

OVERLAND

EDITORIAL ADDRESS: BOX 98A  
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This has been written for a forthcoming book (ed. Bruce Bennett, UWA) on literary magazines. I thought you might like a copy. Any criticisms gratefully received.

*Stephen*

*Dear Stephen -*

*This is excellent, particularly for your success in putting Overland in its personal context.*

*My criticisms are purely editorial (as you know I don't sub heavily enough) - could I have it back after you've corrected them?*

*My only concern in each case is clarity.*

*Regards John.*

## OVERLAND

The roots of Overland reach down from 1954, the year it was founded, to the Spanish Civil War. The radicalism of the left-wing students and intellectuals in immediate post-war Australia was in important respects a client radicalism. Direct experience of fascism was restricted to a few Jewish migrants and those members of the Eighth Division who survived the prisoner-of-war camps. There was full employment, war losses had not been heavy, the 'forces of reaction', represented by Menzies and his United Australia Party (~~seen to~~<sup>already</sup> emerge from the cleaners as the 'Liberal Party') had been discredited. In contrast with Britain, there had been no class-collaborationist National Government in Australia.

For all that, it was a heady time for the Left, or at any rate for the student Left at the University of Melbourne. In the three years 1945-1947 the Labor Club, a 'united front' body, achieved a membership of the order of 450, the Communist Party branch one of some 110. It is said that these figures have never been approached, certainly in a 'British' university; and perhaps at this point it should be noted, especially for those who pooch-pooch the notion of Melbourne as do-gooding/sobersided and Sydney as libertarian/individualistic, that nothing like this was even remotely achieved in Sydney. (That <sup>Melburnian</sup> arch-preacher Manning Clark has spoken -- with considerable truth I think -- of Melbourne's "intellectual bullies".)

There were causes a-plenty, but they tended to be internationalist. Australian folk-songs hadn't yet been invented, very few of my generation had ever heard of Henry Lawson and none of Joseph Furphy, though that famous trio of Max Crawford, Katie Fitzpatrick and Manning Clark started to correct the ignorance of at least the history students in 1945. At the very popular Labor Club vacation conferences, held in the bush though hardly anyone had a car, we discussed political theory, all European of course; political economics, John Strachey and Karl Marx; how Joe Stalin had solved the national question in the USSR; town planning, welfare and <sup>similar</sup> topics over which Fabians (some like Serle and Burns not at all under the thumb of the communists) and the Party people could co-exist; and the songs we sang were the Internationale, the Red Flag (sung in the House of Commons in 1945 and I think in the Public Lecture Theatre at a celebration meeting), the CIO

songs of the New Deal (who, having heard it, would forget D'Arcy Waters singing "The Horse with the Union Label"?), and of the Wobblies ("I dreamt I saw Joe Hill last night") and, of course, and most recent and moving of all, because songs of the fight against fascism from which we were all emerging, the songs of the Spanish Civil War: the haunting "Hans Beimler", the brutally dismissive "Four Insurgent Generals", the "Thälmann Column". That war was close, most of us knew some Australian who had been involved, it was romantic and clean, it epitomised the united front, it had after all ended in victory in the long run, and it was going to take most of us a long time to read Koestler and Orwell and to accumulate the experience to understand what they were talking about,

It really did seem that the world was on the verge of being made a better place. Twenty million had died, many of us had narrowly survived, India was marching towards freedom and the Tennessee Valley Authority showed that public ownership could work.

<sup>Yes</sup> It was all a bloody good thing for Australia. Very well, the Americans (to some extent), the English, the French had been through the excitement and the emotion of the fight against fascism in the 1930s; we were catching up ten years later, but so what? For a middle-class young Australian emerging from a good but conservative middle-class school, and fed up ~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~ ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ both with idiot prefects and idiot army officers, it was a great time to be learning: learning, if you were lucky, from teachers like those mentioned; learning from a need to understand this new exciting world about us, more particularly outside us; and learning, again if you were lucky, from that first generation of young Jews who gave ~~to~~ so much to Australia, first of all in sophisticated ideas and attitudes and families gassed in Auschwitz, and later in service to the country; and some of us had the good fortune to marry out of Old Australia into the New.

*syllipsis doesn't work.*



I don't want to be tedious in setting my personal scene, but it is important, not so much for any minor personal role I may have played, but because what was happening was not a conspiracy and not McAuley's <sup>15</sup> 'gnosticism' but a strong idealistic upheaval which got bureaucratized, sure, but which only partly went wrong.

I was away, in London and Prague, from 1948 to 1951, and I left the student scene behind me. I returned as a correspondent for a communist international newsagency, Telepress, which was soon ~~repressed~~ suppressed in the course of the Czechoslovak upheavals centreing around Geminder and Slansky; then briefly I taught in a Victorian high school, and in 1952 became Victorian organizing secretary (later national organizing secretary) for the Australian Peace Council, a Communist-led 'mass' organization which nevertheless had three remarkable clergymen in the titular leadership, none of them ciphers by any measure: Alf Dickie, Frank Hartley, Victor James. I had become quite friendly with Clem Christesen after Meanjin moved down to the Melbourne University campus after the war, and I remember in London in 1948 reflecting on my future and deciding that the pleasantest thing to do in life would be to run a literary magazine. So, when I moved over into the position of a kind of party functionary in 1952, and despite the fact that Nita and I had just moved to the ~~outer~~ outer suburbs and had started a family and house on about £9 a week, perhaps less (no private incomes), I was pleased to become involved with the Melbourne Realist Writers' Group, at that time an interesting and dynamic body; though the idea of running a literary magazine had receded.

Jack Beasley has recently reminded us of the 'vanguard role' of the Communist Party intellectuals of that period in re-emphasizing, and to some extent in re-creating, some kind of sense of an Australian 'tradition' in the arts.<sup>1</sup> I repeat a few words I wrote in a review of that book:

Katharine Prichard had completed her goldfields trilogy, Hardy and Eric Lambert had published important books, John Morrison and Judah Waten (not strictly a party member) were actively writing; Overland and the Australasian Book Society were being founded; the Australian nostalgia revival was being sparked off by Dick Diamond's "Reedy River"; some of the most important work in dance and theatre was being carried out by communist groups; Cecil Holmes's significant film, "Three in One", was in preparation; it was no accident, nor was it any reflection on [editor] Clem Christesen's objectivity, that [almost] half of the stories in Coast to Coast in 1953-54 were by party members.<sup>2</sup>

One could add, of course, that nearly every Australian writer of the immediately-preceding generation had been strongly affected by the Depression and worked within a humanist-radical vision of Australian reality, organically represented by the various Fellowships of Australian Writers. Capricornia, Come in Spinner, Man-Shy, Palmer's stories, The Battlers, Mary Gilmore, Barnard Eldershaw, <sup>these are my people</sup> Eleanor Dark, Gavin Casey, William Hatfield...

The Realist Writer first appeared in March 1952. There were nine issues in two years, the first one or two edited by Bill Wannan, the rest ~~by~~ myself. It was essentially an in-house bulletin for members of the Realist Writers' Group, and contributors included Eric Lambert, David Martin, Laurence Collinson, Walter Kaufmann, Ralph de Boissiere, John Manifold, Katharine Prichard, Frank Hardy, Vic Williams, Ken Gott, Ian Turner, Len Fox, Elizabeth Vassilieff and John Morrison. In the middle of 1954 Judah Waten, then ~~xxxxxx~~ <sup>working part-time at</sup> the Jewish Council to Combat Fascism and Anti-Semitism, asked me to call and see him. He offered me £15 to turn the Realist Writer into a printed magazine, a sum of money he now tells me (1979) was made available from a fund he had access to which was available for the promotion of Good Works. So I went ahead, presumably with the agreement of the Realist Writers' Group. Certainly the first issue of Overland was sub-titled "Incorporating the Realist Writer", and this was to get me into trouble later on.

The name? I did not want to be self-consciously political, like the little magazine of the 1930s (Strife, Stream). I did not want to be prissily literary (Manuscripts), or Jindyworobakean (Meanjin). One reasonable title (Southerly) and one excellent one (Coast to Coast) had already been seized. I wanted something that gave a feeling of an Australianism that ranged from the Leeuwin to the 'Loo, and I thought and still think that Overland was an excellent choice. Not Overlander, which we often get called, because that to me, even then, was somewhat falsely folk-lore revivalish.

The ~~typ~~ design was copied from a small English C. P. magazine of the day whose name I now forget, something like Daylight: a double column, quarto-sized magazine of sixteen pages, printed by Harry Roberts and his staff of the Richmond Chronicle, good friends to us, though not in a political sense, <sup>as Roy Cudger and the National Press were</sup> ~~over many years~~; Noel Counihan <sup>drawing</sup> did a splendid black-and-white/ of two diggers off to the goldfields for the cover, messages of goodwill came from Mary Gilmore, Vance Palmer, William Hatfield, Clive Turnbull, Frank Davison, Alan Marshall, R. G. Howarth and Clem Christesen. Miles Franklin chipped in in the second issue, a characteristic message I am still proud of:

Today came a most interesting magazine, alive in every pore. That is the way to do it when the population is not big enough to support pompous glossy affairs full of rhetoric, notes on minor issues and sawdust. I will subscribe to Overland if I live.

Price was one shilling; we printed 750 to start with, took delivery on 6 August 1954, and then had to print another 250. Realist Writers' groups in other states no doubt took copies, and Party bookshops; and some were sold through trade unions. The lead piece was by Brian Fitzpatrick, a doughty swipe at would-be censors and ~~that~~ those who claimed that Commonwealth Literary Fund money was "being used to subsidise Communist propaganda". John Morrison, who will one day be re-discovered as one of the finest Australian writers of the twentieth century, had one of his waterside stories. Nettie Palmer and Katharine Prichard wrote briefly on Henry Handel Richardson, Eric Lambert wrote a review and so did that great old battler Senator Don Cameron, and John Manifold wrote a spirited article (<sup>carried</sup> ~~passed~~ over into Overland no. 2), seeking to establish that Banjo Paterson was a bloke pretty much like John Manifold.

Much of this first Overland brings a wryish smile today, and no doubt there are few signs of literary sensibility there, but I'm not ashamed of it, it did achieve something of what it set out to do -- to talk of books and writing in an unselfconscious way with the assumption that there was no reason whatsoever why 'ordinary people' should not enjoy such writing and participate in it. There were two important assertions, implicit and not stated: firstly, that writing was not confined simply to the best that had been said, written or thought in the world, that there were all sorts of traditions, and not just a "great" one; secondly, that other things being equal, writing dealing with our local reality, Australia and our jobs and our politics and our history and, if you like, our beaches, this kind of writing was meaningful in a way that 'better' writing more removed from us was not meaningful. Yes, we espoused the dreaded 'double standard' in Art. No wonder that the James McAuleys and Vincent Buckleys were scornful, sceptical and concerned: not so much with Overland itself, perhaps, for they ~~might~~<sup>may</sup> never have heard of it, but because the kind of thing people like us in Australia were doing at this time suggested not only political perils but also the advancement of philistinism. (I should add that I came to admire McAuley but never penetrated his austerity, and that Vin Buckley has been a generous friend, both of mine and of Overland, in later years.)

And all this brings us to the motto I determined to adopt and to adapt. I had been immensely moved in my undergraduate days by Lawson, Richardson and Furphy. They all taught me what people had been through to make this country that I found myself in. I began ~~xxxxxxixix~~ to realise -- to quote Manning Clark and Dostoievsky -- "what it had all been for". They gave me a sense of place, while the Communist Party gave me a sense of purpose. When I finished Richard Mahony one night in bed in my Grattan Street loft, in 1945 or 1946, tears were running down my cheeks. And of the three, perhaps the greatest was Furphy. I liked his satire, his sense of fun, his 'documentary' skills; after John Ewers pointed it out to us, I liked the way that, in a certain sense, his whole book was a leg-pull; or, if you like, the way he determined that his message or messages ~~was~~<sup>were</sup> going to have to be worked for, because to get a message out of life you have to work for it too. I also liked his mocking, allusive,

maze-like use of language: and, as an old admirer of C. E. Montague, why indeed would I not fall for Furphy? I revere Lawson and Richardson, but Such is Life is a book I should like to be buried or burnt with (though preferably not a first edition).

Furphy had described Such is Life as "temper democratic, bias offensively Australian". Well, we had passed the point where we needed to be offensive to the British or anyone else; but as believers in the Soviet literary doctrine of "socialist realism" we were well aware of the gloss: writing should be "socialist in form, national in content". Furphy's phrase matched pretty well. But there was that difference between "socialist" and "democratic". It was a difference that went a long way towards splitting the Realist Writers' Group. Some, like Frank Hardy, insisted on a hard-line interpretation. He thus demanded that the newly-founded (and supposedly 'broad', like Overland) Australasian Book Society should publish his whitewash book on the Soviet Union, Journey into the Future. (I had recently published a whitewash pamphlet on Czechoslovakia, myself.) It didn't help establish the ABS as an organization transcending a narrow, sectarian-Left approach; and I was determined to keep the magazine as wide-spectrum as possible. To do this involved my assuming a firm role as editor, though I was never one for long-winded ~~or~~ political nit-picking in any case. Furthermore, counting myself I could rely on the support of three out of the five ~~members~~ Melbourne members of the board, the others being Eric Lambert and Ian Turner. ~~This is not to say that~~ <sup>not</sup> serious political cleavages had yet commenced in the Communist Party, <sup>however,</sup> and probably <sup>matters were not</sup> ~~as~~ quite as tidy as I have made <sup>them</sup> ~~it~~ appear. But I was determined that Overland would go out after what we called a 'mass audience', and I was determined it was not going to be the medium, for instance, for long-winded diatribes by Soviet ideologues of the kind we had from time to time printed in the Realist Writer.



Three months later, on the eve of the hundredth anniversary of the Eureka Stockade, our second issue was published: twenty-four pages this time, and an edition of 1500 copies. Bert Evatt allowed us to reprint his introduction to the Sunnybrook Press edition of Carboni Raffaello's book, Hugh Anderson wrote on the "Inimitable", Charles Richmond Thatcher (I happened to have bought what remains I believe the only known portrait of Thatcher for 6d. in a Richmond junk-shop), David Martin and Jean Devanny wrote on the death of Miles Franklin.

Our third issue, also of 1500 copies, featured Edward Harrington, that lovely old balladist, some poems by John Manifold and a story by David Forrest. Our fourth issue, however, was of special note. It appeared in July 1955, in an edition of 4300 copies, nearly all of which were sold. I'm not sure how, but I do have a memory of Frank Hardy flogging a lot on the waterfront. Anyway, it was our high-point: we have never sold so many again, and present circulation is slightly under 2000.

At least that is what I have always assumed. In checking the actual figures I see that we kept on publishing around 4000 copies until the break with the Communist Party in 1958, thereafter dropped to around 3000, and declined further during the 1960s. I find it faintly curious that we should lose circulation when our standards of production and content were improving, and I don't think it can be linked entirely to the split within the C. P. I would be tempted to link it to the decline of 'word' literacy in favor of 'electronic' literacy, except that during this period the circulation of the Age, for instance, has increased considerably, and the sale of general books (though not necessarily of fiction) too. Certainly I see little connection between the enormous increase in educational expenditure in Australia in the last fifteen years and an increased interest in art and ideas; and few academics <sup>seem to</sup> subscribe to Meanjin or Overland. A sample riffle through current subscribers' cards, 122 <sup>of the</sup> Victorian cards, divides into the following rough categories:

'Old Left'	27
Writers and artists	14
Academics	11
Professionals	10
Institutions	28
Politicians	3

Students  
Unknown

1  
27

Two points worth making, I think: only 12 of these subscriptions are country ones; and I can personally identify quite a high proportion of our own subscribers, which is both a good and a bad thing. The number of 'academics' in the sample above is a statistical accident, I suspect. To those who might criticise the 'middle class' nature of our constituency, I would answer (1) interest in writing and ideas is largely a middle-class phenomenon; such interests may not define a person as middle-class, but they may be expected to emerge with leisure, <sup>education,</sup> ~~and~~ security and that ill-defined concept of 'status' (2) this is no doubt regrettable but Overland has tried to do more about it over the years than anyone else has (3) the middle-class have souls too, man for man (or person for person, as I suppose we are now expected to say) as well worth saving as anyone else's.

Of course even a momentary touching on this topic raises a number of interesting questions. Has Overland ~~really~~ ratted? Should we have sought more, as we did in the early days, for direct written expression of struggle, outrage, confrontation, being prepared to print stuff without much literary merit? Is the fact that Overland seems to some people less committed simply a function of the fact that the way protest is expressed has changed? For instance, Overland has never printed more reasonably good protest poetry than in recent years, but on the whole the audience won't read it, because our enragés are writing more for each other than for some 'mass audience'.

*I would argue that*  
Almost any issue of Overland contains a lot of 'political' material, ~~but~~ <sup>though</sup> not necessarily of a factory-gate kind ~~— so I would argue.~~ Articles on Furphy, Henry Handel Richardson, reminiscences, a critical discussion of what went wrong with John Manifold's radicalism, all of these in their own way are meant by us to emphasise national traditions (no longer a national tradition) and to heighten intelligent critical response to our society. Even stories and article and reviews on apparently non-political issues <sup>political</sup> are meant, by me at any rate, to convey the extremely important/message that politics are not ~~repeatedly~~ the most important thing in life.

recently

I should however return to the 1950s. Ian Turner has/remarked that the role of Overland in these years was to develop the radical tradition, including within that the Marxist tradition; to encourage a working-class audience and working-class writers, which raised the question (Ian said) of whether we were popularising high culture or developing popular culture; and to take part in polemics against the Right. This latter included a long struggle to win a grant from the Commonwealth Literary Fund, a struggle we ran for political as much as financial reasons. Menzies used to pull out security reports on Overland at the meetings of the CLF, long after Turner, I and others had left the Communist Party; but some time in the early 1960s we finally won our grant.

A major turning point for Overland was, of course, -the inner-party ideological disputes of the mid-1950s. There were probably three key events: the Krushchev Report, the invasion of Hungary and the murder of Imre Nagy by the Russians. Such issues, and matters arising from them, were debated hotly within the writers' fraction of the Party, and a high degree of demoralization set in. In 1958 Turner was expelled from the Party (he too held a quasi-functionary's position, as secretary to the Australasian Book Society), and I immediately resigned. It was clear that there was no hope of taking the ABS with us, but Overland could be saved from the wreck. Turner and I removed the Overland subscription cards from the ABS office (at the time Overland was included in an ABS sub.) and hid them. Months and even years of bitter dispute followed with the rump of the old Realist Writers' Group; it was a dispute rendered even more bitter by our refusal to adopt an anti-communist position, which Party leaders like E. F. Hill would greatly have preferred. Turner and I carried every significant writer in Victorian Party circles with us, with the exception of Judah Waten (who had recently rejoined the C. P., and took an exceptionally hostile stand) and Frank Hardy who, in pursuit of greater glory, had <sup>I think already</sup> moved to Sydney, nearer to the core of the Party hierarchy.

After the 'break', and despite Turner's and my desire to maintain Overland as a link with the as-yet unreconstructed Left, a 'revisionist' influence which would help to undermine the Stalinists, there were bound to be changes. (In fact Overland did act as a significant linkage with many who had not yet made the break with the Party; Dorothy Hewett, for instance, though it was to be ten years before she followed us out of the Party, never broke personal and literary relations with us.) Turner moved into academic life, I moved into white-collar unionism and then followed Turner into the middle-aged, Ph. D. grind. (We were lucky that it was a time when people of our background could 're-qualify' at forty and pick up an academic job.) We lost many mass contacts, something of our populism and to some extent our polemical edge, though we were front-runners in the 1960s in opposition to the Vietnam adventures. (Though I, at least, had scant sympathy for either side.) In general we remained radical, but became broader, weightier, more 'authoritative': a change rather like that happening to me physically. We printed material on Aboriginal and New Guinea issues before these issues became matters of received opinion. Most importantly, we broadened our editorial base, discarding the old C. P. ties and adding John McLaren (younger than us, uninfluenced by C. P. sterility, a radical social-democrat and a welcome breath of fresh air) and Barrie Reid, librarian and poet, who represented those intellectuals in Australia who went avant garde rather than Red at the end of the war, and hence in joining the Overland board symbolically healed an old and baleful wound. More recently Nancy Keesing, Leonie Sandercock, <sup>Ken Gott</sup> and Gwen Harwood have joined our board. With the exception of Leonie Sandercock it is a board of the middle-aged, but my own attitude is that it is better to have good, experienced people who in general approve of what we are doing than 'token' representatives of youth, women and so on. The board is, or should be, a working group, not a debating club.

Today our stance is a relatively settled one. We serve as a general outlet for creative and critical writing, and seem to be an important opening to many young writers. We maintain a radical editorial stance but seldom bother to make this explicit; our ideology is as broad as the slogan on our title page. Our audience is almost certainly better educated, older and more middle class than it has ever been, though we get many useful letters, contributions and donations from workers, pensioners and the



struggling. At a major editorial conference late in 1978, shortly before he died, Ian Turner listed some of the issues that <sup>Ken</sup>~~Ken~~ worried him about the magazine:

We have lost our popular audience; now it is rather the radical intelligentsia, say 35 years of age and older.

We are a journal which students study, for it appears on reading lists, and is regarded as a historical source. And many young people write for Overland, or at least send stories and poems to it. But few buy and read it.

We have lost some of our ideological bite, and in significant areas are responding rather than leading, or sometimes not even responding at all: political ideologies, the sociology and politics of culture, problems of public support for the arts, and so on.

"But we are still a unique voice," Ian concluded. And so we are, in a way I cannot fully account for. We have a quarter of a century behind us, and we intend to keep going.

Stephen Murray-Smith

1. Jack Beasley: Red Letter Days (Sydney, 1979).
2. Australian, 14 April 1979.