a little place, somewhere, lost it, lost his job, out of work for five years, three children and another who died, glad of a job now on the basic wage, driving a lift. He was the whole of a man. All that expenditure of courage, patience, fidelity, to win that. The gentleness of human dignity. There in thousands of them, getting a dusty answer and not giving ground. Treated like cogwheels, and living like men.

In their book, Barnard Eldershaw have Sydney invaded during World War 2, set on fire, and abandoned by those of its population left alive. This apocalypse is not the end. Several centuries later, a more rational and more controlled society contains a few spirits who are curious enough to look back on those they describe as the First People (black) and the Australians who followed (white). There are struggles between idealism and practicality in the future world too, and Barnard Eldershaw are not impressed; every age, one feels they are saying, has its own struggle to contain the worst and fulfil the best that's in us. Forces are forever in, or out of, balance. The two writers work, perhaps, inside their time's conventions in describing the connections of men and women; Glen Tomasetti¹⁰, writing a generation later, strips Dorton Serry, her 'man of letters', unsexually naked with the new understandings sweeping through society:

'What are you thinking?' he asked. They usually liked that.

'I'm thinking that you're hung up on words, and the only reason I'm here is that you remind me of my Danish grandfather. He nearly always spoke in a level voice, but he gave me the first feeling, from someone else, that I was seeable. And I'm trying to see, here and now, what woman's new strategy should be.'

Ah, Danish. So his hunch was right. She was a Viking's mate. She was Hans Andersen's heartrending Match Girl, his mighty Snow Queen. In blue and white porcelain she was a goose girl. Mocking and conspiratorial, she ran a sex shop in Copenhagen. Next to him, knees apart and elbows on them, she puffed a cigarette.

The clouds thickened. He believed in silence. Water gleamed at a little distance.

She extended her arm above him. Good lord, should he duck? 'You're not such a bad old bastard.' She was patting him on the head!

'Let's go,' he said.

'Yeah, let's go. I was going anyway.'

They walked somehow together into the city streets. At a fruit barrow he stopped. She went on. He caught up with her and said, attempting to patronize,

'An apple for the teacher,' holding out a big green one.
'Thanks.' She took it, tossed it. She hurried ahead, turned and, laughing, stuck her thumb in the air then strode into the crowd.

Man of Letters is one of those books that remind you that once certain things have been written, they can never be unwritten. The world has changed, no matter how many of us keep on in our old ways, pretending that things are the same when they aren't. It's not the promulgation of thought that's dangerous but thought itself, and writers, however self-trained they may be, are professionals at listening to their minds and those of the people about them. Most people, trained to say what should be said, find writers disconcerting, won't buy their books, don't like them very much. Here's Beverley Farmer¹¹:

'Can I read that?'
'Read what?'
Her hands have instinctively spread across the pages of blue scrawl. He raises his eyebrows. 'What you've been writing half the night.'

She passes them over her shoulder. The couch creaks and the pages rustle until at last he tosses them back on the table and goes to make coffee. She stares at them, sweat prickling her. The heating is on full.

'Thank you,' she says, when he brings her mug.
'Is this finished?'
'Oh, for now, anyway. I was just coming to bed – I'm sorry. Haven't you been asleep?'

'I used to respect writers rather a lot,' he murmurs. 'Now I'm not sure.'

'You're writing your thesis on one.'
'Mmm. There's writing and writing. To my mind this –' he points – 'is more like scavenging.' He waits while she swallows hot coffee. 'Perhaps if you wore a badge, a brand on your head that meant: *Beware of the scavenger?* Then people would know they were fair game.'

'You think that's being fair?'

'She trusted you, it seems, with the story of her life.'

'I hope I can do it justice.'

'Justice.' He sighs.

She has nothing to say. He finishes his coffee sip by sip, takes his mug and rinses it, then comes back to stand behind her chair. Her mug is clenched in both hands; the light of the two lamps blurs in her coffee.

'I am not to figure in anything you write,' comes the smooth voice again. 'Never. I hope you understand that.'

Hardly breathing, she cranes her neck forward to have a sip of coffee, but he grabs the mug from her and slams it down on the table, where it breaks. Coffee spurts up and splashes brown and blue drops over her pages. This time she knows better than to move until his footsteps creak away across the boards. His chair scrapes. She hears a match strike in the room beyond, and a sigh as he breathes smoke in.

At this point I should make clear why I'm introducing fragments by various writers; even the most patient reader may think I've run out of ideas, and started to fill up with things I like from the work of others. Not so. I want to characterise Australia, and I want to do it from inside itself, not as seen from elsewhere. Hence *Oztralia*, my title. I began, as I believe one must, with the land. Our understandings of the land, and even more of the life we live on its surface, have both a firmly provable reality, and a much more subjective area wherein our feelings, possible misunderstandings, and our imaginations all have room to move. To play. To question. Every aspect of the human spectrum is in full activity almost all of the time. So how do we know what's right?

The first answer is to turn to the many and varied disciplines by which we build up schemes of knowledge. Anthropology. Geology, geography, economics (if you think that's a discipline), anatomy, biology and so on to ... ah yes, zoology! They're useful and we can't do without them. But there's no -ology that synthesises everything; that's where writers come in. Fully engaged with whatever it is that engages them, they create worlds which resemble the one we live in,

while insisting on operating by created rules, not those that bind us day by day. Writers are the free-est of beings, and the most restrained by the internal disciplines of their craft. Others, looking on, think of them as unfettered to the point of being irresponsible, while writers themselves dream of perfection in the flight they hope to attain. The young writer, starting out full of ambition, but sure to be frustrated, is somewhat like the Wright brothers, getting their heavier than air machine off the ground for a few seconds, a few yards, the first time, and the second time, and more after that, until, eventually, flight became possible of regular achievement. (Today we have that Airbus!) Older writers have perfected their craft and can give us life in its most wondrous forms. Patrick White¹²:

Seeing the dark was beginning to thin, she went down presently. She put a coat over her nightdress. She took the rusted can which she kept filled with seed. In the garden the first birds were still only audible shadows, herself an ambulant tree.

The hem of her nightdress soon became saturated, heavy as her own flesh, as she filled the birds' dishes. Reaching up, her arms were rounded by increasing light.

In the street an early worker stared as he passed, but looked away on recognizing a ceremony.

A solitary rose, tight crimson, emerged in the lower garden; it would probably open later in the day.

Light was strewing the park as she performed her rites. Birds followed her, battering the air, settling on the grass whenever her hand, trembling in the last instant, spilt an excess of seed.

Her throat swelled as the light climbed, as she trudged back, trailing her sodden nightdress along the path where 'at least two people have broken their legs'. The little scoop clattered against the rusty can.

At the topmost step it occurred to her that she must take this first and last rose to her patient Irene Fletcher. She would return and cut it before leaving: perfect as it should become by then.

She poured the remainder of the seed into the dish on the upper terrace. The birds already clutching the terracotta rim, scattered as she blundered amongst them, then wheeled back, clashing, curving,

descending and ascending, shaking the tassels of light or seed suspended from the dish. She could feel claws snatching for a hold in her hair.

She ducked, to escape from this prism of dew and light, this tumult of wings and her own unmanageable joy. Once she raised an arm to brush aside a blue wedge of pigeon's feathers. The light she could not ward off: it was by now too solid, too possessive; herself possessed.

Shortly after she went inside the house. In the hall she bowed her head, amazed and not a little frightened by what she saw in Elizabeth Hunter's looking glass.

White's subject is the wealthy, powerful Elizabeth Hunter who, even as she lies dying, can exert herself over her knighted son and titled daughter. But it is not Mrs Hunter, but one of her nurses, Mary de Santis, who is granted illumination on the book's last page. One of the reasons for White's standing, perhaps, is his endless quest for moments of illumination and his recognition of them when they arrive, even in the most unlikely places and unexpected people.

Australians are more widely thought of as being wry, witty, dry, laconic, with both a taste and a gift for cartooning. Cartooning simplifies, sometimes quite savagely, so that certain essential characteristics of a situation are highlighted, often to be shown as ridiculous. This is a strain of the national life which Murray Bail has cleverly exploited, but in the work I wish to cite¹³, he takes an inherently silly – *fabulous* perhaps – situation and turns it into a love song to his country and a fairy tale with a happy ending. A man called Holland comes to a town in New South Wales (where he's *New!*) and plants on his farm a specimen of every eucalypt that exists. Five or six hundred; they're being reclassified all the time. His daughter grows up, becomes beautiful, and much desired by males. Holland decides that she, Ellen, will be given to the man who can identify every one of his trees. This is no easy task, for some of them are rare. Just as it seems that Ellen will be given to a man called Cave (the name tells all),

another suitor spirits her away. This is not cheating, however, for he too knows all the eucalypts. Shouldn't we all?

This suspended air of perpetual sadness would be of little consequence except the Narrow Leaf Red Ironbark is one of the most common eucalypts on earth; certainly they crowd the woodland areas of eastern Australia, all the way up to the top of Queensland. The botanical name recognised this in the very beginning: *crebra* from the Latin 'frequent', 'in close succession'.

Imagine the effect of such widespread statements of melancholy on the common mood. Needless to say it has permeated and reappeared in the long faces of our people, where the jaw has lengthened, and in words formed by almost imperceptible mouth movements, which often filter the mention of excessive emotions. It has shaded in khaki-grey our everyday stories, and when and how they are told, even the myths and legends, such as they are, just as surely as the Norwegians have been formed by snow and ice.

The eucalypts may be seen as daily reminders of the sadnesses between fathers and daughters, the deadpan stoicism of nature (which of course isn't stoicism at all), drought and melting asphalt in the cities. Each leaf hanging downwards suggests another hard-luck story or a dry line or joke to wave away the flies.

Only a small number of other eucalypts, those pale and stately beauties that have achieved fame on tea towels, postage stamps and calendars, correct the general impression of melancholy, as put forward by *E. Crebra* and some of the other ironbarks. They bring a glow of light to a paddock, a rockface, a footpath in the city: the two Salmon Gums standing in the traffic island between the university and the cemetery in Melbourne! It only needs a few. There is a majestic statement on what is alive and spreading: continuation.

And there is a parallel nearby. It may not be exaggeration to say that the formidable instinct in men to measure, which is often mistaken for pessimism, is counterbalanced by the unfolding optimism of women, which is nothing less than life itself; their endless trump card.

Two more quotes; no, three, and I'll have done. There are any number of writers that I could have brought into these pages, but my reason for bringing in any at all is simple. I wish to remind readers of the wonderful voices to be heard if we will only seek them out, singing endlessly the songs of our land. It is said that we are not a musical people, but we are; that we are not a cultivated people, but we are, if you look around. We are also, unfortunately, a reticent people, or is that so unfortunate? Can we make a virtue, a strength, of this shyness? For many years it was thought that Australia lacked flowers; nobody who lived in the bush thought this, but it was commonly said, until people adjusted their vision and saw the delicacy our plants had always possessed. When people from other lands make judgements about us they do so with the measuring sticks, the criteria, of the places they come from. They cannot know ours unless we tell them, and we've been slow to do so. Is this inferiority, reticence, shyness, modesty, or a decency which thinks that to make claims is somehow to put down others, or at least show that the desire to do so is there, lurking in its nasty way. Frank Moorhouse¹⁴:

Australia 1936.

As she stared out of the railway carriage window at the coastal bush landscape, Edith felt a low revulsion.

Appalling, she thought, the bush is simply appalling. It appeared to her to be grasping and twisted. Grasping for water, grasping for soil – the way the roots of the eucalyptus clutched rocks and clutched the soil.

She turned her eyes back to the food laid out on the narrow first-class carriage table. She had declined the refreshment service and had spread out her own picnic to the rather amused glances of the few others who occupied her section.

She remembered enough about travel outside the cities in Australia to know that to eat well, one had to be gastronomically self-reliant.

In Sydney she'd bought fresh fruit, leg ham, English mustard, Bodalla cheese – which she had yearned for in Geneva – and bread, albeit of doubtful quality.

She poured herself a small cognac from her flask to aid the digestion.

She had Lawrence's *Kangaroo* on her lap – the first chance she'd had to read it.

Edith – Edith Campbell Berry – is home to visit her father, who is ageing. Edith works for the League of Nations, hence the reference to Geneva, and has invested a great deal in its success. Edith is an internationalist, one of the not-so-large bureaucracy trying to persuade the nations of the world to submit themselves and their policies, not to speak of their frequently warring intentions, to the need for peace. At the stage of the book from which the quote is drawn, their cause is not yet helpless, though that is to come. Edith was in Geneva when her mother died; it was her mother's wish that she continue her work, and not come home. Now that her father is weakening, she has taken leave, and is forced to look at the land she's come from.

There was nothing comforting about Australian nature, nothing cool, mossy or kind which invited you to lie back and allow the pine smells and the murmuring of the breeze in the tall treetops to lull you to dozing. The bush prickled, insects nipped and flies stung, and the noise of the wind in the trees was vaguely threatening. And branches sometimes fell.

How disgustingly disloyal she really was. What was to become of a person who thought as she did? Her disloyalty was an embarrassing and gaping hole in her heart. She hoped, and supposed, that time and reacquaintance with her country would eventually mend her and that she would feel whole-hearted about her habitat and her place of birth, her patrimony.

She did have sentiments about the railway station names – an odd confusion of the Aboriginal and the European. Thirroul, Austinmer, Coalcliff, Fairy Meadow, Wollongong, Kembla Grange. She laughed. Who in God's name thought of calling the place Fairy Meadow? There were no meadows and there were no fairies at Fairy Meadow.

Frank Moorhouse is locating in Edith Berry one of the problems the European mind has in coping with Australia; it refuses to give what the onlooker has been trained to expect, to want; it yields nothing, and requires the onlooker, the inhabitant, to adapt to it without the slightest promise that anything will come of doing so. But as anyone who has travelled Australia will know, it can offer, when it chooses, moments of wonder, of blessedness, which go far to explain the arbitrariness of those moments of illumination in Patrick White. All one needs is to be open and ready for the moment when it comes.

It's time now for another writer, my last but one, Eve Langley¹⁵. She published her first book in 1942, then disheartened her Sydney editors by sending them manuscripts they found impossible; turgid, disorganised, endless, without incident. They could make no sense of them. They published a second book eventually, then gave up. Eve married, went to New Zealand, came back, and found her way to a hut in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney where she eked out a wretched existence, solitary, fragmented, delusional ... the story is almost too sad to tell. She died alone and her body was found some time later. Yet her first book, about two girls calling themselves Steve and Blue, is a rapturous account of a summer spent picking peas, and dallying with love, on the river flats near the Gippsland lakes, in the south-east corner of her land.

That night we left the sections and went down to sleep at Mrs Wallaby's. There were puftaloones for tea, cooked in a big camp oven over a roaring fire made from the finest railway sleepers. Charl had tons of timber on his property, but was too fatigued to cut it down; and to sneak along the railway line and lift a sleeper from the pile kept by for repairs was the work of a moment. And how well they burnt!

I shall never forget those walks down to Wallaby's at night, after we had knocked off in the maize paddock. We didn't go near the camp, but struck off across the paddocks to the railway line and walked along its harsh stony path until we came to a fence with a bit of bag bound around the barbed wire. We got through and were on

the road and walking down towards Sullivan's, whose large families lived in scattered houses all along the road.

The railway crossing lay stark and bare across the road that led to their old homestead, and two great poplars, the poets of the land, shook their bare autumn branches, black and fine, across the stars. Post-and-rail fences, as frail as Chinese writing, lay on each side of the trees against a reddening sky. We lived for things like that.

Over Evan's range burnt the Dog-star, Sirius, with a scorching red, blue and green fire.

"That is my star," I said to Blue. There, walking slowly, with my eyes raised to it, I prophesied.

"Some day, I shall write fully our life together, with its tragedy and comedy. But better than that, I shall write of Australia and bring lovers to her so that they shall fill the land with visionaries. For 'where there is no vision, the people perish.' But, Bluey, Bluey, I wonder what really does lie ahead in the years? Why does sorrow haunt me?

" ... Be thou therefore in the van
O circumstance; yea, seize the arrow's barb
Before the tense string murmur.

"But I am lost. I see nothing to seize. I am powerless. Poor and uneducated, we roam our country, fit for no work but that of the paddocks. It is good. It is better than the factories of the city. But what, my Bluey, lies ahead? I guess ... and fear."

As we passed little lonely places where the moonlight lay on the soft grass and the wild-looking trees shone like silver, we imagined that we could see the black figures of the aborigines flying through the timber and up into the ranges.

"Australia, Australia," I cried. "Ah, Patria Mia!"

The last word goes to Frederic Manning, 1882 – 1935, child of a well-to-do Catholic family; his father was for a time Lord Mayor of Sydney and Manning's household was in close contact with the State Governor, at a time when vice-regal circles were socially central. He was sickly and used his weakness to keep himself away from school, having private tutors instead. While still a youth he went to England and when war came he waited for a time, then joined the King's

Shropshire Regiment as a humble soldier, when it was available to him to become an officer. His front-line experience lasted only three months, but it gave him what he needed. In 1929, he wrote it down¹⁶. Manning is, alas, hardly known in his own country and forgotten in England, but his book holds all that he learned of war and his reflections upon it. It is also a model of stylish, shapely prose, responsive to everything it conveys.

On the march to Louvencourt they passed an Australian driving a horse-drawn lorry, with a heavy load whereon he sprawled, smoking a cigarette with an indolence which Bourne envied. The Colonel wheeled his grey, and pursued him with a fire of invective practically the whole length of the column, to the man's obvious amazement, as he had never before been told off at such length, and with such fluent vigour, in language to which no lady could take exception. He sat up, and got rid of his cigarette, looking both innocent and perplexed.

Certain national stereotypes were well established by 1916! Again, it is tempting to end the quotation there, but Manning has more:

The men were delighted. It was quite time somebody was made to pay attention to their bloody mob.

The Shropshire soldiers are pleased that somebody is getting ticked off. The Colonel is their man, not the Australian. Indolence is not allowed within their ranks. We need to recognise that the English soldiers are protecting their sense of themselves and the ways in which they've been made. Others will always be others to them. As for Australians, the responsibility of understanding, expressing and portraying ourselves ... that will always be ours.

- 8 *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, by Henry Handel Richardson, first published 1930, quotation from 1954 edition, The Reprint Society, London
- 9 *Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow* by M. Barnard Eldershaw, first published 1947, quotation from 1984 edition by Doubleday & Company, New York
- 10 *Man of Letters*, by Glen Tomasetti, McPhee Gribble, Melbourne, 1981
- 11 'Home Time', from *Home Time*, by Beverley Farmer, McPhee Gribble, Melbourne, 1985
- 12 *The Eye of the Storm*, by Patrick White, Jonathan Cape, London, 1973
- 13 *Eucalyptus*, by Murray Bail, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 1998
- 14 *Dark Palace*, by Frank Moorhouse, Random House, Sydney, 2000
- 15 *The Pea-Pickers*, by Eve Langley, Angus & Robertson, Australia, 1942
- 16 *The Middle Parts of Fortune*, by Frederic Manning, Peter Davies, London, 1977

OZTRALIA

The name of our country derives from the Latin *australis* meaning ‘southern’ or ‘belonging to the south’; hence Australia, a name conferred by people from the north. The history of this land has been one of allegiance to the British Empire, first, and more recently to America as it’s become the world’s dominant power. Proud as Australians may be of their country, the name it possesses hints at those habits of subservience which are part of its character. There has long been another strand, however, of those wanting their land to be better than its sources, in particular, those expressing the ideas, feelings, intuitions and passionately held values which have risen here. The essays in this book deal with the Australian land, the responses to it of the black civilisation, the ways of those who came later, but most of all with its writers, giving the land a voice of its own, the sounds of its most deeply felt expression.

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