A Failed Vision: Realist Writers' Groups in Australia, 1945-65: the case of Overland.

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In the early 1950s, Frank Hardy, then probably Australia's best known Communist writer, wrote a letter to the Party's newspaper, Tribune, complaining that the paper's contents and political commentary did not reflect the actual interests of the workers. To remedy this, he suggested that worker correspondent should be appointed in each workplace to write reports of what they and their fellows were actually doing and discussing. Those correspondents who developed an interest in writing should be encouraged to join Realist Writers' Groups which would nurture their talents, and a national journal could then be established to publish the best of their work. Finally, a publishing co-operative would give them the opportunity to bring their work directly to the audience of their fellow-workers. Thus the Party would build up a network of readers and writers through whom a whole alternative culture might be developed as a prelude to revolution. The vision is as generous as, with hindsight, it appears romantic and doomed to failure. But the failure was not necessarily predetermined, and in seeking the reasons which led to it we may find lessons applicable to other attempts to challenge dominant cultural and political systems.

The most immediate and tangible results of Hardy's ideas and of the corresponding development of Realist Writers' Groups were the establishment of the literary journal Overland the publishing co-operative, the Australasian Book Society with which for some years it remained associated. Yet, despite their success in finding an audience for left-wing writers and views, neither Overland nor the ABS ever became more than one more voice in the increasingly discordant chorus of the left. To the extent that each overcame the circumstances of its origins it was because it learned to speak to a public of wider interests but narrower social composition than the audience is sought. Overland in particular thus became the voice of socialist conscience and dissent rather than of revolutionary fervour, and within two years of its foundation its assumption that Australia's creative intellectual tradition was by nature radical was challenged from the right by the foundation of Quadrant, dedicated to orthodox values in both culture and society.

Although Quadrant can be viewed as a manifestation of the conservative reaction to postwar radicalism, I believe it is more useful to consider both Overland and Quadrant as Australian products of the Cold War. Their styles from the beginning were as different as their politics. Overland embodied the wartime and postwar optimism which now felt itself embattled against a new, or renewed, force of conservatism. It was consciously populist, representing both the idea of a broad front on the left and the convinction of the editor, Stephen Murray-Smith, that, as

he later expressed it, "there was no reason whatsoever why 'ordinary people' should not enjoy such writing and participate in it".[1] This implied both the pluralist belief that there were many standards and traditions, and the nationalist assumption that Australian readers might gain their greatest pleasure from writing dealing with subjects close to their experience. The mere assertion of this principle, implied in the motto "Temper democratic, bias Australian" which the journal adapted from Joseph Furphy, was an important political act in the climate of the 1950s. Quadrant, on the other hand, had a better sense of this climate in its assertion of the right to cultural freedom against the demands of totalitarian systems, which was reflected in its proclamation of its intention to publish fiction, poetry and criticism which respected traditional forms.[2] While Overland's populism, expressed incidentally in the quite conventional forms of the verse and fiction it actually published, aligned it with the already declining classes of largely self-educated workers in traditional industries, and the left intellectuals who were romantically attracted to similar values, Quadrant's policies expressed the values of the newly emerging class of university educated professionals who managed the industrial and mining expansion of the fifties and sixties. Their outlook was conservative but individualist, and they looked to international rather than local traditions for their models, whether of artistic excellence or of economic merit. Yet the immediate challenge to Overland did not come from this direction, but from its own ranks.

To understand the difficulty, and eventual failure, of Overland to become the voice of a broad front on the left we need to look

closely at the circumstances of its origin. Many of the people associated with it brought to it an idealism or optimism which had been nurtured during the war and represented a determination, which was to dominate much domestic politics on the left at least until Arthur Calwell retired as Leader of the Opposition in 1967, that the misery of the Depression must never again be allowed to blight the life of Australia. The need for a new start was expressed even among conservatives in the emergence from their warring factions of the aptly misnamed Liberal Party. The postwar policies of the Labor government, included an economy controlled through nationalised banks, an industrial base built in the process of postwar construction, and a blanket of social security and health services, were designed to ensure family welfare and full employment though national development. On the further left, however, it was felt that the horrors of the Depression were a necessary feature of capitalism, and could be avoided only by the revolutionary transformation of the economy and the establishment of a communist society. The Communist Party of Australia was the vehicle for this activity, and acquired during the immediate postwar years its greatest size and unity ever. [3]

Members of the Party unequestioningly accepted the Soviet Union, exalted by the wartime resistance of its peoples to the German invaders, as leader along the path to world communism, and took from the Soviet Communist Party the form of democratic centralism as the basis of organization. This form took the principle of

maximum discussion followed by maximum unity into a means of complete orthodoxy of thought. The leaders received the correct interpretation of world events from Moscow and disseminated them through the ranks to apply them to the analysis of particular situation and the determination of proper action. This concept of a working class movement was to come in direct conflict with Overland principle of democracy.

At the time of its foundation, however, Overland was conceived as a way of uniting readers and progressive writers in defence of the general principles of socialism which had inspired the postwar years but now seemed in danger of being submerged in the rigidities and fears of the Cold War and the dull conformism of what Murray-Smith was to term "the seemingly endless horrors of the Ming dynasty."[4] The virulent fear of Communism had been expressed in the attempts of the Menzies government to ban the Communist Party, and all who might be declared by executive action as its supporters. The Act implementing this ban was found unconstitutional, and the subsequent enabling referendum narrowly lost. Meanwhile, Frank Hardy had been prosecuted in the State of Victoria for obscene libel as a consequence of the publication of his novel Power Without Glory (Melbourne, 1950). The campaigns over these two issues united Communist Party members and sympathisers, trade unionists, writers and the more radical or liberal-minded members of the Labor Party in defence of the simple rights of freedom of speech and assembly. Hardy, to the dismay of his counsel, turned his legal defence into a political campaign, addressing meetings in homes and workplaces across the state, linking the political and cultural issues, and

selling copies of his book.[5] In the unity engendered by these struggles the hopes of the postwar years seemed to be reborn, and the role of the Communist Party itself in breaching that unity and through its own divisiveness and intransigence helping to bring down the Labor government was forgotten.[6]

Hardy had been encouraged in his writings by George Seelaf, secretary of the Butchers' Union, who had found him a position on the union journal and had published his stories in its pages. This experience, the success of his campaign against the libel charge, and the reception of his novel by workers and unionists, led him to his grand conception of an alternative network of writing and publishing which would generate an independent working class culture.[7] In this conception lay not only the origins of Overland and of the Australasian Book Society, but also the conflicts in which they were both to be involved, and which would eventually bring about the demise of the society. The heart of the problem lay in the Realist Writers' Groups themselves, for the means they employed to promote individual development was rigorous criticism of any deviation from the received ideology.

The Melbourne Realist Writers' Group, funded after the war, included Frank Hardy, John Morrison, David Martin, Lawrence Collinson, Ken Gott, Stephen Murray-Smith and others who have remained associated with Overland. In March 1952 it published the first issue of a duplicated journal called the Realist Writer, edited for two issues by Bill Wannan and then for another

seven by Stephen Murray-Smith. What happened then is unclear. According to Frank Hardy, the Realist Writers' Group itself initiated Overland and appointed Murray-Smith "to edit the journal", which was "intended to express and publicise the ideas and work of progressive cultural group . . . emphasize discovery and encouragement of new working class writers and publication of established progressive writers .... [and] to have a left-wing, working class standpoint, a militant policy on political and cultural questions and a clear working class tone of voice."[9] According to Murray-Smith, Judah Waten had offered him fifteen pounds to turn the Realist Writer into a printed magazine, and he had gone a head on that basis and "presumably with the agreement of the Realist Writers' Group".[10]

The Realist Writer was, as Murray-Smith has commented, "essentially an in-house bulletin for members of the Realist Writers' Group". As such, although it published writing by a distinguished group of contributors, its function was to allow members to see each others' work, to publish polemic which would strengthen their common commitment to peace and socialism, and to share information with members. It was, in other words, a means of training writers to express themselves and of mobilising them for political activity. Writing was that part of this activity which raised working class consciousness.

Some of this tone continued into the early issues of Overland. The first 12-page issue included contributions from such associates of the Realist Writers' Group as John Morrison, John Manifold, Katherine Susannah Prichard, David Martin, Elizabeth Vassilieff and Eric Lambert, but it also included contributions from other figures on the left, including a strong attack by Brian Fitzpatrick on censorship of ideas in the name of anticommunism, and a piece from the old Wobbly Senator Don Cameron. The next issue commemorated the rising at the Eureka stockade with H.V. Evatt's introduction to Raffaelo Carboni's book, and later issues continued the realist tradition with work by the balladist Edward Harrington, fiction by John Morrison, David Martin and David Forrest, poetry by Vic Williams and Dorothy Hewitt. The editor's column, 'Swag', with its notes and comments on whatever took his interest, but addressed directly to the readers of the journal, and the column of brief contributions from readers, 'Smoko', both helped to create a community of interest between the journal and its readers and writers. This community however differed essentially from the Realist Writers' Group in that it assumed only the broad interests implied by the motto "temper democratic, bias Australian", and neither assumed nor demanded commitment to any particular interpretation of these terms nor any single form of action to realize them. There was, to use more recent jargon, no hidden agenda. The journal from the first valued ideas and debate for their own sake, judging them according to the interest they held for an ordinary Australian reader rather than for the contribution they might make to some ultimate end. This ensured

that Overland, at least in its early years, retained its working class and Australian tone, but at the same time it opened it to a range of perceptions of value and experience which went beyond what would be considered important by any single group. This was the core of the disagreement between its editor Stephen Murray-smith, and the Realist Writers' Groups from which it had sprung.

Neither in their journals nor in their meetings did the Realist Writers' Groups engage in theoretical discussion, but behind their work was the assumption that the role of the intellectual is to formulate a more precise analysis of the manifestations of class conflict in world affairs, and that the task of the creative writer is to rouse workers to an understanding of their role in the historically inevitable overthrow of capitalism. Individual work was judged 'objectively' on the basis of whether or not it contributed to this purpose. Thus Power Without Glory was good because it exposed the corruption of bourgeois democracy and the complicitly of the Labor Party, whereas the work of Patrick White or modernist poets was bad because it diverted the attention of the reader from the realities of class to the illusions of metaphysics and the inner life. The further complaint was that the symbolism was inacccessible to the ordinary person and thus served only to conceal social truth.

These worries surface in the reaction of the Sydney Realist Writers' Group to the first issue of Overland.[12] Members of the group were generally delighted with its appearance, and excited by the idea that they at last had a journal which could bring socialist realist writing to a wider audience, particularly among members of trade unions, and immediately took steps to distribute and sell it around Sydney. They saw the journal very much, however, as an integral part rather than a complement of their total program. They used each issue as a basis for discussion in their meetings, they passed on their criticisms to the editorial board, and they expected that their members would find publication in its pages. From the first issue, therefore, they were disturbed to find work from writers who were not only not sympathetic to their aims, but who produced work which, considered 'objectively', was hostile to them. In particular, they took offence at an exchange between David Martin and A.D. Hope which was published in this issue. Hope had published in the Canberra Times a dismissive review of a book of Martin's poems. Martin had responsed:

> You love to play God,
> To toy or to praise,
> To brandish your rod
> To destroy and to raise.
> But the Lord took the dust,
> And make it a man,
> While you earn your crust
> By the opposite plan.

Hope's reply was geni enough, beginning "Dear Martin, you have scored a it . . ."j, and both writers were content to have their verses published in Overland. There was however strong objection amongst the Sydney realists to giving any space or attention to such a 'reactionary' as Hope. Unlike Murray-Smith, they were not concerned to provide a forum where workers, or indeed any ordinary Australian, could speak of their own experience. Their ideological certainty allowed them to value only writing which would reinforce their orthodoxy.

The disagreement over the purposes of the magazine inevitably became a conflict over management and control. The first editorial board, which the Realist Writers' Group believed it had appointed, consisted of Stephen Murray-Smith as editor, and Eric Lambert, Jack Coffey, Ian Turner and Ralph de Boissiere from Victoria, Joan Clarke and Len Fox from New South Wales, John Manifold from Queensland, Joan Williams from Western Australia and Brian Fox from New Zealand. Murray-Smith used the members of this board as assistants and advisers, but several members, particularly Jack Coffey, believed that the whole board was responsible for the magazine and that they should therefore all see all the material submitted to the journal and that all decisions, and in particular those about the content of each issue, should be taken on the basis of a vote by the whole board. It may be noted in passing that this would have been completely impracticable once the magazine became established, when the sheer volume of work made delegation necessary, but the immediate issue was about the nature of the magazine rather than about the

practical details of its production. The distinction was between control by a committee which would guarantee orthodoxy and by a single editor who, by taking personal responsibility, could use his own judgement to keep the magazine open to all voices, leaving final judgements of value to be made by the readers. Control by committee, whether of an academic, a political or a literary journal, will guarantee its adherence to the standards and values of a particular reference group, but I would suggest that only the individual editor can ensure the novelty and dissenting criticism which alone can maintain intellectual and creative life.

The editorial board continued, despite these disuputes, in much the same form for the first eight issues. Ralph de Boisiere withdrew, and several additional members were added, including Frank Hardy, and in issue number 7, autumn-winter 1956, Jack Coffey, Ian Turner and John Manifold were named as Assistant Editors. Then, in issue number 9, summer 1956-57, only the name of the editor, S. Murray-Smith, appears on the masthead. Ian Turner was expelled from the Communist Party in 1958, whereupon Murray-Smith resigned. This marked the final breach between Overland and its former allies - the Communist Party and the Australasian Book Society and Realist Writers' Groups, which the Party continued to dominate. Murray-Smith's name appears alone on the masthead until issue no. 18, winter-spring 1960, when the names of four interstate advisory editors are added. They include Ian Turner, by then in Canberra. It was only after Turner's return to Melbourne in 1964 that the present system of a number of advisory or associate editors in Melbourne started to evolve.[13]

The conflict with the Communist Party originated in the events of 1956, when Khruschchev's revelations about Stalin and the risings in Hungary, followed by a Soviet invasion, undermined trust both in the domestic achievements of the Soviet Union and in its peaceloving foreign policy. The Communist Party of Australia at first denied the existence of Khrushchev's report, and attempted to suppress internal discussion of any of the issues. On behalf of the Peace Council, Murray-Smith visited Berlin, Prague, Moscow and Peking in 1957 and returned with evidence of "repression, dishonesty and sadism". The party refused to accept his findings, and relations with the Realist Writers became more strained. Jack Coffey had called a meeting of the editorial board at which Murray-Smith, in his absence, was reproved for failing to observe proper democratic procedures and was replaced as editor by Coffey, but in a night raid Murray-Smith and Turner removed the Overland cards from the Australasian Book Society office where they had been kept and thus retained control of the journal, which Murray-Smith claims kept the support of every significant writer in Victoria except Judah Waten.

At the time of his breach Overland had become a valuable piece of intellectual property, even if its finances remained exiguous. The support of individuals and organisations connected with the party had enabled it to achieve from the start quite large sales by the standards of Australian literary magazines. One thousand issues of the first were printed, and most of them sold through Party bookshops, Realist Writers' Groups and Trade Unions. In January 1955 Murray-Smith wrote that there were now 53 subscribers in NSW, only 9 of them in

Sydney, and 109 in Victoria. The cover price was 1/-, and the Pioneer Bookshop had sold 60 out of 100 copies received, John Morrison had sold 150, and Joan Clarke owed Overland 3/5/-, "which we can ill afford not to have sent to us". Sums of this order remained a continuing concern throughout these early years, but the magazine continued to increase its sales. In September 1955 editorial board members were told in a circular that an initial printing of 2500 copies of the last issue (number 4) had been followed by a further printing of 1800, that there had been a good response to advertisements in the Age and the Sydney Morning Herald, and that only 500 copies remained to be sold. Subscriptions were now half way to the target of 500. Frank Hardy had sold 1700 copies, but later correspondence suggests that he may have been tardy in forwarding the proceeds to the editorial office. This circular also reported the magazine's first application to the Commonwealth Literary Fund for a subsidy, and Murray-Smith's optimism that as the journal fitted the requirements he was confident that they would receive 50 or 100 a year. It was in fact not to be until 1963 that it received its first grant. By number 8 the print run was 4200, and subscriptions of 1243, of which 456 were in Victoria, 277 in NSW and 203 in Queensland. The Australasian Book Society, which employed Ian Turner and included Overland in its membership subscription, provided 619 of these subscriptions, a figure which had risen by 1958, the year of the break, to 1400. At this time the accumulated debt had risen to 400.[15]

The break with the Party thus gave Overland independence at the cost of valuable support in the form of sales and subscriptions, which by then had risen to 5/- a year - "Australia's best five bob's worth", as the advertisements put it. However, it would appear that Murray-Smith had anticipated this break when he dropped the names of members of the editorial board from the masthead in 1956, and the Sydney Realist Writers' Group had already established its own journal, again called The Realist Writer, in June 1958. Henceforth, the two groups would go their own way, although writers like John Morrison continued to give support to both.

The first issues of the Sydney Realist Writer were duplicated but stapled to give the format of a magazine rather than a news letter. The editor was Frank Hardy, assisted by a board including Jane Tabberer, Mick Staples, Betty Collins and Vera Deacon, who was also Treasurer of the Realist Writers' Group. The activities of the Group were thoroughly integrated with the production and editing of the journal, which was run in the way that members of the group believed Overland should have been managed. The consequence was that an enormous amount of energy went into ideological debate, self-criticism and organisation, and, as with Overland, into the conduct of social functions to rally support. The ambitions of the group however constantly outran its performance. In 1961 the journal announced the formation of a National Council of Realist Writers, and from the second issue of that year the it sought a national audience, but it does not appear that its circulation over rose beyond a few hundred. At the only national conference recorded in the Hardy papers, the interstate delegates seem to have been representing

mainly themselves, and apart from Hardy himself, who already had an established reputation, the only significant writer to emerge from the Sydney realists seems to have been Roger Milliss, who contributed a few poems from Wagga Teachers College, where he was then lecturing. His autobiographical novel, Serpents Tooth, is a remarkable record of the enthusiams of the movement which produced the Realist Writers' Groups, but neither its literary style, a breathlessly subjective expression of reality, nor its outlook would be likely to appeal to the ideology of social realism. Like the papers of the Realist Groups themselves, his work records the enormous enthusiasm and sweeping vision that the Party inspired, but it also shows how this enthusiasm itself prevented them perceiving the reality they believed they knew, so that instead they imposed on it their own delusions. [16] It is appropriate that the opening chapters of Milliss's novel should have been first published in Overland. [17]

Overland's break with the Party enabled it to engage in the debates about the issues which divided people, rather than attempting to impose solutions. This exaberated the divisions with the Party when, in issue number 14, 1959, Murray-Smith published two views of Boris Pasternak's Dr Zhivago. Katharine Susannah Prichard takes the orthodox line that Pasternak has failed to appreciate the significance of the Revolution, and "prefers the religious maundering of a superstitious girl to Marxism which gave a practical basis, and direction of triumph, to the revolution". She defends the decision of the Russian authorities not to publish the novel because they seek not to make profit but to "improve the standards of readers, to interest, delight and educate", and the people's money should

not be used to "pay for the publication of books which betray their interests, disregard their achievements, and vilify the revolutionary struggle ..." Maurice Shadbolt, on the other hand, argues that the work "enlarges our view of all human life and endeavour", and is the work of an author "committee not to any specific version of political thought; but to humanity, in the vast sense ..." It was this suggestion, implicit in the decision to publish two reviews and explicit in Shadbolt's words, which drew on Overland and its editor the wrath of the Party. Rex Chiplin attached the whole issue in the Tribune of May 13, reaching the conclusion that the journal had become "a shackle on the Labor Movement". Katharine Prichard dissociated herself from this attack in a later issue of Tribune, but Frank Hardy extended it in a long letter in which he claimed that Murray-Smith had betrayed everyone who had worked for Overland, and that the only way it could now become "broader, more democratic, more popular and more Australian" would be for him to restore it to the Realist Writers' Groups or to the control of joint editors and an editorial board. Ralph de Boisiere, in the paper of the Victorian branch of the Party, the Guardian, came to the nub of the matter when he asked rhetorically, "Can one arrive at the facts about Pasternak by presenting the reader with two opposing views about the novel Zhivago?" This conception that there could be only one view of reality, based on the assumption that the Party embodies "the leading role of the working class" and alone can speak for it, as Hardy implies, was responsible for separating the Communist Party and the writers' groups it sponsored from any real understanding of reality as the ordinary Australian perceived and experienced it.

In fact, a glance through the issues of Overland journal in the ten years after the break will show how the journal continued its commitment not only to political debate but to a broad range of realist writing and to the Australian tradition. John Morrison, who believed that all his writing furthered to the cause of the working class but refused to accept the direction of the Party about either the subject or the style of his writing, extended his range from observations of life on the commuter's train to stories of the way people harden themselves against circumstance until they contribute to the same conditions that destroy them. David Martin and June Factor examined the twisting loyalties demanded of migrants. Kay Brown, Jack Highett, Merv Lilley and others wrote stories of work. Peter Mathers revealed the surrealistic actuality of a modern society too complex to be understood either by ideology or the bureaucracy that nevertheless controls it. Frank Moorhouse, in 1964, links sex, class and politics in a story which anticipates the understanding of a country town that he was to show at length in his full-length The Electric Light Experience. Alongside these, Patrick White's 'Clay' explores a subjective and finally mystifying aspect of experience, and a continuing series of reportage develops a specifically Overland genre of realism, combining commitment with detachment.

Yet, despite its continuing adherence to an optimistic view of humanity and to an Australian tradition of humour and tolerance, and although it is difficult to find any style of writing or subject of debate which is not represented in its pages, Overland during these years continued to lose circulation. It may be that in casting off the certainties of the old left it became too

eclectic for a world which continues to prefer the certainties of ideology, particularly if expressed in the barbaric jargon preferred by new right and new left alike. The liberal humanism towards which Overland drifted lacks a constituency in a corporate age, where it no longer reflects any particular class interest. While the old realists lost touch, and the new pragmatists found it, Overland remained too broadly enquiring, its editor too disturbingly idiosyncratic, to catch a fashion. As David Carter has complained, it sought a position on the broad left but failed to find any sure theoretical position. Yet it may just be that what it has found is the variety of human truths which give voice in Australia.

1. Stephen Murray-Smith, Indirections: a literary autobiography, Townsville, 1981, p.31.

2. See Editorial in Quadrant, vol.1, no.1, and Introduction Peter Coleman (ed.), Twenty-Five Years of Quadrant, St Lucia, 1984.

3. John Sendy (former CPA official), 'The literacy quarterly Overland: foundation, history, significance', unpublished essay for Deakin University, 1985, p. 2. Sendy quotes membership figures of 25,000 at the end of the war, declining to about 8,000 by 1950-51. ABS obtained an early membership of 3,000. Murray-Smith, op.cit., p.54, states that Overland reached a peak circulation of just over 4,000 in 1955.

4. 'Swag', Overland.

5. For Hardy's account of the campaign, see The Hard Way, Melbourne, 1961.

6. The role and ambitions of the CPA in the 1949 Miners' strike have yet to be documented. I have been told in interviews with people who were CPA members at the time that the intent was to reveal the ALP through its actions against the strikers as enemies of the working class, who would then turn to the CPA and institute the revolution.

7. Frank Hardy papers, National Library of Australia, series 23, xx 4887.

8. For the functioning of the RWGs, and their relationship to Overland, see Hardy papers. loc.cit.

9. Frank Hardy, letter to Tribune, 10 June 1959, p.7.

10. Murray-Smith, op.cit., p.30.

11. Ibid., loc.cit.

12. The Hardy papers contain minutes and correspondence of the Sydney Realist Writers' Group only. These report similar reactions from groups in Brisbane and Melbourne, and copies of their letters, but the weight of opinion is naturally from Sydney.

13. Names of editors and members of the editorial board are taken from mastheads of successive issues of Overland.

14. Details of this breach are taken from Sendy, op.cit., pp. 8-9; Murray-Smith, op.cit., pp. 36-39 - quotation from p. 36; and from copy of Jack Coffey's statement in Hardy papers.

15. Letter from S. Murray-Smith to Frank Hardy, 12.1.55; circular from editor to editorial board members, 13.9.55; editorial circulars dated 1956 and 29 April 1958, all contained in Hardy papers.

16. Based on incomplete file of The Realist Writer in Hardy papers and on correspondence of the RWG and the editorial committee, also in Hardy papers.

17. Roger Milliss, Serpent's Tooth, Ringwood, 1982 ? 18. Letter in Hardy papers.