MCLAREN - BOXB18-DOC2

Fear and Loathing in the South China Seas: the challenge of nationalism in Australia and Southeast Asia

John McLaren - Valedictory lecture, 1997

As I wrote the words for this lecture, and possibly now as I speak them, the smoke of forest fires is blanketing great parts of Indonesia, Brunei, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand. These fires, scarcely reported in our press and even less internationally, hav already been responsible for the crash of an airliner and the deaths of its passengers, and for uncounted cases of discomfort, illness and death among the citizens of the affected areas. They will also have added measurably to the atmospheric greenhouse effects that our present, and hopefully temporary, federal government prefers to ignore. They symbolize the twentieth century as aptly as the Holocaust, the atom bomb or the Berlin Wall. They are the direct product of the greed and corruption that characterize the new world order that has arisen from the shards of colonialism. The nation states that have arisen in this order either remain clients of imperial governments and transnational companies, or have descended into anarchy. In both cases, their ruling elites hold power by appealing to national traditions while serving personal ambitions. In Asia, the ideology devised to protect their power is ~~known~~ misrepresented as traditional Asian values.

In Australia, The history of white settlement ~~in Australia~~ has been characterized not so much by drama as by harshness and disappointment. When seen through the eyes of the settlers, it is also a tale of remarkable endurance and achievement, although these are shaded by the price paid. The settlement of the land has been accompanied by the degradation and destruction of the environment. The degree of tolerance and collective identity we have reached depends on an ironic secularism that when threatened can easily give way to prejudice and bitter racism. Generations of immigrants and visitors from Asia, beginning with the Chinese in the 1830s, have been victims of this intolerance, which has also extended to later waves of immigrants from Europe. The greatest victims have, however, been the Aborigines, whose treatment we are only now beginning to recognize. From their point of view, the history of white settlement has been one of dispossession, betrayal and brutality.

Allan Patience had discerned in Australia's history a "hard culture", characterized by masculinity and secularism, and a consequent brutality towards the land and to any people perceived as different. This culture, hostile to things of the mind and spirit, has made difficult the work of writers who have sought to take imaginative possession of the land through their words. Marcus Clarke portrayed the beginnings of a new society closed by the physical and mental barbarity of the convict system; Henry Lawson and Barbara Baynton wrote of people driven into exile or madness by the harshness of the land; Henry Handel Richardson dissected the repressions of a society that, caught in a cycle of boom and bust produced by its own destructive energies, paid no heed to the gentler virtues of home and nurture. John Docker has described this view of Australian literary history as "the gloom thesis", which may be related to what the present Prime Minister has called "black armband" history. Harry Heseltine more analytically suggests that the Australian writer has been trapped by "the tyranny of an uncertain self" that arises from a the historical predicament of being "Thrust as it were into a cultural vacuum, without the support of a sanctioned tradition, [so that] his central task became one of authenticating his own uncertain self in an unfamiliar world." Heseltine argues that recent Australian writers, particularly Patrick White, have been able to escape this tyranny and "make of the divided self the subject and support of a complex, sophisticated and penetrating art."[1] However this may be in relation to ~~the~~ their art, it is my contention that the work of our writers continues to show a society divided from its own past and so incapable of relating either to its neighbours or to its own inner being. I would describe this not so much as a hard culture as a fearful culture, frightened of itself and of others.

The novels of Henry Handel Richardson, Xavier Herbert and Brian Penton, in particular, portray a culture that, by denying the possibilities of gentleness and harmony, is perpetually exiled from its own land. More recent illustrations of this denial can be found in the work of such writers as Tim Winton, James McQueen and David Ireland. In ~~all of their~~ writings, the masculine drive to dominate destroys the possibility of belonging, which requires the feminine capacity for making a home. McQueen, in Hook's Mountain, takes as his hero the outsider, the loner who eventually can defend the mountain he loves only

[1] Allan Patience, 'Australia's Hard Culture', Australian Studies, 1992; John Docker, In a Critical Condition, Penguin, Ringwood, 1984, pp. 110-40; John Howard, Menzies Lecture 1996, unpublished; Heseltine, The Uncertain Self: essays in Australian literature and criticism, OUP, Melbourne, 1986, pp. 1-21.

by taking to the bush with the weapons of the people who would destroy it. Winton writes of heroes who eventually learn to surrender their violence to women, children or religion, represented frequently by the element of the ocean waters which dissolves their individuality. Ireland most memorably and unforgivingly describes the culture of brutality in The Glass Canoe, where life revolves around the Southern Cross, the pub that provides refuge for the urban tribes that live around it. In the chapter 'My People', the narrator draws an explicit parallel between these lives and the story of human kind:

> First they were boys, primitive hunters of fruit and adventure . . .
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> Teenaged, they became apprenticed to learn the pastoral world of snorting, grunting, purring machines, . . . and grew among the flocks . . . of workers whose labour and lives were farmed by the powerful . . . The horizon had shrunk.
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> A few years more and a job displaced them, now part of the adults' herd, to the refinement of the factory-city. . . amongst the unattainable riches of civilisation . . . The horizon was work, pub, races. (p. 11)

But the mateship of the bar uneasily contains the violence suppressed by the exigencies of work. The schooner of beer, the 'glass canoe' of the title, does not take its passengers away from the frustrations of their lives. Pub disputes are customarily settled by fists, boots or weapons, the chronicler of pub life is disposed of in a barrel, and the pub itself is eventually destroyed in a fight with the tribe from a neighbouring pub. As an image of Australia, the illusory freedom of the pub proves to be a prison that suppresses the instincts it promises to nurture. Its confines breed distrust of outsiders and of any insiders perceived as different. As an image of modernism, the novel shows the tribes still dispossessed of their lands by the forces that promised liberation.

Australian writing does however have gentler images of settlement and its promises fulfilled. Alan Marshall's autobiography, I Can Jump Puddles, stands as a celebration not only of a boy's triumph over polio but as a realization of the companionate possibilities of a country town. In the later stories, collected in Hammers over the Anvil, Marshall returns to the time and place of his youth to reveal the underside of rural life, the violence and bigotry that ruptures the dream of harmony. Yet he still shows these elements of life through the eyes of a childhood narrator and his friend, who bring to the events an understanding and tolerance that shown by any of the adults. This childhood perspective - so different from the egotistic anarchy of Norman Lindsay's juveniles - suggests that the boys, not the adults, hold a truth about Australian society that cannot be suppressed by the shortcomings of individuals. Yet, unwittingly, this also suggests that Australian culture remains in a state of immaturity, rejecting evil as something external and individual, able contaminate others but not ourselves. This applies also to the work of Marshall's friend and contemporary, John Morrison, whose stories of work on the waterfront and in the suburbs show evil in the form of both class and family oppression, and portray the terror as well as the comfort of solidarity. Morrison finds strength in compassion, whether for a child, a fellow worker or a domestic partner. Its lack distorts the personality, driving the individual, male or female, outside the bounds of society. Although Morrison shows how these distortions reflect and produce a society divided by class and domestic power, he does not portray the inwardly divided individual. Evil remains external, a product of an oppressive system and malignant individuals, not a collective responsibility.

Although Australian poets have similarly tempered the story of a harsh country with visions of harmony and fulfilment. David Campbell's poetry embodies the relaxed sprawl of a man completely at home in the countryside. Judith Wright achieves a deeply spiritual relationship to land and nature. Les Murray finds in the bush a quality that heals the divisions of settlement and the alienation of the cities. Yet these visions are, in each case, shadowed by irresolution, by a failure at the heart of the intimacy. Campbell tends to dissolve suffering, by both blacks and whites, in a cycle of love and death that stretches back to classical mythology. Murray, despite his celebration of a bond with the land that is shared by both settlers and blacks, linked by what he calls "the human-hair thread", betrays in his most ambitious work an uneasiness about the strength of this bond. His verse-novel, 'The Boys Who Stole the funeral', starts in the relaxed style of folk lore, but finishes with the white boys having to undergo weird blood-rites at the hands of a gothic Aboriginal spirit before they can claim their share in the land. But it is most Wright who, from her early 'Bora Ring, has been aware of the Aboriginal absence from the white story.

This recognition deepens in Wright's later work to the realisation that the absence is not only from the landscape, but from the settlers themselves. Like Campbell, Wright is descended from the pioneering generations whose lives provide the source for Franklin's and Penton's fiction. The change in her understanding is dramatised in the distinction between the two prose works that deal with these forebears. The first, Generations of Men, is an affectionate story of their coming of this land, and of the struggle,

particularly by the women, it took to make it their own. The second, published 22 years later, puts the Aborigines in the story, so changing it from an heroic epic of endurance to a tragic tale of dispossession, brutality and bloodshed. The land hunger of the new settlers led them, with a few notable exceptions, to exclude Aborigines from their newly seized runs. Driven by fear, they forced the government to recruit a force of Native Police, who in turn joined with the squatters in both retaliatory and pre-emptive killings of the Aborigines. The Aborigines, forbidden to gather for ceremonial or social purposes, excluded from their lands and often deprived of the weapons they needed to hunt for game in the scrubs that remained to them, fought back, adding to the squatters' fears. The story is both common and sadly familiar, but Wright identifies its central element as the refusal of the whites to recognize the Aborigines as humans who would respond in the same way as any others to being deprived of all they had known and cherished. As one of the persecutors, the Crown Commissioner William Wiseman, wrote, " not even the savage of Australia was 'so utterly devoid of courage and pride as to yield without a struggle that country . . . on which he is used to obtain his food, and to which he is undoubtedly attached.'" (p. 85) These words were not, however, intended to arouse compassion, but as a warning to settlers who did not accept that to treat the Aborigines with kindness was to be the first to suffer from pillage.

For Wright, the refusal to acknowledge the humanity of the Aborigines is one with the settlers' ignorance of the land they exploited. Both have led to destruction, and consequently to an alienation of the settlers from the land, an inability to put down roots. Yet in her ~~more recent~~ poetry she has found a way forward based on an acceptance of the past and a yielding to the landscape, rather than on an attempt to impose our desires on either. In her 1985 sequence, 'For a Pastoral Family', she sees both the persistence and the failure of her family's endeavours. It is written in love, as she writes of

> Blue early mist in the valley. Apricots
> bowing the orchard-trees, flushed red with summer,
> loading bronze-plaqued branches;
> our teeth in those sweet buttock-curves . . .
> . . .
> it was well, being young and simple,
> letting the horses canter home together.

~~But~~ This affection is complicated by her awareness of the ironies of a history that builds contentment on violence and then dispossesses the dispossessors. The opening to this sequence compounds the pleasures of the present with the blindness to the circumstances of their foundation and the bewilderment of the successors of the pioneers to their own dispossession:

> Well, there are luxuries still,
> including pastoral silence, miles of slope and hill,
> the cautious politeness of bankers. These are owed
> to the forerunners, men and women
> who took over as by right a century and a half
> in an ancient difficult bush. And after all,
> the previous owners put up little fight,
> did not believe in ownership, and so were scarcely human.
> (Selected Poems, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1990, p. 226.)

The century and a half of occupation would be little enough against the timeless stretch of the "ancient" bush, were it not for that further adjective, "difficult". Something, the poem suggests, is due to those who endured such difficulty to make the land serve their purpose. Yet the final lines of the stanza, written at the same period that the author was chronicling the terrible record of the resistance and dispossession of the Aborigines, serve also as a judgement on a nation that, by refusing to acknowledge the cost of its achievements, fails to recognize the humanity of those on whose blood these achievements were built. Instead of legitimate possession of the land, we are left with a polite avoidance of the truth of both history and human nature. As Wright comments on her family at prayer,

> That God approved was obvious,
> Most of our ventures were prosperous.
> As for Dies Irae

we would deal with that when we came to it.

(p. 228)

A complacent decency blinds us to both the inner and the external forces of destruction. Wright herself finds comfort in the oppositions of a landscape that heals and language that connects.

> This place's quality is not its former nature
> but a struggle to heal itself after many wounds.
>
> . . .
>
> In a burned out summer, I try to see without words
> as they do. But I live through a web of language.
> ('The Shadow of Fire', p. 236.)

Through language, which for Wright includes science and history as well as poetry, we can comprehend the truth and mystery of the world we inhabit, and so become fully human. A trust in language can lead us to the realization expressed in the closing line of this sequence, that "We are all of us born of fire, possessed by darkness." As a corollary, a failure to trust language, the attempt to avoid the discomfiting facts of our lives, can only lead to ~~what~~ Coleridge's ~~described in his~~ nightmare apparition of Life-in-Death.

Although Bernard Smith has shown us how ~~Coleridge~~'s "~~Rime of the Ancient Mariner~~" was derived in part from accounts of Cook's voyages to the Pacific, there is no reason to believe that this image has any direct factual counterpart. It is however significant that it arises in the course of Coleridge's imaginative reconstruction of an incursion by Europeans into a world entirely new to them. The core of the poem is the slaying of the albatross, and the guilt, punishment and expiation of the killer. In its aspect as an episode in the imperial exploitation of new worlds, this can be taken as a metaphor for the process of white settlement in Australia. Judith Wright performs for us the role of the mariner, keeping us from celebrations by reminding us of a guilt in which she acknowledges her own complicity. Until we do likewise, we remain enmired in our guilty past.

Wright closes The Cry for the Dead with an elegy to the people her family displaced, and above whose descendants, still subject to punitive white laws, "the cliffs and ravines of Expedition Ranges perhaps still shelter, in caves and overhangs, the crumbling bones of those who were pursued there more than a century ago, and a few fading and eroding scratches and stains of old stencilled hands and figures may remain as the last memorials of the Wadja and their northern neighbours."(p. 280) This image of ancient signs now deprived of the watchers that gave them meaning also haunts fiction of settlement by Randolph Stow and David Malouf.

In The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea, the boy, Rob, grows up in a quiet country surrounded by war. The signs of this violence ~~are~~ that threatens his family security are, in the present, the Japanese and, from the past, the reminders of the convict labourers who built the house and the Aborigines who were displaced to allow its building. In Malouf's Harland's Half Acre, the children play around a place made haunted by their father's stories, a platform of rock where Aboriginal carvings lie "stranded by time and sun in spare outline". There,

> Stepping back into the lives of those first creators, they would crawl about, retracing the lines with a forefinger, clearing out leaf-grist, pollen, fragments of bark, the husks of dead insects; or would themselves take a knife and scrape, so that figures only vaguely discernible would . . . climb back to the surface and surprise them (p. 23)

But between their play and the past they retrace lies the violent breach that had marked their family's irruption, like that of the Wrights, into this new land. "First, the overland trek from somewhere beyond Tamworth into an unsettled area that was immediately, to the three brothers, so much like home". And, as Malouf comments, "so much like a place they had never laid eyes on but whose lakes and greenness were original in their minds." Then, "Possession was easy. One bloody brief encounter made official with white man's law."(p. 30 The settlers can see only an imagined homeland, in which the Aborigines have no place. The culture derived from Europe can see natives only as noble savages or decadent remnants, who in neither case can play a part in history. Their destruction is therefore as acceptable and lawful as it is inevitable. They must be removed to allow the grand narrative of social progress and individual fulfilment continue.

But, as Malouf shows, physical occupation of the land does not convey either permanency or imaginative possession. In seven line of his narrative, and one generation of his history, the Harlands lose their property and are reduced to day-labourers. The remainder of his narrative tells of how Frank Harland travels through time and space until he is able to paint the canvasses that make a tiny part of the land truly his own. To possess this land he has also, however, to understand the world from which the Europeans came, but from which their descendants have cut themselves off in a denial that parallels their denial of their violence towards the Aborigines. Europe is symbolized in the figure of Knack, the dealer whose music, in which Harland recognizes "something compelling . . . which led to strength and sunlight," also brings the violence of war and suicide. Centrally, however, the repressed violence is symbolized by the dark space beneath the Queensland house,

> where under-the-house was another and always present dimension, a layer of air between lighted rooms and the damp earth: a place of early fears, secrets, childhood experiments, whispers, . . . It was darkness domesticated, a part of local reality, the downside of things. . . that underworld was full of threats. (p. 145)

It is in this place of fear that Harland's nephew Gerald hangs himself, so destroying the possibility that there will be any heir to the family's dreams, but at the same time freeing Harland for his final burst of creativity. To accommodate this urge he has to leave the house, living almost without shelter near the ocean, allowing no barriers to come between him and his painting of the land and his people. He has taken into himself history and place, the knowledge of others in himself, and is able finally to face the truth without despair.

Although this representative family of Australian writing provides evidence of our hard culture, it does not suggest that this is a satisfactory way to characterize the whole of our culture. Nor is the so-called gloom thesis sufficient. There are too many contradictions. Despite the harshness, cheerfulness keeps breaking through. Yet I think it is fair to say that it is a culture of avoidance, a culture that is reluctant to acknowledge evil while still affirming the positive values of human existence. The writers I have discussed, like all artists, face these truths, but their works are peopled with characters who are unable to do so. Like the narrator's Aunt Roo, in Harland's Half Acre, they don't want to know what is wrong, let alone do anything about changing it. "I've told you years ago, pet, those people are no good . . . concerned with nothing but pulling the world down, they're never satisfied. And in a country like this, where we have everything!" (p. 193) In some ways, this is the precise attitude of Judith Wright's relatives, who insist that the "really deplorable deeds / had happened out of our sight, allowing us innocence." (p.226) But, as Jessica Anderson has pointed out, innocence is itself dangerous, destroying what it cannot understand. In a society characterized by the contradictions of "its rawness and weak gentility, its innocence and deep deceptions.," the domestic tyrants, heirs of a hard culture of dominance, are excused, while their victims are condemned for the crime of being different." (Tirra Lirra by the River, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1978, p. 83.) This condemnation, while exalting the kind of family values espoused by John Howard, leads to the assumption that anything important happens elsewhere, and thus perpetuates the notion of Australia as a second-class, derivative society, incapable of managing its own destiny. This leads to the cultural cringe that makes us seek powerful foreign sponsors while refusing to take a stand against our neighbours on any basic human values. Rather than recognizing difference within a common set of values, we follow an imperialist tradition in assigning them to a category of difference that is not subject to the values we wish to see applied to ourselves. Thus the standards we applied to the Aborigines in order to seize their lands become a means of separating us from our neighbourhood and of excluding anyone within our own community who dares to be different.

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As I wrote the words for this lecture, and possibly now as I speak them, the smoke of forest fires is blanketing great parts of Indonesia, Brunei, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand. These fires, scarcely reported in our press and even less internationally, hav already been responsible for the crash of an airliner and the deaths of its passengers, and for uncounted cases of discomfort, illness and death among the citizens of the affected areas. They will also have added measurably to the atmospheric greenhouse effects that our present, and hopefully temporary, federal government prefers to ignore. They symbolize the twentieth century as aptly as the Holocaust, the atom bomb or the Berlin Wall. They are the direct product of the greed and corruption that characterize the new world order that has arisen from the shards of colonialism. The nation states that have arisen in this order either remain clients of imperial governments and transnational companies, or have descended into anarchy. In both cases, their ruling elites hold power by appealing to national traditions while serving personal ambitions. In Asia, the ideology devised to protect their power is misrepresented as traditional Asian values. In Australia, similar rapacity and disregard for the land and its people is cloaked in the rhetoric of a divisive and exclusive nationalism that uses an appeal to a falsified past as a means of generating fear in the present.

White settlement in Australia has been characterized not so much by drama as by harshness and disappointment. When seen through the eyes of the settlers, it is also a tale of remarkable endurance and achievement, although these are shaded by the price paid. The settlement of the land has been accompanied by the degradation and destruction of the environment. The degree of tolerance and collective identity we have reached depends on an ironic secularism that when threatened can easily give way to prejudice and bitter racism. Generations of immigrants and visitors from Asia, beginning with the Chinese in the 1830s, have been victims of this intolerance, which has also extended to later waves of immigrants from Europe. The greatest victims have, however, been the Aborigines, whose treatment we are only now beginning to recognize. From their point of view, the history of white settlement has been one of dispossession, betrayal and brutality.

Allan Patience had discerned in Australia's history a "hard culture", characterized by masculinity and secularism, and a consequent brutality towards the land and to any people perceived as different. This culture, hostile to things of the mind and spirit, has made difficult the work of writers who have sought to take imaginative possession of the land through their words. Marcus Clarke portrayed the beginnings of a new society closed by the physical and mental barbarity of the convict system; Henry Lawson and Barbara Baynton wrote of people driven into exile or madness by the harshness of the land; Henry Handel Richardson dissected the repressions of a society that, caught in a cycle of boom and bust produced by its own destructive energies, paid no heed to the gentler virtues of home and nurture. John Docker has described this view of Australian literary history as "the gloom thesis", which may be related to what the present Prime Minister has called "black armband" history. Harry Heseltine more analytically suggests that the Australian writer has been trapped by "the tyranny of an uncertain self" that arises from a the historical predicament of being "Thrust as it were into a cultural vacuum, without the support of a sanctioned tradition, [so that] his central task became one of authenticating his own uncertain self in an unfamiliar world." Heseltine argues that recent Australian writers, particularly Patrick White, have been able to escape this tyranny and "make of the divided self the subject and support of a complex, sophisticated and penetrating art."[1] However this may be in relation to their art, it is my contention that the work of our writers continues to show a society divided from its own past and so incapable of relating either to its neighbours or to its own inner being. I would describe this not so much as a hard culture as a fearful culture, frightened of itself and of others.

The novels of Henry Handel Richardson, Xavier Herbert and Brian Penton, in particular, portray a culture that, by denying the possibilities of gentleness and harmony, is perpetually exiled from its own land. More recent illustrations of this denial can be found in the work of such writers as Tim Winton, James McQueen and David Ireland - not to mention the current generation of grunge realists. In all of their writings, the masculine drive to dominate destroys the possibility of belonging, which requires the feminine

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This recognition deepens in Wright's later work to the realisation that the absence is not only from the landscape, but from the settlers themselves. Like Campbell, Wright is descended from the pioneering

generations whose lives provide the source for Franklin's and Penton's fiction. The change in her understanding is dramatised in the distinction between the two prose works that deal with these forebears. The first, Generations of Men, is an affectionate story of their coming of this land, and of the struggle, particularly by the women, it took to make it their own. The second, published 22 years later, puts the Aborigines in the story, so changing it from an heroic epic of endurance to a tragic tale of dispossession, brutality and bloodshed. The land hunger of the new settlers led them, with a few notable exceptions, to exclude Aborigines from their newly seized runs. Driven by fear, they forced the government to recruit a force of Native Police, who in turn joined with the squatters in both retaliatory and pre-emptive killings of the Aborigines. The Aborigines, forbidden to gather for ceremonial or social purposes, excluded from their lands and often deprived of the weapons they needed to hunt for game in the scrubs that remained to them, fought back, adding to the squatters' fears. The story is both common and sadly familiar, but Wright identifies its central element as the refusal of the whites to recognize the Aborigines as humans who would respond in the same way as any others to being deprived of all they had known and cherished. As one of the persecutors, the Crown Commissioner William Wiseman, wrote, " not even the savage of Australia was 'so utterly devoid of courage and pride as to yield without a struggle that country . . . on which he is used to obtain his food, and to which he is undoubtedly attached.'" (p. 85) These words were not, however, intended to arouse compassion, but as a warning to settlers who did not accept that to treat the Aborigines with kindness was to be the first to suffer from pillage.

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> did not believe in ownership, and so were scarcely human.
> (Selected Poems, p. 226.)

The century and a half of occupation would be little enough against the timeless stretch of the "ancient" bush, were it not for that further adjective, "difficult". Something, the poem suggests, is due to those who endured such difficulty to make the land serve their purpose. Yet the final lines of the stanza, written at the same period that the author was chronicling the terrible record of the resistance and dispossession of the Aborigines, serve also as a judgement on a nation that, by refusing to acknowledge the cost of its achievements, fails to recognize the humanity of those on whose blood these achievements were built. Instead of legitimate possession of the land, we are left with a polite avoidance of the truth of both history and human nature. As Wright comments on her family at prayer,

That God approved was obvious.
Most of our ventures were prosperous.
As for Dies Irae
we would deal with that when we came to it.
(p. 228)

A complacent decency blinds us to both the inner and the external forces of destruction. Wright herself finds comfort in the oppositions of a landscape that heals and language that connects.

This place's quality is not its former nature
but a struggle to heal itself after many wounds.

. . .

In a burned out summer, I try to see without words
as they do. But I live through a web of language.
('The Shadow of Fire', p. 236.)

Through language, which for Wright includes science and history as well as poetry, we can comprehend the truth and mystery of the world we inhabit, and so become fully human. A trust in language can lead us to the realization expressed in the closing line of this sequence, that "We are all of us born of fire, possessed by darkness." As a corollary, a failure to trust language, the attempt to avoid the discomfiting facts of our lives, can only lead to the kind of nightmare apparition we find in Coleridge's 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner', where the figure of Life-in-Death comes to possess the mariner's soul.

Although Bernard Smith has shown us how Coleridge's poem was derived in part from accounts of Cook's voyages to the Pacific, there is no reason to believe that this image has any direct factual counterpart. It is however significant that it arises in the course of Coleridge's imaginative reconstruction of an incursion by Europeans into a world entirely new to them. The core of the poem is the slaying of the albatross, and the guilt, punishment and expiation of the killer. In its aspect as an episode in the imperial exploitation of new worlds, this can be taken as a metaphor for the process of white settlement in Australia. Judith Wright performs for us the role of the mariner, keeping us from celebrations by reminding us of a guilt in which she acknowledges her own complicity. Until we do likewise, we remain enmired in our guilty past.

Wright closes The Cry for the Dead with an elegy to the people her family displaced, and above whose descendants, still subject to punitive white laws, "the cliffs and ravines of Expedition Ranges perhaps still shelter, in caves and overhangs, the crumbling bones of those who were pursued there more than a century ago, and a few fading and eroding scratches and stains of old stencilled hands and figures may remain as the last memorials of the Wadja and their northern neighbours."(p. 280) This image of ancient signs now deprived of the watchers that gave them meaning also haunts fiction of settlement by Randolph Stow and David Malouf.

In The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea, the boy, Rob, grows up in a quiet country surrounded by war. The signs of this violence that threatens his family security are, in the present of the novel, the Japanese and, from the past, the reminders of the convict labourers who built the house and the Aborigines who were displaced to allow its building. In Malouf's Harland's Half Acre, the children play around a place made haunted by their father's stories, a platform of rock where Aboriginal carvings lie "stranded by time and sun in spare outline". There,

> Stepping back into the lives of those first creators, they would crawl about, retracing the lines with a forefinger, clearing out leaf-grist, pollen, fragments of bark, the husks of dead insects; or would themselves take a knife and scrape, so that figures only vaguely discernible would . . . climb back to the surface and surprise them (p. 23)

But between their play and the past they retrace lies the violent breach that had marked their family's irruption, like that of the Wrights, into this new land. "First, the overland trek from somewhere beyond Tamworth into an unsettled area that was immediately, to the three brothers, so much like home". And, as Malouf comments, "so much like a place they had never laid eyes on but whose lakes and greenness were original in their minds." Then, "Possession was easy. One bloody brief encounter made official with white man's law."(p. 30 The settlers can see only an imagined homeland, in which the Aborigines have no place.

The culture derived from Europe can see natives only as noble savages or decadent remnants, who in neither case can play a part in history. Their destruction is therefore as acceptable and lawful as it is inevitable. They must be removed to allow the grand narrative of social progress and individual fulfilment continue.

But, as Malouf shows, physical occupation of the land does not of itself convey either permanency or imaginative possession. In seven line of his narrative, and one generation of their history, the Harlands lose their property and are reduced to day-labourers. The remainder of the narrative tells of How Frank Harland travels through time and space until he is able to paint the canvasses that make a tiny part of the land truly his own. To possess this land he has also, however, to understand the world from which the Europeans came, but from which their descendants have cut themselves off in a denial that parallels their denial of their violence towards the Aborigines. Europe is symbolized in the figure of Knack, the dealer whose music, in which Harland recognizes "something compelling . . . which led to strength and sunlight," also brings the violence of war and suicide. Centrally, however, the repressed violence is symbolized by the dark space beneath the Queensland house,

> where under-the-house was another and always present dimension, a layer of air between lighted rooms and the damp earth: a place of early fears, secrets, childhood experiments, whispers, . . . It was darkness domesticated, a part of local reality, the downside of things. . . that underworld was full of threats. (p. 145)

It is in this place of fear that Harland's nephew Gerald hangs himself, so destroying the possibility that there will be any heir to the family's dreams, but at the same time freeing Harland for his final burst of creativity. To accommodate this urge he has to leave the house, living almost without shelter near the ocean, allowing no barriers to come between him and his painting of the land and his people. He has taken into himself history and place, the knowledge of others in himself, and is able finally to face the truth without despair.

Although this representative family of Australian writing provides evidence of our hard culture, it does not suggest that this is a satisfactory way to characterize the whole of our culture. Nor is the so-called gloom thesis sufficient. There are too many contradictions. Despite the harshness, cheerfulness keeps breaking through. Yet I think it is fair to say that it is a culture of avoidance, a culture that is reluctant to acknowledge evil while still affirming the positive values of human existence. The writers I have discussed, like all artists, face these truths, but their works are peopled with characters who are unable to do so. Like the narrator's Aunt Roo, in Harland's Half Acre, they don't want to know what is wrong, let alone do anything about changing it. "I've told you years ago, pet, those people are no good . . . concerned with nothing but pulling the world down, they're never satisfied. And in a country like this, where we have everything!" (p. 193) In some ways, this is the precise attitude of Judith Wright's relatives, who insist that the "really deplorable deeds / had happened out of our sight, allowing us innocence." (p.226) But, as Jessica Anderson has pointed out, innocence is itself dangerous, destroying what it cannot understand. In a society characterized by the contradictions of "its rawness and weak gentility, its innocence and deep deceptions.," the domestic tyrants, heirs of a hard culture of dominance, are excused, while their victims are condemned for the crime of being different." (Tirra Lirra by the River, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1978, p. 83.) This condemnation, while exalting the kind of family values espoused by John Howard, leads to the assumption that anything important happens elsewhere, and thus perpetuates the notion of Australia as a second-class, derivative society, incapable of managing its own destiny. This leads to the cultural cringe that makes us seek powerful foreign sponsors while refusing to take a stand against our neighbours on any basic human values. Rather than recognizing difference within a common set of values, we follow an imperialist tradition in assigning them to a category of difference that is not subject to the values we wish to see applied to ourselves. Thus the standards we applied to the Aborigines in order to seize their lands become a means both of separating us from our neighbourhood and of excluding anyone within our own community who dares to be different.

This dual separation and exclusion will be overcome by recognizing the causes. By repressing our own past, both the history of settlement and the history of the countries from which the settlers came, and replacing it with stories of triumphal nationalism, we repress our own human potential. Gillian Bouras, in her accounts of her reverse migration, her courageous but doomed struggle to become a part of the peasant culture of her husband's Peloponesian village, shows the gap that we can never cross to a past that was lost when we became literate. But her books also succeed in acknowledging that past that we share even if we can no longer live it. She may never have been able to gain acceptance from her mother-in-law, or even to gain respect for her attempts to understand and enter into the village life, but she did succeed in translating

that oral tradition into words on the page, so that it can become a part of our lives as we can never become a part of it. Fotini Epanomitis brings the same culture alive from the inside, returning imaginatively to the myths and legendary history of her ancestral Greek village and so making it a part of our world. Beth Yahp does the same for the Malaysian Chinese, bringing their uprooted traditions into direct conflict with the urbanising and modernising present. These writers, by taking us into specific European and Asian cultures, enlarge the meaning of our own culture, both strengthening our understanding of its sources and undermining its imposed unity. As we discover these mythological elements in our own community, these traces of different pasts that continue living in the present, we enhance our capacity to recognize the cultural understandings that underpin the distinctive Aboriginal relationship to the land that we occupy.

But if we are to understand ourselves and our place in this land we need also to learn from the efforts of our neighbours to construct nations within the boundaries that they, like us, have inherited from the regimes of imperialism. F. Sionil José's novels, which place the Philippines at the centre of world history as its people struggle to build a nation, encompass the victims of modernism, the dispossessed who fill the slums of Manila and constitute a global diaspora of labour, as well as the peasants who continue to produce the wealth that sustains the globe-trotting elite. K.S. Maniam shows the deracination and exclusion of the members of the Indian community which was originally brought to Malaya to work the plantations, and Catherine Suchen Lim and Shirley Geok-lin Lim explore the parallel circumstances of the Malaysian Chinese, both at home and abroad. Gopal Baratham shows the dark underside of cruelty and persecution that underpins the antiseptic commercialism of Singapore. All these writers are engaged in questioning their national ideologies, of revealing the human costs of modernisation and globalisation, and of making room within their nations for those who are excluded by the sometimes genteel, often barbaric practices of government and industry.

These are the people being choked by the smoke of burning forests, and condemned to further years of poverty by the collapse of speculation on stocks and land. Theirs is the world we share, and their search for freedom, for a place where they can be at home with themselves, is one that can teach us much about our own struggle to find security in a threatening world. We have at least as much to learn from the writings of these countries as we do from the metropolitan writers of Europe or the United States. Along with the writers from our own country, they can help us to come to terms with our colonial past, to make ourselves at home in our land and its present, and to overcome our fears for the future. In the words of the late Stephen Murray-Smith, we have a particular responsibility for this country. It happens also that we live at a time when this responsibility is particularly urgent. An honest and unsentimental appraisal of our cultural traditions and the cultures of our neighbours can give us the understanding and courage we need meet this responsibility.

Genuine Reconciliation with the Aboriginal people, the adoption of white important writing lies outside the scope of this talk, is a necessary step towards this end

Making forward steps the adoption republican Commonwealth deriving its sovereignty from the people and embodying the values of secularism, egalitarianism and diversity are of course the necessary steps towards this the other forward. end. of course, vital.

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respond much faster and more skilfully to the evolving community issues and problems. There is a far greater seriousness about tackling community-undermining problems, such as sexual harassment and discrimination in all its forms. On the student life front, I was amazed to find that Oxford colleges were more closely related to the public school than the adult world. Students' management of their own affairs was supervised at a level which would provoke open revolt here.

Realising that, in many ways, we were doing just as well, if not better, than places we were modelled upon is a very satisfying discovery at one level. However, in meeting Americans, Europeans and those from various other confident countries, I came to realise that I had been asking the question the wrong way around. Students from Harvard, Yale, the Sorbonne, or Berlin took their own university experience as the benchmark and asked whether or not Oxford measured up to it. Of course, such an attitude can produce the sort of decadent cultural isolationism reflected in the fact that a majority of American school children cannot accurately name more than a few countries other than the United States on a world map and you get CNN leading broadcasts with 'CNN world news, top of the story, rain in Idaho'. More significantly, however, this attitude of taking your own experience and the vision of your own community as a benchmark reflects the sort of confidence which is necessary for such visions to be genuinely communal. Without a profound confidence in a community vision with which not all people are comfortable, it is hard to communicate to those suspicious, fearful or uncomprehending that they do indeed belong to it. It would be easy to take comfort in the fact that this confidence often finds its youthful manifestation in an unrealistic idealism which is destined to be frustrated by dark forces and ignorance and self-interest. We can no longer afford the luxury of such cynicism masquerading as realism.

What has changed, I suspect, from a generation ago is that the compromised confidence of the Australian elites is not a result of that insecure reflex we named the cultural cringe but an uncertainty at the heart of our identity. It is an uncertainty, captured, at least in part, by the title of Stephen Fitzgerald's book, *Is Australian an Asian Country?*. Or, to put it another way, what is to be the new synthesis between our European cultural heritage and the political, economic and cultural inheritance of our Asian geography?

To speak of this uncertainty in the Australian identity in the same breath as the cultural cringe risks mischaracterising this situation as a negative one. If anything, it is a moment of opportunity and openness, of which, I think, we are very privileged to be able to be a part.

Indeed, when, towards the end of our time in England, I was asked that question which is more about values than feelings, 'what did I feel about going home?', I found English and American friends surprised by my enthusiasm for returning to Australia.

Of course, it would have been easy to proffer some negative reasons for this enthusiasm. Returning to Australia was a chance to escape the English weather, which is so bad that they call 3 days over 25 degrees a heat wave, and their national attitude to food which is comparable only with that held by Intercollegiate Catering in the darkest days of Ormond food. One could have added the delight at leaving the desolate social landscape and corruption of public life that had been left by 18 years of Tory rule - although there would be the risk of being accused of having jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire. One might also have concluded, that at least you get television coverage of a country that actually has a chance of winning sport.

However, the primary cause of my enthusiasm about returning to Australia was the prospect of being in and belonging to a country as it forges its sense of self anew. For in the debates we are having at present, coinciding as they do with the centenary of Federation and the opportunity for constitutional reform, much of what it means to be Australian is open for redefinition. The process of reconciliation between indigenous and other Australians, the debate over the republic, the discussion about our place in Asia and disagreements over tarifs indicate but some of the breadth of the questions which are both in the public realm and have deep implications for our identity.

The question asked by friends abroad and its equivalent, 'how does it feel to be back?' implicitly relies upon a sense of European cultural superiority. One is expected to express some sort of nostalgia for the geographic home of those ideas which contribute so much to the identity of Australians of European ancestry. Therefore, as we approach the question of our identity, the challenge before us - and it is a challenge for elites and battlers alike in every aspect of our society - is to find an Australian sense of self which has a depth and integrity so that our national self-understanding and international image will genuinely reflect what makes this an interesting and worthwhile place to live - a sense of self which means we will have the confidence to ask, *not* 'how does it feel to be back?' but rather 'how did it feel to be away?'

Rufus Black
Chaplain of Ormond College

O.C.A. Dinner Address ~ 19 September 1997

Time and again, in Britain and travelling in the United States, Canada and other places, I was struck by the monochromatic images which people have of Australia. They were images, on the one hand, of Australia as a frontier kind of place - a rough country with attitudes to match - or, on the other hand, of an endless sea of banal suburbia. To the eyes of many beyond our shores, Australia is *Crocodile Dundee* meets *Muriel's Wedding* - which may be why, the Brits at least, didn't know what to make of *Priscilla Queen of the Desert.* If we are thought about at all, we are all too often perceived to be an uncultured, unintellectual, racist nation of sporting legends. Great Australians abroad, like Germaine Greer, Robert Hughes, and Clive James, are assumed to be refugees from the land of the philistines rather than exports of what is finest about the country.

I suspect that it has really only been as a result of Pauline Hanson giving a face to the ugly Australian that other Australians have come to realise that they do not recognise their own reflection in the international pond of public opinion.

The Hanson phenomenon would also seem to have crystallised another change in Australian public life. The first echo of this change which I heard was in a feature article last year on the so-called Immigration Debate in *The Economist.* I was called up short by the author's free use of the distinction between the Australian elite - a label which identified people across the political spectrum - and the Aussie battler. Explicitly to articulate this division, which admittedly has long existed in Australian society, seemed somehow to run against the instinctive egalitarianism which is such an attractive feature of our national life. On returning home, I have found other figures in the public square, from pollsters to political journalists, being quite prepared to use the term. The preparedness of people to speak this language suggests that a very deep value gap has developed in Australian society.

In the crudest of terms, the Australian elites in the professions, business, academia and in our cultural institutions can be seen as celebrating our plurality, being broadly in favour of a more open and competitive economy, recognising the need for reconciliation with Aboriginal Australia, supportive and enthusiastic about our cultural strengths, and possessing a positive attitude towards our place in Asia, even if they do not do a great deal about it. The so-called Aussie battlers are perceived by elites to be disinterested in our cultural institutions, suspicious of non-Anglo-Saxons, hostile to the Asian presence and fearful of economic insecurity. I suspect, however, the real way to characterise the Aussie-battler is to say that they are people who are not confident about their having a place in the elites' vision for the future. The Keating Government, whatever its failings, did much, at various points, to articulate important elements of the elites' vision. However, they were voted from power because they failed to communicate the place of the average Australian in that vision.

With the coming of Hanson, the elites are realising that it is not only the majority of Australians who do not share their vision but that much of the rest of the world does not even know such a vision exists.

So where does the limited experience of a journey from Ormond to Oxford and back again fit into this far more exciting play of cultural forces. I would certainly not want to claim that such an anecdotal and idiosyncratic experience was rich with insight into these larger questions.

In travelling to the *et vetera* of Oxford from the *et nova* of Ormond I was interested to find out how we compared with those august institutions on which much of what we do here was originally modelled, along with Edinburgh and Glasgow of course. I have to admit that I was surprised. Academically, I had anticipated that joining a class with students who had been taught by people I had, at best, read, would mean fighting just to keep in the game. To my surprise, and that of other Australians there, we found that a good Australian undergraduate education was at least as good a preparation for higher degree work as that gained by anyone anywhere else in the world.

I must say, however, that it is a cause of sadness to me to return to find that some of the features which made for a such good undergraduate education are being vigorously assaulted. Funding cuts are seeing tutorials rise in size to the boundaries of pedagogical absurdity and they are placing student-denying pressures on academics. More problematic still is the triumph of various post-French ideas in the humanities - ideas which are evacuating courses of the core content which was once their strength and leaving some students with barely the simulacra of what was once valuable about a university education.

Returning to the comparison, in relation to college life I was just as surprised on the academic front. We have certainly done a far better job at making the notion of a collegiate community a meaningful one. In part, this reflects strategic choices such as to keep the college at a size where we could still dine as a community, but it also reflects the time and energy which students, tutors and administrative staff put into making it a working community. Most of the masters I have known here and their key assistants, be they vice-masters or deans, have had a far greater knowledge and understanding of the student community than the retired Sir Humphry Applebys who so often head English colleges. And they certainly