

# QUADRANT

## The Perils of Trusting Pandemic Experts

SALVATORE BABONES, PETER L. SWAN

The High Price of Toppling Statues

TRISTAN HEINER, JOHN O'SULLIVAN

The Prophetic Pessimism of Michel Houellebecq

ANTHONY DANIELS

Viktor Orbán and the Central European *Kulturkampf*

NICHOLAS T. PARSONS

The Berlin Congress of Cultural Freedom, 1950

OSCAR CLARKE

Thinkable Crimes and Decoding Witness J

MURRAY WALTERS, PETER WEST

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On Philip Ayres MARK MCGINNESS

On David Campbell IVAN HEAD

On William Hazlitt BARRY GILLARD

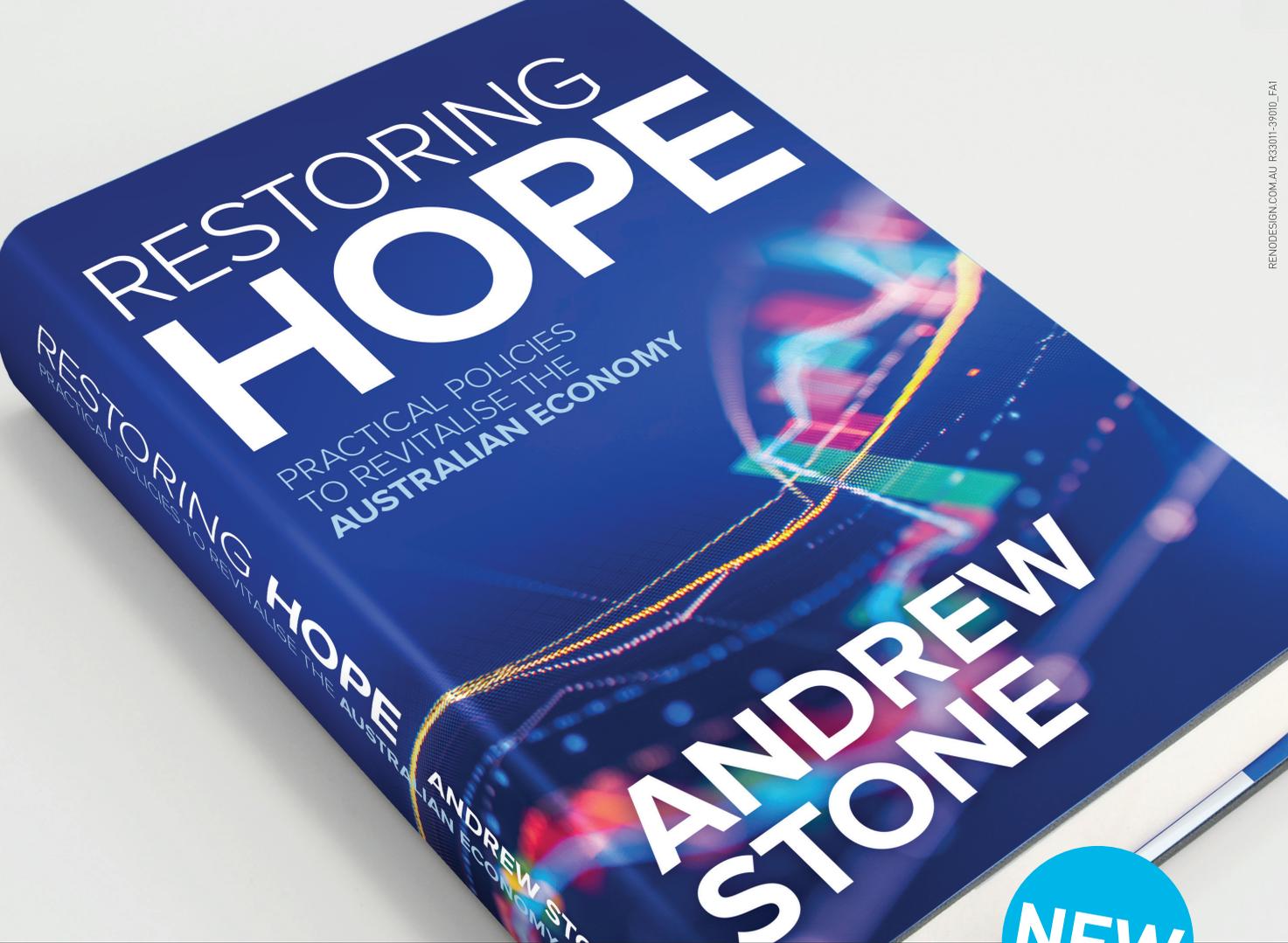
On Willem de Kooning CHRISTOPHER HEATHCOTE

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Gabrielle Lord, Meg Courtney Hawke, Joe Dolce, R.J. Stove*

FICTION | *Sean Wayman*

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# RESTORING HOPE

PRACTICAL POLICIES TO REVITALISE THE AUSTRALIAN ECONOMY  
**ANDREW STONE**

NEW

Since the Howard government, Australia's per capita growth rate has slumped and wage growth has been anaemic, while housing prices have skyrocketed relative to household incomes. Commonwealth net debt has surged; the nation's birth rate has fallen to its lowest level ever, presaging serious problems with population ageing; and Australia has become much more vulnerable to an economic shock than we were prior to the Global Financial Crisis.

In response, however, much of our national economic policy debate has been shallow, philosophically incoherent, impractical, or focused on commitments off in the "never

never" rather than on concrete near term proposals. In contrast, Andrew Stone in Restoring Hope lays out a coherent, comprehensive yet politically achievable economic agenda for a resolute federal government for the next three to five years.

Encompassing immigration, the housing market, higher education reform, federal State relations, energy policy, workforce participation, welfare reform, budget repair, monetary policy and financial system regulation, the book demonstrates that good government, which addresses our key economic problems and yet earns the respect and support of the Australian people, is possible.

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## LETTERS

### The Country Party of WA

*SIR:* David Barnett's article "The Missing Voice of the Country Party" (May 2020), focused on federal politics. With my West Australian background and being a son-in-law of the Hon. Arthur Watts CMG, doyen of the Country Party in that state, what has been the party's fate there?

Arthur was elected MLA in 1935 and retired from Parliament in 1962. He was Leader of the Opposition in 1942 and led the Country Party for twenty years, being Deputy Premier on two occasions, from 1947 to his retirement. No one has reigned longer in Country Party history, and this says something about the esteem in which politicians were held in those days.

The drought in Western Australia in 1911 and 1912 led to the establishment of the Farmers and Settlers Association in 1912. This morphed into the Country Party of Western Australia in 1914, the first in Australia. In a state with a population of under 300,000, about 100,000 were involved with agriculture. The new party took eight seats in a Legislative Assembly of fifty in the 1914 election, with 14 per cent of primary votes out of 95,400 votes cast. Up until the 1933 election the party, in coalition with the liberals, formed the state government. In the 1933 election the liberals became the third party in the Assembly and the Country Party led the opposition. Up until the 1939 election, the party averaged eleven seats in Parliament, with 16 per cent of the primary votes, from an ever-increasing number of voters.

The McLarty-Watts government came to power in the first post-war election of 1947. The McLarty-Watts, and later the Brand-Watts, government effected great changes in the post-war state,

many of which were controversial; including the building of the Narrows Bridge and its freeway system, which in the minds of some destroyed Perth's waterfront, and the Kwinana refinery, a step in its industrialisation. Such projects put the interests of the state, not popularity, to the fore.

Despite all this good work the party's support declined. Average parliamentary seats went down and from 1939 to 1962 averaged only nine. The party's support decreased from 16 to 10 per cent. Fewer people were country people. Recent figures show only 30,000 West Australians employed in agriculture, forestry and fisheries these days—an almighty fall from 100,000, when the party was formed, while the state's population has increased seven-fold. The party, now under the Nationals banner, has only five members in a fifty-nine-seat legislature and commands only 4.5 per cent of the primary vote.

The "missing voice" is also an affliction in West Australian politics. The party has suffered from its failure to concentrate on where its original supporters live, in the country. Country people seem to have been forgotten. Perhaps the term "National Party" doesn't help. The outback needs a voice.

The halcyon days when politicians were highly respected also seem to have gone. Arthur Watts refused a knighthood on the grounds that he hadn't enough money to contribute to all the good causes that knights were expected to support! No money in politics in them days, and perhaps a good thing. He was a fine man.

*Ewen Tyler*  
*South Yarra, Vic*

### Guilt culture

*SIR:* Harry Cummins's article "Our Epidemic of Self-Reproach and its Costs" (June 2020) attributes elements of our disadvantage to

the influence of Christianity. He quotes Salmon Rushdie saying that Islam is a “blame culture” whereas Christianity is a “guilt culture”.

Today’s post-Christian culture differs from its ancestral culture in how guilt is deployed. In the past, Christian leaders taught their flocks to search their hearts for personal guilt. This guilt arose because of things individuals did, or failed to do. The goal was to repent, to avoid sin and do better in the future.

Today many people participate in rituals denouncing their ancestors, or the government, or other actors. They reproach people long dead. They decry politicians to whom they are opposed, with claims that the world is watching our actions, and we should be ashamed. If they feel guilty, it is because of what others have done.

Imagine going to confession and saying, “I feel guilty about the indigenous people killed in Queensland in the 1850s.” The priest would rightly say, “Anyone who lived then is in the hands of God. Tell me about your own behaviour.”

Although social structures can promote evil actions, it is rational to accept guilt *only* for what is in one’s power to make otherwise. Feeling guilty about things one couldn’t influence suggests a poorly formed conscience. Perhaps some explicit teaching about sin and personal responsibility would help.

*Michael Cashman  
Grange, Qld*

## Victims of Rape

*SIR:* I am sorry that Michael Giffin (June 2020) has taken umbrage at my letter (May 2020). It is difficult to give such a complex argument due deference in a short letter and it was the two sentences related to abortion that stood out for me: “Foetal abnormalities are unavoidable. Rape is avoidable.” The key point is that rape is an act of sexual

penetration enacted by force and without the consent of the victim. Rape victims are not playing the role of victim. They *are* victims. Rape is always non-consensual; if intercourse is consensual, quite simply, it is not rape.

Many lies are told about sexual encounters, but this is not, as Michael Giffin implies, confined to women, as the statements of Bill Clinton, Jeffrey Epstein and Harvey Weinstein have shown.

In Australia, our most trusted institutions have lied and obfuscated about the rape of children, both boys and girls. In the 1990s, Father Kevin O’Donnell raped the two Foster children, then aged five and seven. Priests at St Alipius in Ballarat had almost free rein amongst school children and allegedly lied to their superiors. The Royal Commission into Child Sexual Abuse found within the Anglican Church there were 1082 complaints of child sexual abuse between 2015 and 2018 and Brisbane’s Bishop Thompson spoke of a decades-long culture of abuse and cover-up. Similarly, Melbourne Archbishop Philip Freier said he was shocked at his church’s “failure to tackle child sex abuse”.

For these and all other victims, rape was not avoidable.

*Jill Fenwick  
East Melbourne, Vic*

## Post-war Architecture

*SIR:* I’m dismayed by Philip Drew’s letter (June 2020) on my article “When Modernist Britain Fell Down” (May 2020), grumbling that I am unfair to architecture. He gets my discussion back to front. It’s chiefly about some strong novels and films—including *High Rise* and *A Clockwork Orange*—which emerged from the rebuilding of post-war Britain. I emphasised how the problems that blighted new council estates were caused by construction companies and local

government; and also that Ballard’s portraits of trendy architects are fictional caricatures.

*Quadrant* readers will recall my articles on Jacques Tati’s film *Mon Oncle* (June 2014) and Jeffrey Smart’s paintings (July–August 2016), which likewise explored how those two creators used the post-war reconstruction of France and Italy as themes in their work. Modern architecture often figures in visual art, novels and film—think of Fritz Lang’s silent masterpiece *Metropolis*—and I’ve long been fascinated by how highly creative people seize upon such motifs when weaving artistic works.

*Christopher Heathcote  
Keilor, Vic*

## ABC Breaches of Duty

*SIR:* There can no longer be any excuse for turning a blind eye to the outrageous breaches of their duty by members of the ABC Board, namely “to ensure that the gathering and presentation by the Corporation of news and information is accurate and impartial according to the recognised standards of objective journalism”. Paul Kelly, in the *Australian* (June 10, 2020), pointed out that the ABC was engaged in the cultivation of a political culture. What is more, he says, “everybody can see it”.

There could be no worse breach of the duties of the board under the law than to cultivate a political culture. It breaches all three central duties to be accurate, impartial and objective. They should be called to the bar of the Senate to account for these grave breaches of the law.

It is time for the Liberal Party to stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood and bend every spirit to the reform of this undemocratic monstrosity, else risk condemnation as spineless opportunists.

*Fred Bennett  
Bonner, ACT*

# IN PRAISE OF EMPIRES

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KEITH WINDSCHUTTLE

The worst news I've heard about the COVID-19 pandemic was that it took the life of Deepak Lal, one of the wisest men I've known. Aged eighty, he was living in London and already suffering from a slow-acting cancer when the coronavirus proved too much for him. He died on April 30.

Several of Lal's obituarists called him a "development economist" because that was how he made his name in the 1980s when he wrote a number of pungent criticisms of the socialist economic policies that until then had kept most of the Third World in poverty. In the last two or three decades of his life, however, he became one of the world's great economic historians, which is his true legacy.

Part of his wisdom was to recognise that, while economics was an important driver of both national and world histories, it was not alone. To understand the real history of any people, their political, cultural and religious lives were even more important. *Quadrant* readers can get a taste of his abilities from our July-August 2016 edition where he reviews a collection of historical essays by J.B. Kelly on the Middle East and ends up writing one of the most incisive criticisms yet made of recent Western interventions into that disaster zone.

The book of his that impressed me most, and which, even though it doesn't mention Australia, is the one from which Australians can probably learn most, is *In Praise of Empires*, a 247-page volume, published in 2004 (Palgrave Macmillan, New York). These days, the concept of imperialism is so offensive to political fashions on university campuses that its title would by now have cost Deepak his professorship at UCLA (as a similar tract actually did in 2017 to Bruce Gilley at Portland State University). Nonetheless, Deepak told me at a conference in Sydney in 2006 that he enjoyed being one of the few Indian-born academics to take such a position when most others who gained places at US and UK universities were renowned for their reliance on post-colonial theory and anti-Western ideology.

Lal wrote his book to argue that most of the

major empires in human history have provided long periods of peace and stability in which economic development could flourish. This was true from ancient to medieval times, and from Rome to China. In our own time, he maintains, the world still needs the domination of one global imperial power to keep as much peace as possible and preserve prosperity.

Lal's book also suggests a new paradigm for understanding modern history. Rather than the story my generation was taught—a modernity full of revolutionaries overthrowing *ancien regimes* and romantic heroes building ethnic nations on the ruins of old royal dynasties—Lal argues the principal driver of modernity in the world was the British Empire. In the nineteenth century it generated a global empire of free trade, powered by the industrial revolution and enforced by a Royal Navy presence in all oceans. Britain provided direct rule in its formal empire and indirect rule in much of the rest of the world through gunboat diplomacy and economic opportunity. Lal calls this geographic and temporal structure *Pax Britannica*, the British peace. He also calls it the first Liberal International Economic Order.

From 1815 to 1914, imperialism gave Britain a century of peace at home and it provided the rest of the world with far more order and stability than it would otherwise have had. It was an empire not of plunder but of civil order that kept the channels of commerce free of pirates and predators. Britain did not do this because it wanted to conquer or even to civilise the world. It pursued its own interest to generate export trade and to provide international financial services. The industrial revolution produced a surplus of low-cost, factory-manufactured goods for which Britain sought global markets. The City of London also set out to become the financier to the world, providing short-term credit for trade and long-term credit for investment.

Despite the prevailing anti-colonialist cant that still condemns British imperialism as one of history's great iniquities—as I write this, the morning press reports students at Sydney University are

organising a rally to “dismantle the settler-colonial state system”—the first Liberal International Economic Order was hugely beneficial to all the countries it touched. British investment provided the infrastructure of rail, ports and coaling stations through which comparative advantage could be exploited by local entrepreneurs of many nations.

Imperialism encouraged investors to put their money in developing economies, places that would otherwise have been sites of great risk. Hence when the British Empire was at its peak it was a much greater positive force for international investment in poor countries than any more recent institutions. In 1913 some 63 per cent of foreign direct investment went to developing countries, whereas in 1996 the proportion was only 28 per cent; in 1913, 25 per cent of the world stock of capital was invested in poor countries but by 1997 it was no more than 5 per cent.

After 1918, with Britain crushed by the weight of war debt and debilitated by class warfare at home, *Pax Britannica*'s days were numbered. The United States emerged from the First World War the most economically and militarily powerful country, and Britain's natural successor. Had it recognised its own global interests better, Lal says, it would have taken Britain's place and produced a *Pax Americana*. Instead, it embraced the Wilsonian idealism of collective security through transnational associations. This model soon failed, and America retreated into isolationism and protectionism. Arguably, Lal writes, the United States' reluctance to assume the imperial role contributed to many of the disasters of the last century: two world wars, the Great Depression, and the rise and fall of two illiberal creeds, fascism and communism.

Chastened by the experience of international disorder that American isolationism permitted in the interwar years, by the end of the Second World War the US political elite changed tack. It recognised its national interest required a strong maritime power to uphold the balance of power in Europe and to maintain economic and political order in the rest of the world. Its members surreptitiously took up the task of building a US imperium to maintain the Pax which the British were now both unwilling and unable to support.

The US constructed a new Liberal International

Economic Order for the post-war world, using transnational institutions to open world markets to trade in goods and the free flow of capital. Initially, a number of Third World countries, under the thrall of the Soviet Union, either stood outside or only half-heartedly joined the new order. But after the debt crisis of the 1980s and the collapse of European communism in 1989, there was a rush to join. The most notable converts were India and China. The only countries that failed to join this newest phase of globalisation were those of Africa and the Middle East, which thereby excluded themselves from this era of economic progress.

*Pax Americana* will no doubt seem to many to be alien to American political traditions. In the midst of the controversy over his invasion of Iraq in 2003, George W. Bush told a gathering of military veterans that America had no territorial ambitions. “We don't seek an empire,” he said. “Our nation is committed to freedom for ourselves and for others.”

Lal responds to this by distinguishing two different kinds of empires: those that seek to advance certain enterprises, such as taking plunder or imposing an ideology; and those that do not seek to impose their own objectives, but rather see themselves as a custodian of laws and civil order. The British Empire was the latter kind, a model that is not inconsistent with American traditions, or at least with classical liberal American traditions.

So, what would the world lose from a seriously anti-imperialist US? It would lose the Liberal International Economic Order. Lal argues that such a loss can occur without the United States falling over the kind of precipice that ended the Roman Empire. It could happen gradually within the current framework of democratic politics simply from an American reluctance to fulfil the role and a preference to withdraw into itself, as it did in the interwar period. If this happens, others, especially China or India, may well fill its place.

The problem with this scenario is that neither China nor India has the political traditions and culture required for the task. If either became the world imperium we might still have an International Economic Order, but it would not be classically liberal. Indeed, Lal argues, it would lose the one thing that made it work in the first place, and the one thing that made it a force for good in the world.

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# ASPERITIES

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JOHN O'SULLIVAN

As far as the British public was concerned, the Chinese Cultural Revolution began in London in 1966 when Chinese diplomats rushed out of their embassy in Portland Place (conveniently close to Broadcasting House) and attacked the police stationed there to guard them. A picture of one “diplomat” threatening a policeman with a hatchet made it onto the front pages, and the next day crowds gathered in Portland Place shouting anti-Chinese slogans. Drunken British hooligans—less of a cliché in 1966 than today—were patriotically inspired to ransack a few Chinese restaurants across the country. Their owners defensively placed in their windows signs that proclaimed “We Are Hong Kong Chinese and British”—sentiments that have come back into vogue in recent days.

The Battle of Portland Place, though dramatic, was a probably a calculated response to movement restrictions placed on the diplomats by Harold Wilson’s government, which was reacting (more reasonably) to the burning of a UK mission and the roughing-up of UK diplomats by “Red Guards” in China. Both governments wanted the crisis over, and when Mao and his faction re-imposed control over both their rivals and their student revolutionary supporters, they embarked on long negotiations that, among other results, tacitly accepted postponing the return of Hong Kong until 1997.

By then, however, the Brits had become fascinated by the anarchic disorders that were sweeping China, where students paraded their teachers in dunce’s caps, local authorities sent lawyers to spread night-soil over the fields in forced labour, and precious artefacts of Chinese culture were seized from museums and destroyed in the streets. Young Red Guards were licensed to imprison, beat, torture and even kill people in positions of authority who supposedly represented the obstacles that traditional culture presented to the achievement of true revolution. Those young idealists, as many have since testified, now look back with shame and horror at their combination of crime, brutality and philistinism towards people who had done them no wrong and in some cases had been their mentors.

What was mystifying then—and to some

extent still is—was whether this was anarchy or dictatorship. Was the entire Cultural Revolution an exercise in power politics to destroy Mao’s enemies or a kind of revolutionary fiesta that would ensure the loyalty of an entire generation of young Chinese to Mao’s scorched-earth version of revolution?

It was probably both. If so, the first purpose was achieved and the second inevitably failed. Mao emerged from the Cultural Revolution supreme in China, a kind of god-man, with his party rivals dead or imprisoned, but after his death the Maoists were purged and the politics of revolutionary egalitarianism abandoned. Deng Xiaoping introduced his capitalist-roader economic reforms about the time Margaret Thatcher arrived in Downing Street, and China’s power and prosperity have grown rapidly ever since. Whatever criticisms the Chinese people have of their government today, they show no nostalgia for Mao or his ism.

It was only outside China that enthusiasm for Maoism survived. Some Westerners saw Maoism admiringly as the most complete rejection ever attempted of the alienating but seductive Western liberal capitalism they despised. Others were simply naive as to what it was like to live under it. Both were refuted by Deng Xiaoping’s response to Shirley Maclaine in a White House receiving line when she said that a doctor sent to hard labour in the fields to overcome his sense of bourgeois privilege had told her it was the most uplifting experience of his life.

“He told you that, did he?” replied the plain-speaking Deng. “He was lying.”

Other Westerners looked at the theory-led antics of the Cultural Revolution with amazement and thought, “It could never happen here.”

It’s happening here, of course, at least in Britain and the United States, and even in Australia, though less aggressively. The scenes of crowds burning cities, attacking the police, looting small businesses, and then in an illogical but somehow understandable progression, pulling down statues, destroying national symbols, and doing their best to erase familiar signposts to the past to leave little doubt about what’s going on. It’s a revolution against our culture, our history, our countries and ourselves.

And its cause seems to be the brutal killing of George Floyd by a Minneapolis policeman, which immediately became the worldwide symbol of racism against black Americans, especially at the hands of the police, and that in turn has led to the rapid spread of this directionless anarchy.

**W**e can speculate about why the spread of this anarchy has been so swift and dramatic. People are bored and angry after eight weeks of lockdown. They're afraid of the economic consequences, and a sharp fall in their standard of living, when the pandemic finally ends. They want to blame someone, probably the government, for their own anxiety.

But none of those explanations touches the main mystery. The killing of Floyd is universally condemned; it will be punished with remarkable speed by the standards of American justice; and it doesn't illustrate the war on Black America by the police, for the substantial reason that there is no such war. Black Americans suffer many serious social disadvantages, but they are the result of many complex causes unrelated to the racism of other Americans. The figures for fatal shootings of men by the police show that about two thirds of the victims are white and only one third black—nine people last year. Though police shootings of black men are disproportionately high in relation to the black percentage of the population, they are disproportionately low in relation to black involvement in crime. The overwhelming majority of murders of black men are committed by other blacks. Even if racism plays a part in the social problems of Black America, it plainly is not their main, let alone total, explanation.

As the conservative black columnist Larry Elder recently wrote: "Assume there's a vaccine against white racism. Would 70% of black kids **STILL** be raised in fatherless homes? Would 50% of blacks **STILL** drop out of many urban high schools? Would 25% of young black urban men **STILL** have criminal records? Would blacks **STILL** kill 7000 blacks every year?" The implied answer, alas, is that probably things would improve only slightly, if at all. And if the solutions proposed by progressive elites were adopted, for instance defunding the police, it would make the lives of ordinary Americans, blacks in particular, more dangerous and poorer.

And even if you think Elder is wrong about America, why should the murder of someone in Minneapolis—a city ruled by progressive Democrats for two generations—be a legitimate excuse for riots in London and other British cities in which the police bend over backwards in order to maintain good "community relations" with all races? Why

too should the riots rapidly become violent protests against the symbols of national life and history? My replies, drawing on the experience of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, would stress five similarities.

The first would be that there's a deep political conflict between different political and cultural elites in Britain and America which is now being fought on the terrain of patriotism versus multiculturalism and the creation of the "next America" or the prevention of Brexit.

The second is that the anti-nationalist side, in part because its electoral strength is rooted in black and minority constituencies, has adopted a narrative that treats America as a fundamentally flawed and racist society in which black people are the victims of racist institutions that must be torn down and replaced.

The third is that progressive elites have their own Red Guards who advance and even enforce this analysis in slogans that are a mixture of idealistic and intimidating. "Black Lives Matter" is both true and worth saying, but when it's accompanied by the claim that "All Lives Matter" is racist, then it becomes a hostile sectarian claim and an implied threat. Demands that others "take the knee" is simple intimidation. Some recent protests were brutally insensitive to the destruction of black livelihoods they caused. And Antifa is Thug Central.

A fourth is that, because the central claims of the revolutionary cause are false and some of its actions unlawfully violent, its propaganda outlets have to lie and obfuscate in their accounts. Here is how BBC news reported the first London protests: "27 police officers injured during largely peaceful anti-racism protests in London."

And, finally, the authorities enforce the law selectively in progressive jurisdictions from Bristol to Minneapolis.

It's a grim picture, but this Cultural Revolution is in its earliest stages. We can't know how it will turn out. Such events generate opposition automatically as their true oppressive character becomes clearer. Nor should we underestimate the appeal of our own political culture to refugees from its opposite. Britain has just announced that it will admit more than three million Hong Kong UK passport-holders and give them a path to citizenship. A poll shows this proposal was welcomed by 57 per cent of all voters and majorities in all political parties—a sharp corrective to the media and progressive narrative of British racism. These new Brits are likely to have a sceptical attitude to cultural revolutions and some knowledge of where they lead. Only recently some of them were waving Union Jacks rather than burning them, just as their fathers and mothers built a replica of the Statue of Liberty in Tiananmen Square.

# ASTRINGENCIES

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ANTHONY DANIELS

I don't know why, but ever since I was a child I have loved churchyards and cemeteries. I find them almost as irresistible to enter as bookshops, and when for some reason I pass one without having entered I feel a sense of missed opportunity. Perhaps it is because, like Pip in *Great Expectations*, I imbue the names and fragments of information inscribed on the tombstones with imaginary information of my own devising. There is nothing, I have found, to stimulate the imagination like a graveyard.

There is, in a sense, no more egalitarian institution than a cemetery. Of course, the tombs are apt to vary in size and grandeur according to the wealth and importance, or self-importance, of the family of the deceased; but the fundamental condition of being the resident of a cemetery, namely being dead, is the same for everyone. One man, one death.

The British were once very good at cemeteries. I know of at least three towns in Britain in which the cemeteries (one of them a churchyard) are by far the most attractive and agreeable places in the whole town, and certainly the best-kept. In one ancient town, turned into a visual hell by criminally-bad British architects, only the municipal cemetery, founded by the Victorians and still intact, provided some aesthetic relief. The cemetery gardener I spoke to said he liked working there because the residents were so well-behaved, something that could not easily be said of the residents of the rest of the town.

In another town, while resident for a few weeks there, I used to walk in the cemetery for pleasure. The Victorian chapels, overhung by yew trees, acted as a kind of balm to soothe my outrage at the surrounding functionalist ugliness. If form follows function, as the modernists claimed, goodness knows what horrible function they imagined that their buildings served.

In this cemetery was a section set aside for the graves of children. There was here a little grave of a child aged two who had died nearly fifty years before. On this grave was a vase with a single fresh

flower in it; and two years later, when I visited again, the vase was still there, and still with a fresh flower.

What a wealth of grief and suffering this simple sign suggested, that (I surmise) of a hopeful newlywed couple who perhaps had no further children to comfort them in what must now have been their old age! How small were my daily irritations compared with their grief! What impressed me also was the dignified lack of exhibitionism, that is to say the sincerity, of the gesture, very different from, say, the sensibility (or lack of it) shown in the immediate aftermath of Princess Diana's death, when extremity of expression was mistaken for depth of feeling.

I have reached an age when many of the buried in almost any cemetery died at an age earlier than my present one, and this, albeit fleetingly and without much practical effect on my subsequent conduct, induces a sense of guilt in me, especially when the deceased was born a number of years after me. Why have I been granted a longer life than they, almost certainly through no merit of my own? But a question that should be salutary, like most salutary questions, never lingers long. It is like confession in Catholicism: it has to be repeated because, however many times and however sincerely we may resolve to go and sin no more, somehow we never quite keep to our resolution. Perhaps that is why I have regularly to visit cemeteries.

Confined in Paris during the late (or perhaps first phase of the) COVID-19 epidemic, I was but a stone's throw from the Père Lachaise cemetery, where I love to walk. It is probably the cemetery with the highest concentration of famous residents or guests in the world, but during the confinement it was closed to the public, and this was of the greatest frustration to me. So near and yet so far! There seemed to me little logic to the closure of the public places of Paris while it was still permitted to walk in narrow streets. But I have long since given up considering myself the sole arbiter of what is permitted or not permitted to me, so I kept my

indignation within limits.

As soon as it re-opened to the public, I went in with the kind of relief that an alcoholic of the good or bad old days of severe licensing restrictions experienced when at long last the doors of the pub opened. I turned to the left, for an old lady of my acquaintance, whose brother had been deported in the last convoys of Jews to be deported before the Liberation, wanted me to take a photograph of the stela erected to the convoy's memory. Theirs was a bourne from which only a tiny handful of travellers returned (her brother not being among them), and the old lady had spent the last three quarters of a century without knowing what became of him.

A few hundred yards to the left of the entrance nearest my flat is the space of the cemetery that has monuments dedicated to those deported from France to the extermination and concentration camps of Nazi Germany. Strange to relate, this appalling subject has inspired modern sculptors to produce works of great expressive power, when the great majority of public monuments, in France as elsewhere, are of minimal artistic quality, to put it kindly. Perhaps Adorno, who famously (but erroneously) said that after Auschwitz there could be no more poetry, might have been nearer the mark if he had said that after Auschwitz there could be no more sculpture—though not *because* of Auschwitz, but for reasons internal to the history of art.

The monuments to the departed are next to what I call *Communist Corner*. Here are interred communist leaders such as Maurice Thorez and Georges Marchais, as well as members of the party's literary wing (their communist affiliations did not prevent them from being good poets), such as Paul Éluard and Louis Aragon. The whole area has a faded feel as if communism, once the opium of the French intelligentsia, is now as irremediably and harmlessly old-fashioned as patchouli or antimacassars. The Party, however, had its lists of people to be deported or eliminated, if it ever came to power. The question for it was not that of deportation or elimination as such, but of who was deporting or eliminating whom, a true example of the dialectic at work.

Oddly enough, by far the most be-flowered tomb in the cemetery is that of Alan Kardec, real name Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail, of whom I had not heard prior to my frequent promenades in the cemetery. He was a nineteenth-century French spiritist who took his pen-name from a suggestion by a spirit with which, or with whom, he was in contact. He has a particularly strong contemporary following in Brazil, numbering I believe in the millions, and it is mainly Brazilians who tend the tomb.

The care of Kardec and neglect of communists reminds me of a second-hand bookshop I once patronised, owned by a Marxist of the Enver Hoxha (Albanian) faction. It was always a matter of great chagrin to him that his customers were more interested in Bibles and books about spiritualism than they were in the memoirs of Enver Hoxha or the Marxist "classics" like *A Short History of the CPSU* or *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. I suppose he would have been deeply disappointed by Pèrre Lachaise, with its evidence of the false consciousness to which the masses are liable, rating Kardec over Thorez.

Alas, I have to report something which is not entirely creditable to human nature, at any rate in its contemporary form. A wave of thefts has occurred in the cemetery, with people carrying off funerary ornaments, stone crosses, busts, bas-reliefs, memorial slabs and so forth. Presumably they want them for ornaments in their own gardens, or maybe the marble slabs for kitchen islands. Perhaps there is a black market for them.

In the annals of crime, no doubt, these thefts count as minor; most of the tombs from which they occur are no longer tended carefully by descendants of the deceased. In that sense, no one, or no one specific, is a victim of them. And yet the thefts, from graves, tombstones and mausolea, make my heart sink. There is no linear measurement of human depravity.

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*Among Anthony Daniels's recent books is **In Praise of Folly: The Blind-Spots of Our Mind** (Gibson Square, 2019), published under his pen-name, Theodore Dalrymple.*

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# THE PHILISTINE

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SALVATORE BABONES

Everyone loves a good riot, or at least some wanton destruction. Monotheism got its start when Abraham trashed his father's idol shop. The fabled democracy of ancient Athens was little more than a century of mob rule. Mark Antony got started in politics by inciting a mob to burn down the houses of Brutus and Cassius. When Jesus overthrows the tables of the money changers, we cheer; when the chief priest questions his authority, we hiss. We are all Spartacus.

Who now stands up for Terah? Sparta? Brutus and Cassius? The money changers in the Temple? Even the Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation features revolution on its website, with Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* to topple a constitutional monarchy. The BBC's *Doctor Who* has helped a hundred alien races oust their governments; how often has he (or, more recently, she) checked back to see how the former rebels were using their newfound powers? If the history of decolonisation has taught us anything, it's that romantic revolutionaries rarely make responsible rulers.

The fashionable fascination with rioters and rioting is not confined to socialists, liberals or conservatives, to Left or Right. It seems to have much more to do with distance. The more remote the rioting, the more attractive it seems. Australians leapt to the defence of Hong Kong's anti-China (pro-democracy?) protesters when they burned metro stations last year, confronting police with bricks, petrol bombs and even an occasional bow and arrow. This year, your ABC is glorifying the burning of police stations across the United States. Hong Kong is a poke in the eye for China, after all, and Minneapolis is a long way from Ultimo.

Global news coverage of the riots, looting and arson that spread across America portrayed the "protests" as a righteous response to racially-tinged police brutality. Murder is murder, and the video footage of police officer Derek Chauvin kneeling on the neck of George Floyd is chilling indeed. Concerned bystanders repeatedly asked, then yelled at the police to stop. Floyd already had his hands cuffed behind his back, and there were at least four armed officers on the scene, so it's unlikely that he

could have posed any threat. Chauvin awaits the verdict of a jury of his peers.

Meanwhile America faces the jury of the press corps, which has fallen in love with the mayor of Minneapolis, Jacob Frey, an attractive young millennial who in looks, speech and politics resembles nothing so much as an American Justin Trudeau. He is a Democrat—the top five candidates in the city's Australian-style transferable preference voting system were all Democrats—who campaigned on a platform of (wait for it) police reform. Frey wanted to hire an additional 400 officers in a bid to reshape the force. The coronavirus put paid to that.

In America's mirror-image political colour scheme, Minneapolis is the bluest of blue cities in a consistently blue state. It is represented in Congress by the Somali-American former refugee Ilhan Omar. After going heavily for Bernie Sanders in the 2016 Democratic Party primaries, Minnesota (the state of which Minneapolis is the capital) voted overwhelmingly for Hillary Clinton in the ensuing presidential election. If the Derek Chauvin riots (it seems unfair to associate them with the apparently peaceable George Floyd) are a product of the divided America we hear so much about, it's an America divided between African-Americans and the Democrats who govern them.

Nearly all the cities that have been hit hard by riots and looting are long-time bastions of the Democratic Party. Yet when the party's presumptive presidential nominee, Joe "you ain't black" Biden, said in a teary-eyed video plea that George Floyd was a victim of America's "original sin" of "systemic racism", the media lapped it up. Biden's written follow-up statement condemning looting and rioting was less well reported. Not that he called it "looting" or "rioting". He wrote that "protest" was "an utterly American response" to injustice, but that "burning down communities" and "violence that endangers lives" were not. One out of three ain't bad.

The United States actually has long and glorious traditions of burning down communities and violence that endangers lives. In a country whose citizens refused to ratify their constitution until a promise was inserted that "the right of the people to

keep and bear arms shall not be infringed”, a certain degree of elemental savagery is to be expected. Biden and the Democrats who govern most of America’s big cities are caught in the contradiction of having to applaud violent “protesters” while calling for restraint. Donald Trump’s coolly matter-of-fact “looting leads to shooting” is more historically honest (if less politically correct).

For the fact is that riots and looting have been a way of life in America since before there was even a United States. Every American school-child knows about the 1770 riot remembered as the Boston Massacre. They learn especially that the first American to die in that confrontation was a mixed-race African-American and Native American former slave named Crispus Attucks. Their curriculum then moves on to the 1773 incident that has gone down in history as the Boston Tea Party. The East India Company called it looting and vandalism.

After the Revolution, the first major riots in the fledgling republic broke out in 1786, when Daniel Shays led a group of western Massachusetts frontier farmers to disrupt court proceedings for the collection of debts. George Washington, then in brief retirement before returning to lead the country as its first president in 1791, suggested that the rebels might be agents of “British influence disseminated by Tories”. Thus began the era of fake news. Captain Shays, a wounded war veteran who had been presented his officer’s sword by no less than the Marquis de Lafayette, was later pardoned for his crimes—but not for his debts.

Shortly after assuming the presidency, Washington had to deal with another frontier tax revolt led by a Revolutionary War veteran, the Whiskey Rebellion. Like Shays and his Massachusetts farmers five years earlier, western Pennsylvania’s Major James McFarlane and his distiller friends harassed tax collectors and disrupted court proceedings, this time over the collection of a new federal tax on alcohol. Unlike Shays, McFarlane lost his life in the revolt. The Massachusetts authorities were something of a soft touch. Washington meant business.

So does Trump. In response to the riots and looting, he put military police on standby, even as Minnesota’s (Democratic) governor Tim Walz

mobilised 10,000 troops from the state’s National Guard. The National Guard is a unique American institution, a survival of the old state militias from previous centuries. Nominally under state control, it is now trained, equipped and paid for by the federal government. It even has an air wing, though Minnesota’s F-16s and C-130s are unlikely to be deployed on the streets of Minneapolis.

More than a dozen other state governors have called out their own (ground) National Guards to buttress beleaguered city police forces as the “protests” have spread. “Protesters” looted a shopping mall in Los Angeles, a department store in Seattle, and retail outlets in Philadelphia. They set cars on fire throughout the country. They even attacked an Apple store in Brooklyn. Apple’s tempered glass cracked, but did not break.

In Atlanta, “protesters” attacked the headquarters of CNN, the erstwhile Cable News Network now reduced to initials—and almost to rubble. The (black, female, Democratic) mayor of Atlanta, Keisha Lance Bottoms, begged the “protesters” to spare the network, on which she often appeared. They ultimately diverted next door to the College Football Hall of Fame. In a choice between looting officially branded college football jerseys or CNN news anchor bobble-heads, it was no contest. Crisis averted.

Inevitably, the attack on CNN was blamed on ... Donald Trump. By repeatedly demonising the network on Twitter and in the White House press room, he apparently motivated a mob of young,

stone-throwing, skateboard-wielding “protesters” to spray-paint “F\*\*\* Trump” on the giant CNN logo that fronts their building. Meanwhile back in Washington, another group of “protesters” attacked a Fox News reporter because, you know, Trump has violated the sanctity of the press. Hey, if Jay-Z can have an entourage, so can Trump.

Trust Atlanta’s Mayor Bottoms to remember what really matters in all this: social distancing. Lecturing the kids that if “you were out protesting last night, you probably need to go get a Covid test this week”, she reminded them that “there is still a pandemic in America that’s killing black and brown people”. A viral pandemic, that is. Black lives matter, if not to the Minneapolis police, then at least to the Atlanta mayor. Now if only she can convince your ABC.

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# COMORBIDITY IN THE ENGLISH CURRICULUM

FRANK K. SALTER

Australian schools are coming out of shut-down, where for many weeks they have been sheltering from the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period the internet has proven of great value by allowing teachers to continue interacting with their students remotely, talking, listening and exchanging documents via computer.

One effect has been greater involvement by parents in their children's education. With distance schooling, parents can discover what their children experience in the classroom. So it was, sitting beside my thirteen-year-old son, I watched his English teacher present parts of the New South Wales curriculum for that subject. My reaction is expressed in the following letter of April 30.

Dear [teacher],

This letter concerns the English curriculum for Class 8E.

I've been helping [my son] with his Year 8 English assignments and notice that Lesson 4 does not deal with the subject of English.

The first question [of that Lesson] might come from a course on identity politics. It asks students to define and give examples of "social inequality, racism, segregation, ghettos, discrimination, civil rights, slavery". The second question involves researching the victimhood of African Americans in the United States. Students are asked to research slavery, the Civil Rights Movement, the Ku Klux Klan, Rosa Parks, the freedom rides, and the Black Lives Matter movement. Not one question was directed at literature, texts, poetry or songs. The topics are also deficient with respect to understanding the lives of African Americans, which is a larger story than victimhood.

I don't see how researching Rosa Parks or the racism of the Ku Klux Klan helps children understand poetic techniques or rhetorical devices. The questions do not seek to elicit such information. Neither do they engage with Australian culture.

Lesson 4 is not at all about English, and

all about politics and society viewed from an extremely ethnocentric and pessimistic black-American perspective. Students are not provided with opposed viewpoints.

This contrasts with an earlier lesson concerning Martin Luther King's famous "I have a dream" speech, which asked about rhetorical devices such as rhythm and rhyme. Lesson 6 is devoted to this speech. The speech has some relevance to English, despite being extensively plagiarised. Putting that aside, and King's degrading treatment of women, it would have been preferable to teach about your students' own culture. Why not the great wartime speeches by Menzies and Curtin (or Churchill and Roosevelt) in their stand against German and Japanese ethnic aggression, or the poetry and prose written by Australian prisoners of war subject to barbaric treatment?

You do suggest Lesson 4 is relevant to Australia in your spoken instructions, available online for the students. No Menzies or Curtin or POWs. Instead you adopt an indigenous perspective, and a decidedly pessimistic one, claiming that Australia has had a long history of racism: "[racial discrimination] is quite ingrained in Australian history, sadly, through all the stolen generations, the fact that indigenous Australians weren't even counted as citizens in the 1960s, they were still classed as flora and fauna ... Australia has a really dark history with racial discrimination and segregation."

I have to say, that is untrue and a slur on Australia and on the ancestors of your students. Like other societies derived from Europe, Australia is highly individualist, with relatively low levels of ethnic solidarity. Well before Federation indigenous Australians were British subjects and had the vote in all colonies except Queensland and Western Australia.

The example you give to the class is the federal government's recent lockdown policies to contain the COVID-19 virus. You note that Aborigines are asked to stay at home if they

are 50 years or older, but other Australians only when they are 70 or more. The cause of this difference, you say, is great racial or social inequality, which is shameful for Australia. No reference is made to causes that lie within indigenous communities. All the causes are matters of shame for Australia.

“So, the racial or the social inequality in Australia is so poor that indigenous Australians are classified when they’re 50 as 70. That is quite shameful; that’s not something we should be proud of as a country. We know there was a huge learning gap between indigenous Australians and white Australians so I think it is really imperative and timely that we should look at the social inequalities in our own country.”

Are these ideas—in the written assignment and your statements to the class—part of the NSW school curriculum? Does the NSW Department of Education require them to be taught?

If they are required, I should like to read the applicable part of the curriculum. Could you send me a reference or link?

Even if you are constrained to inflict this on the children there might be room to soften the Department’s propaganda with cautions, for example pointing students towards material relevant to the study of English that doesn’t defame their country, ancestors or heritage. Shouldn’t teachers protect their students from hateful ideologies?

I look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,  
Frank Salter

P.S. I have instructed [my son] not to submit Lesson 4. I cannot think of a way for him to answer the questions while remaining within the subject of English. Again, your suggestions would be welcome.

The teacher never did reply or send a curriculum link. Instead a deputy principal telephoned. He sympathised with my annoyance, but pointed out that if the lessons were changed he might receive another visit from local Aboriginal activists and be accused of racism. I counter-pointed that English in New South Wales has descended to ideology because teachers are expected to instruct pupils on non-literary subjects about which they are ignorant, such as American history and the sociology and psychology of race. Why not stick to analysing texts? The deputy principal explained that knowing how badly African Americans have been treated helps students understand the emotions expressed

in their speeches and songs.

I continued that my son’s class also studied the Stolen Generations. That is another contested, politicised subject. And it is being taught from one radical minority perspective. None of these subjects is like algebra or physics. There are different points of view.

I could have added that by substituting ideology for scholarship, the curriculum distorts students’ understanding of society. For example, it does not describe emotions expressed by blacks who are conservative or politically neutral or who do not resent whites or for whom identity politics is unimportant. Neither does it describe the emotions of whites hurt by these accusations or of those who reject them. Expressions of black victimhood and the social theory meant to explain it are both cherry-picked from the same narrow ideological perspective. It is unacceptable that the Department of Education adopts this approach.

The deputy principal suggested I forward my letter to an English adviser in the New South Wales Education Standards Authority, a body responsible for developing the curriculum. I did. My covering letter of May 11 contained the following message:

Please find attached a letter of complaint I sent to my son’s Year 8 English teacher at [his] School. The letter explains that I do not attribute all or even most of the [English lessons’] bias and national defamation to the teacher but to those who set the curriculum. I would appreciate receiving your response, as someone involved in curriculum development. Can you shed light on how high school English became politicised? Is there anybody involved in curriculum development in the NSW education system who disagrees with the present direction?

No reply has arrived and I am left with stark choices—leave my son in the public school system, pay for a private school, or undertake to school him at home. The first two options leave him exposed to the present ideological curriculum. Home schooling still must operate within the curriculum, but I would be able to filter out or soften its most mendacious and damaging elements. I’m thinking about it.

While my son remains at school I shall do what I can to shield him from lies and insults in the curriculum and those teachers who uncritically convey them.

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*Among Frank K. Salter’s books is **Emotions in Command: Biology, Bureaucracy, and Cultural Evolution.***

## An Academic Nursery Rhyme

There was an old scholar  
who lived in a shoe  
he applied for some grants  
that didn't come through

He revised all of physics  
invented a serum  
provided a proof  
of Fermat's last theorem

He wandered down paths  
wherever they led  
he did not leave footprints  
but footnotes instead

He focused on details  
what others had said  
splitting the hairs  
that grew on his head

He flew to a conference  
out over the sea  
he recorded it all  
in a book-length CV

On his way back  
he went for a float  
the floor struck a leak  
and down went the boat

He kept his composure  
for while he was sinking  
he busied himself  
with lateral thinking

They say he still teaches  
below the cold waves  
lecturing on Plato  
in seawater caves

His pupils are fish  
they gather in schools  
in afternoon labs  
they inspect molecules

Whales stop and listen  
and so do the sharks  
they grin at his jokes  
and learn about quarks

An octopus comes  
but don't be alarmed  
he takes notes for each student  
with each of his arms

And once in a while  
a mermaid glides by  
and listens to lectures  
while wondering why

Life in the ocean  
is meant to be free  
except for the cost  
of tuition and fees

The water refracts  
soft light like a prism  
but our scholar complains  
the sea's like a prison

At each convocation  
three hundred feet down  
it's hard to keep swimming  
while wearing a gown

Lectures to give  
essays to mark  
our hero's immersed  
in political snark

Trembling in fear  
of harassment complaints  
he lives like a monk  
and prays like a saint

With post-Modern tones  
he likes to transgress  
he lectures on Mondays  
wearing a dress

He triggers the students  
but not with a gun  
he owns a harpoon  
that shines like the sun

And sometimes it's true  
he dis-criminates  
while giving out marks  
and grading debates

Whenever he tires  
of meetings and things  
he takes tranquilizers  
to balance mood swings

He edits a journal  
called *Salt Water Studies*  
which publishes friends  
and all of his buddies

He fills it with jargon  
as clear as the mud  
composed every month  
in the heart of the flood

And maybe one day  
he'll win a great prize  
and thank Mr. Nobel  
with tears in his eyes

Or maybe again  
he'll just disappear  
an expert on trends  
of some far yesteryear

Defending a theory  
from some ancient day  
on the crest of a wave  
that just tumbles away.

*Louis Groarke*

# COVID-19 and the Perils of Expert-Driven Policy

When the Australian Senate's Select Committee on COVID-19 held its first public hearings on April 23, 2020, the first witness it called to appear was, quite naturally, the country's Chief Medical Officer (CMO), Professor Brendan Murphy. As Australia's CMO and chair of the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC), Professor Murphy was the public face of the government's coronavirus response. He told the Senate's COVID-19 Committee that he "first heard notification through the WHO [World Health Organisation] on New Year's Day, on 1 January that there was a cluster of pneumonia of unknown aetiology in Wuhan". For the next three weeks, he told the committee, he and the AHPPC were in "watching mode ... getting data out of the WHO, from our counterparts in other countries and from the CDC [the United States Centers for Disease Control]". Murphy said that on January 19, he and the AHPPC "moved to a very different mode", issuing a travel advisory for Wuhan and notifying the Australian National Incident Room.

What Professor Murphy actually told the public on Sunday, January 19, was:

The situation warrants close attention and an evidence-based response and there is no cause for alarm in Australia. Australia has well established mechanisms to respond to ill travellers at points of entry. Under Australian legislation airlines must report passengers on board showing signs of an infectious disease, including fever, sweats or chills. Planes reporting ill travellers are met on arrival by biosecurity officers who make an assessment and take necessary actions, such as isolation and referral to hospital where required. *The World Health Organization position does not currently recommend any travel advisory for China, or additional measures at airports beyond our established mechanisms ...* Australia has processes in place to enhance border measures in relation

to a communicable disease, if required, working through our established Health Protection system. [emphasis added]

In other words, he confirmed business as usual. Preparations for a travel advisory for Wuhan weren't actually announced until Tuesday, January 21. In that January 21 message, Murphy detailed the provisions that Australia would take at the border: "All passengers on these direct flights will receive information about the virus on arrival requesting that they identify themselves to biosecurity officers at the airport if they are unwell."

Once again, business as usual. That might not be surprising, except for the fact that on the previous day, January 20, China admitted that it had been lying to the world about the severity and infectiousness of the coronavirus, reporting 139 new cases in Wuhan, Beijing and Shenzhen. Cases were also reported in Japan, South Korea and Thailand. Knowledge of the new cases may or may not have called for a more aggressive public health response, but knowledge of China's obfuscation should have raised alarm bells in the National Security Committee of Cabinet (NSC) that the AHPPC, acting primarily on advice from the WHO, might not have access to accurate and complete information about the evolving epidemic.

Returning to Murphy's April appearance before the COVID-19 Committee, Senator James Paterson asked him "what were the key, most important, decisions that the government made" in the early days of the crisis. Murphy answered that "the most important early decisions were related to border measures". He went on to explain:

China was clearly, in that early phase, the epicentre. It wasn't just Hubei province; it was spreading rapidly in other provinces of China. We knew that the greatest risk to uncontrolled transmission was in imported cases. As an island, we were in a position of perhaps doing

border measures more effectively than other countries, so the unanimous health advice of the Health Protection Principal Committee was that we should do that.

If only that were true, Australia might have entirely avoided the massive economic disruption caused by coronavirus shutdowns inside the country. In fact, Murphy and the AHPPC repeatedly advised against more stringent border measures. On January 31, more than a week after China had locked down 50 million people in Wuhan and Hubei province, Murphy said at a joint press conference with Health Minister Greg Hunt:

The World Health Organization strongly recommends that ... nations do not ban flights from China because unless you lock down exit from the country, banning flights, direct flights, doesn't stop people coming from China ... It seems likely that China is increasingly blocking export of its residents, so they are reducing tour groups coming out of China and if the outbreak in provinces other than Hubei, which is now completely locked down, increase, *I believe they will stop exits from China which is a more effective way ...* So at the moment, our Health Protection Principal Committee does not recommend banning direct flights from China, *as it's not a public health measure.* [emphasis added]

According to his Senate remarks, Murphy woke up the very next morning, Saturday, February 1, to tell Hunt that an “urgent convening” of the NSC was needed to ban non-residents from entering Australia directly from China. The story was developed in the *Age* by Melbourne editor Jewel Topsfield and the *Sydney Morning Herald* by political editor Peter Hartcher. According to these two reports, on the morning of February 1, Murphy sent Hunt the message that “we now have sustained human-to-human transmission outside Wuhan; I think we are going to have to close the border to China”. Hunt called Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who ordered a meeting of the AHPPC. Hunt then set up a conference call with Murphy and Morrison. Murphy advised Morrison that “there’s a very strong risk of this spreading to Australia”, which prompted Morrison to ask, “Are you recommending that we close the border to China?” Murphy reportedly answered yes, prompting the NSC to act.

Yet when the AHPPC did meet on the morning of February 1, what they actually decided was to “expand the case definition for novel coronavirus infection from 1 February 2020 to apply to people from all of mainland China”. This, only after noting

“the increasing (but still relatively small) number of cases in provinces outside Hubei Province”. In other words, the AHPPC unanimously changed its opinion on travel from China, overnight, based on no new information or guidance from the WHO, which continued (and continues to this day) to recommend against restrictions on international travel. The NSC apparently considered the AHPPC’s definitional change to be “new and urgent information” and accordingly banned non-residents from entering Australia directly from China.

Speaking at a press conference the next day, Sunday, February 2, Murphy confirmed this account of the AHPPC’s reasoning, that the sweeping travel ban resulted from nothing more than a definitional change. He explained that:

Yesterday AHPPC came to the point where we believe that the spread of the virus outside of the Hubei Province in other provinces of China, *while still relatively small numbers*, represents evidence of sustained human-to-human transmission in those provinces. And we and other countries have now broadened our definition of the cases of potentially infected people to include anyone who has been in mainland China who has relevant symptoms. *A corollary of that is*, that extends to our travel warning and it also means that, given that we have undertaken a precautionary approach to quarantine people who had come back to infected areas; that used to apply to Hubei Province, but now it is applying to people who have come from mainland China from the 1st of February. [emphasis added]

A much more likely explanation of the AHPPC’s Saturday morning change of heart is the fact that the United States announced its own China travel ban on January 31, meaning that Australians awoke to the news on the morning of February 1. Murphy seems to have overlooked this fact in his April Senate remarks, when he said, “I think, in retrospect, our colleagues in ... the US regret that they didn’t do the same”—that is, impose restrictions on travel from China. Of course, the US did impose restrictions. Australia followed suit within twenty-four hours. It seems unlikely (to say the least) that this was a mere coincidence, but that is the story we have been asked to believe, by Murphy, by Hunt, and by the AHPPC.

Attempting to reconcile Professor Murphy’s April remarks to the COVID-19 Committee to his public statements as the crisis unfolded, it is just possible that in early February, the AHPPC

actually was keen to prevent the importation of coronavirus into Australia. But as the month wore on, it became more and more apparent that the AHPPC was in favour of relaxing border controls. On February 13, the AHPPC recommended that special exemptions to the China travel restrictions should be considered. On February 19, the AHPPC recommended that Year 11 and 12 students be allowed to travel from China to resume their studies in Australia, and that entry be considered for university students. On February 26, the AHPPC reiterated this advice, and began to build a case against restrictions on travel from Iran, Italy and South Korea: “extending travel bans to restrict travel from multiple countries is not likely to be feasible or effective in the medium term”. On February 29, the AHPPC flatly stated:

AHPPC believes that, in general, *border measures can no longer prevent importation of COVID-19* and does not support the further widespread application of travel restrictions to an increasing number of countries that have community transmission ... Whilst preventing entry to Australia for travellers from Iran ... could be considered by government and would assist in compliance with self-isolation, AHPPC was concerned that further travel restrictions may set an unrealistic expectation that such measures are of ongoing value for further countries. [emphasis added]

Ignoring the AHPPC’s advice, the NSC imposed a ban on travel from Iran the next day. On March 4, the AHPPC explicitly recommended against imposing a travel ban on South Korea. The NSC imposed one anyway. One week later, the AHPPC didn’t even bother to issue a statement to guide the government’s March 11 decision to ban travel from Italy. On March 18, in advance of the government’s March 19 decision to impose a worldwide travel ban, the AHPPC actually argued that an open borders policy would be equally effective:

AHPPC noted that there is no longer a strong basis for having travel restrictions on only four countries and that Government should consider aligning these restrictions with the risk. This could involve *consideration of lifting all travel restrictions*, noting the imposition of universal quarantine and a decline in foreign nationals travel, or consideration of the imposition of restrictions on all countries, while small numbers of foreign nationals continue to arrive. [emphasis added]

The picture that emerges from a detailed reading of the public statements made by Professor Murphy and the AHPPC throughout the first three months of the coronavirus crisis is of a health establishment that was committed to following WHO travel advice to fight the coronavirus in the community instead of stopping it at the border. The bizarre reported sequence of events on the morning of the February 1 China travel ban becomes much more intelligible if it is surmised that Murphy and the AHPPC in reality opposed travel restrictions, but were pressured into recommending them by the political leadership, who would have been shaken by the overnight news of America’s China travel ban. This would also make sense of Murphy’s extraordinarily sophisticated explanation that the travel ban was merely the “corollary” of an overnight definitional change.

In the light of the AHPPC’s later pressure to loosen the China travel ban and resistance to further travel restrictions, Murphy’s claim to the Select Committee that he believed “the most important early decisions were related to border measures” beggars belief. He told the Senate:

we put in border measures stopping all flights from China. We put in measures stopping people coming from Iran and the Republic of Korea. We then started some very enhanced border measures and progressively hyped up our recommendations to DFAT to increase the travel advisories. We have now really closed our borders.

All true, but little or none of this seems to have reflected his own advice at the time. Quite the contrary: it seems to have been the NSC that pushed for tighter border security measures.

The superior performance of the political leadership over the professional bureaucracy in this regard should not be surprising. In this crisis, good border security policy depended more on political judgment than on medical advice. In the internet age, the best medical knowledge and opinions are available to everyone who cares to access them. From mid-January, all of the information needed for the formulation of an effective border response to the coronavirus crisis was freely available on the internet. Australia was, as Murphy suggested in his Senate remarks, in the “position of perhaps doing border measures more effectively than other countries”. Had Australia acted more aggressively to limit and quarantine airport arrivals and followed Asia’s early lead in banning cruise ships, it might have saved hundreds of billions of dollars and avoided the self-quarantine of 25 million people.

Decision-making in a crisis is a heavy responsibility, and it is much easier to criticise decisions in retrospect than to get them right at the time. Nevertheless, decision-makers should be able to rely on well-informed, unbiased, candid advice from experts. These experts have a responsibility, at a bare minimum, to take into proper account facts that are well known. In their advice on travel restrictions from mid-February through their final abrogation of responsibility on March 18, the AHPPC seems not to have met this most basic of expectations. Only a full investigation can reveal exactly why the AHPPC appeared so keen to follow WHO advice against imposing travel restrictions at a time when the seriousness of the threat posed by the coronavirus had already become well known—but one strong force that had the potential to bias the AHPPC’s travel advice is moral hazard.

Moral hazard is “the expectation that organisations (and their leaders) will reap the rewards of success but others will bear the burdens of failure”. The AHPPC certainly faced serious moral hazards in all of its decision-making, since success in keeping Australia safe from the coronavirus would have meant honours for the members of the AHPPC but failure would impose costs on society at large. A focus on responding with internal public health measures instead of external border security measures would also have highlighted the importance of the AHPPC members’ own departments. As things have turned out, Professor Murphy and the AHPPC have in fact been widely lauded for their “fearless” advice to government. The hundreds of billions of dollars that this advice has cost the country have been debited from other accounts.

In reality, whether in the spirit of collegiality with their colleagues at the WHO or for reasons of their own, Murphy and the members of the AHPPC seem to have resisted the imposition of travel bans until it became politically impossible for the government to continue to accept their advice. Even in the case of the momentous decision to close the border with China, the AHPPC held on to its anti-closure position until the last politically possible moment. In Murphy’s account, the Saturday morning decision to reverse course on the China travel ban was due to the fact that “sustained transmission” of the coronavirus was no longer occurring only in Wuhan, but in the rest of China as well. Yet just the day before, he had explained that Australia

should keep its borders open, not because there was no sustained human-to-human transmission outside Wuhan, but because the AHPPC believed that it would be more effective to rely on China to impose exit restrictions. This was entirely consistent with WHO advice.

The WHO, in the highly-publicised report of the second meeting of its Emergency Committee on January 30, had already admitted that “human-to-human transmission has occurred outside Wuhan and outside China”, though without using the qualifier “sustained”. By January 31 Australia time, it had already been widely reported in the world’s media that the coronavirus had spread to every region of China, and at least four provinces outside Wuhan had more than 1000 confirmed cases. At the time, it was also already well known among infectious disease experts that the “confirmed” cases constituted only a fraction of the total cases in China. Guangdong province alone, hosting over a thousand coronavirus cases (including at least two Australians), sent 77,787 passengers to Australia in January 2020. On January 31, no one reading the news could have been unaware of the sustained human-to-human transmission of the coronavirus outside Wuhan and Hubei province—and the risk this posed to Australia.

The exact relationships among the CMO, the broader AHPPC, and the NSC necessarily remain

opaque, but it seems clear from a close reading of AHPPC statements and Murphy’s public comments that:

- The AHPPC shared the WHO’s strong predisposition to oppose travel restrictions
- The inclination to impose a China-wide travel ban did not originate with the CMO or the AHPPC
- The AHPPC, following the WHO’s reasoning, consistently advised the government to rely on China itself to contain the coronavirus within its borders

In addition to the AHPPC’s incentives to align with the advice coming from the WHO, Australian governments (including state governments, which are represented on the AHPPC) faced strong incentives not to embarrass China with a travel ban. China was well known to vehemently oppose travel bans. Australia has a contentious diplomatic relationship with China, despite the fact that corporate Australia relies heavily on China as an export destination, investment source and business partner. This tension is reflected in Australia’s state-level

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economic diplomacy relationships with China, with Victoria and Western Australia pursuing closer relationships with China in recent years despite federal pressure to be more cautious. Australian governments thus also faced moral hazards in their coronavirus response emanating from their political relationships with China. The extent to which this may have affected policy advice and policy-making is, of course, unknown.

There were also strong economic arguments not to ban travel from China. The strongest of these came from the international education sector, including its most powerful component, the universities. Australian airlines, by comparison, were not very dependent on China: out of a quarter of a million seats available on non-stop flights from China to Australia in January, only 5.7 per cent were on Qantas, and none on Virgin Australia. Tourism operators were generally small companies lacking political power, and in any case tourism from China was collapsing even without travel restrictions. The only large, powerful organisations that expected customers to travel from China regardless of the coronavirus epidemic were Australia's universities, in particular its influential Group of Eight universities. That these universities were all public institutions only added to their influence.

As the universities and their industry bodies warned at the time, the China travel ban has cost Australian higher education dearly. The Mitchell Institute of Victoria University in Melbourne estimates the likely lost revenues due to coronavirus at \$19 billion spread over three years. Of course, most of these losses would have been realised anyway, as the coronavirus would have cut off most international educational travel by the end of March 2020, whether or not Australia had imposed its February 1 China travel ban. The crucial counterfactual is that Australian universities would have retained many Chinese students for the first semester of 2020, had the travel ban taken effect just a few weeks later. Nonetheless, in February the Centre for Independent Studies estimated the likely first-semester revenue losses to all Australian educational institutions due to the China travel ban at between \$2.8 billion and 3.8 billion—still a very substantial sum.

These potential losses seem almost certain to have been the primary consideration behind the AHPPC's arguments starting in mid-February that the China travel ban should be relaxed. In its statements over that period, the AHPPC repeatedly floated the prospect of relaxing travel bans for students, and students only. It never so much as mentioned relaxing restrictions for business people, investors or extended family, to say nothing of tour-

ists. The one time that the travel ban actually was relaxed, in late February, the only group allowed in were Year 11 and 12 students (and their guardians), an action specifically cited by the AHPPC as a prelude to admitting tertiary students. Standing next to the federal authorities at the press conference convened to announce the partial travel opening was the Victorian Education Minister, James Merlino. Australia's top universities may or may not have lobbied the government in private for a relaxation of China travel restrictions, but their financial dependence on China was well known. An August 2019 paper from the Centre for Independent Studies characterised it as "extreme".

The tragedy of moral hazard is that to avoid upsetting a major trading partner or to save a few billion dollars in international student revenue, the Australian government came very close to inviting more than 100,000 Chinese students to fly to Australia at the height of China's nationwide coronavirus outbreak. In the end, the Australian government avoided this outcome, but only because the advice of the AHPPC was disregarded, not because its advice was followed. Prime ministerial pronouncements that national policy would be "guided by the expert medical advice of the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee" must be taken with a grain of salt. When it came to imposing and maintaining Australia's travel bans, the NSC repeatedly acted against the spirit (if not the letter) of the AHPPC's expert medical advice. The country is lucky that it did.

If the advice on border security offered by Australia's health authorities was potentially coloured by moral hazards, the actions taken were even more compromised by the malady of "proformalist" reasoning. Proformalism is the practice of treating stylised facts as if they were actual facts. It is characterised by "box-ticking the letter of the law while completely ignoring its intentions". If Australia had a narrow escape from moral hazard in its coronavirus border security response, it fell prey instead to proformalism of its isolation and quarantine procedures.

In its travel-related coronavirus statements throughout the crucial period of February and early March, the AHPPC consistently endorsed "self-isolation" or "self-quarantine" at home as the proper response for travellers returning from coronavirus hotspots. It described such unmonitored self-isolation as "a highly precautionary approach" that constituted a "strict quarantine requirement", despite being self-enforced and relying entirely on voluntary compliance, with no official follow-up. As one colourful account described the procedure:

Our plane was held at the gate while a customs official moved through handing out bits of paper explaining the self-isolation rules: a single A4 sheet that most passengers around us folded up and stuffed in a bag. In the terminal everything proceeded as normal, until we spotted a tiny sign directing those who had been in China, Korea, Iran or Italy in the last 14 days to move to a separate area for “enhanced screening” ... One of those gowned medical staff came and took our temperature and asked if we had any symptoms of coronavirus. We said we didn’t, and so were pointed back in the direction of the general immigration area.

This account from travel writer Ben Groundwater describes events that took place at the end of March, though they mirror exactly the procedures announced by Professor Murphy at the end of January for arrivals from Wuhan. These procedures could only be characterised as “highly precautionary” on the pro forma assumption that all passengers would correctly identify for advanced screening, the pro forma assumption that all passengers would appropriately self-isolate, and the pro forma assumption that no passengers were infectious while in transit, whether or not they were symptomatic. Violate any of these pro forma assumptions, and airport arrivals halls had the potential to turn into massive cauldrons of coronavirus transmission.

With the exception of the Wuhan evacuees quarantined in Christmas Island in early February, Australia didn’t impose supervised quarantines on arriving passengers until March 29, long after the futility of self-isolation should have been clear. It shouldn’t have taken press reports of coronavirus-infected returnees shopping, eating out and playing golf to alert Australia’s chief health officers to the fact that handing out fliers on arrival at the airport did not ensure effective case isolation. When Australia did start imposing real quarantines, they applied to all travellers, from risky or safe areas, infected or not. Yet by this time, most of the coronavirus cases that would enter Australia from overseas had already entered. The horse had already bolted.

The *Ruby Princess* fiasco further illustrates the dangers of proformalist reasoning. Following the closure of Asian ports in mid-February, cruise operators were permitted to redirect capacity to Australia. Ships like the *Ruby Princess* were also

allowed to sail between Australia and New Zealand because both were categorised as “low risk” countries. This pro forma approach to risk did not incorporate the lessons that should have been learned from the *Diamond Princess*, on which a single initial coronavirus case spawned 634 infections. That was known nearly three weeks before the *Ruby Princess* even set sail. The *Ruby Princess* was allowed to operate because pro forma it represented a low risk of departing with a case or picking one up in New Zealand. But if even one of its 2647 passengers did have coronavirus—or, more to the point, any one of the thousands of passengers on any of the dozens of cruise ships that were allowed to sail from Australia in February and March—Australia would have another *Diamond Princess* on its hands.

Proformalism was similarly implicated in the decision to allow the *Ruby Princess* to dock at Sydney’s Circular Quay with no additional health precautions. Because it had only travelled to New Zealand, and New Zealand was a low-risk country, pro forma the ship posed a low risk of coronavirus infection. The same was true of every individual ship that was allowed to dock without checks. Of course, it was tragically not true of the cruise ship industry as a whole. Whatever the result of the criminal investigation into the legal responsibility for the decision to allow

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*As the experience of Taiwan has demonstrated, the coronavirus battle could and should have been fought at the border.*

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the *Ruby Princess* to offload without precautions, the intellectual fault at the centre of the fiasco is clear. Proformalist reasoning at all points made the *Ruby Princess* disaster possible, and a disaster like it almost inevitable. In allowing the cruise industry to operate (and, indeed, expand) throughout March, Australia’s health authorities considered only the pro forma criteria that were already in place before the coronavirus crisis began. They abjectly failed to learn from the real-world events that the rest of the world was following live on television.

The coronavirus has turned into a truly global pandemic, but Australia’s coronavirus-prompted economic “hibernation” (to use the Prime Minister’s word for it) could have been averted by simple good sense. As the experience of Taiwan has demonstrated, the coronavirus battle could and should have been fought at the border. All that was needed for Australia to dodge the coronavirus bullet (and save hundreds of billions of dollars) was for the country to have:

- Imposed travel restrictions on countries at the point when the coronavirus became endemic in

those countries

- Enforced monitored quarantine on Australian residents returning home from those countries
- Suspended cruise ship sailings in February

The first action simply seems like good old common sense—although it was not a sense common to the WHO or the Australian public health community. The second should have followed on from the quarantine restrictions imposed on the Wuhan evacuees; it is a mystery why Australia’s public health authorities felt that February returnees from Wuhan required such extreme isolation, while later returnees from coronavirus hotspots like Iran, South Korea, Italy and the United States could be trusted to self-isolate at home on their own recognisance. Finally, it is incredible that the cruise industry was allowed to continue to operate (and even expand its operations) in Australia as ship after ship around the world fell prey to coronavirus outbreaks.

When Professor Murphy appeared before the Select Committee on COVID-19 on April 23, he told Senator Paterson that throughout the coronavirus crisis, “government decisions, both federal and state, have at all times been advised by

the consolidated national advice from the AHPPC”. In a strictly pro forma sense, that statement probably is true. But this kind of proformalist thinking is what introduced the coronavirus into Australia in the first place. Had the NSC discounted the advice of Murphy and the AHPPC, discounted the China-influenced advice of the WHO, and relied on their own good judgment about border security, Australia likely would have avoided a crisis altogether. As the rollout of the useless and unused COVIDSafe app has shown, if you have a hammer, every problem is a nail. For Murphy and the AHPPC, their hammer was a public health response involving hospital preparations and self-isolation for the entire country. Border security was not really their remit. Border security is the responsibility of the NSC. By relying too heavily on public health advice, the NSC let down its guard, and let in the coronavirus.

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*Salvatore Babones contributes The Philistine column in Quadrant. A footnoted version of this article has been submitted to the Australian Senate’s Select Committee on COVID-19, and is available at Quadrant Online.*

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## Willowwitch

Willowwitch weaves her streaming hair  
 White hands fashion a willow snare  
 A secret smile on her cold, cold lips  
 Green ropes flow from her fingertips

Leafy ribbons of green and gold  
 Fall to flow on the river cold  
 Leafy garlands of gold and green  
 Fall to flow on the willow stream

In a tangle of leaves the maiden drifts  
 Upstream or down as the eddy shifts  
 With willowy snarls her limbs are bound  
 Fair floats the hair of the maiden drowned.

Willowwitch weaves her leaves afresh  
 With elfin craft her willow mesh  
 Her new snare floats near the treacherous shoal  
 Like a jewel from her throat hangs the maiden’s soul.

*Gabrielle Lord*

# The Unnecessary Devastation of the Lockdown

As of May 22, Australia had suffered 7088 cases of COVID-19 and 102 people had died with the virus. Most of the fatalities were men aged between seventy and eighty-nine. A sizeable proportion of those admitted to ICU in hospitals were suffering from comorbidity issues such as cardiac disease and diabetes. Australia's Chief Medical Officer (CMO) has told a Senate inquiry that the Australian government's actions to lock down the economy saved 14,000 lives.

In the meantime, Camilla Stoltenberg, director of Norway's public health agency, has confessed:

Our assessment now, and I find that there is a broad consensus in relation to the reopening, was that one could probably achieve the same effect—and avoid part of the unfortunate repercussions—by not closing. But, instead, staying open with precautions to stop the spread.

The cost to the Australian economy of the global pandemic could be as high as one thousand billion dollars, with an additional direct cost to the taxpayer of \$260 billion in this year alone. It will be a while before our Prime Minister and the state premiers admit that the continuing lockdown was entirely unnecessary and unjustified.

With the support of 289 or more top economists, on April 19 four economists, Edmond, Hamilton, Holden and Preston, denied “that there is a trade-off between the public health and economic aspects of the crisis”. I answered this in an article in the *Australian* on May 13. Holden and Preston later estimated that without lockdowns and similar interventions but presumably with voluntary social distancing, out of our population of 25.5 million 225,000 would have died, based on an assumed fatality rate of 1 per cent and yielding an incredible rate of 882 deaths per 100,000 residents.

The claimed deaths saved are higher than

argued by Australia's CMO by a factor of sixteen times. The same methodology yields nearly three million deaths in the US and seventy million globally. But is this astute economic analysis, or simply fanciful alarmism and fearmongering designed to frighten Australians into acceptance of continuing lockdown?

If one were to accept the Holden–Preston analysis, with an assumed valuation of A\$4.9 million per whole of life, the cost of not locking down is placed at A\$1.1 trillion. As Paul Frijters has pointed out, deaths are largely confined to the elderly and infirm with very low life expectancy, reducing this outlandish estimate by 95 per cent to a slightly more plausible A\$55 billion; and applying the same methodology to the CMO's more conservative estimate yields a more modest figure of \$3.4 billion in comparison with the Commonwealth's outlay in excess of \$260 billion—which is an expenditure of \$76 for every dollar saved!

These Holden–Preston death-rate estimates are extreme even relative to discredited forecasts made by Neil Ferguson of Imperial College, London, in March 16, of 510,000 UK deaths and 2.2 million US deaths. These forecasts, with little if any scientific justification, prompted massive lockdowns in the UK and the US, and in much of the rest of the world including Australia.

So far, the UK has experienced 34,600 deaths (54 per 100,000) associated with the virus and the US approaching 100,000 (30 per 100,000), and the global total is 340,876 as of May 22, a very modest rate of 3.7 deaths per 100,000 so far. This is less than 0.5 per cent of the deaths projected by Holden–Preston. Why are these death rates so much higher than Australia's? Unlike Australia, the UK, with tens of millions of new arrivals in the last few months, is only now commencing mild quarantining arrangements. Similarly, quarantining arrangements and bans on non-resident entry to the US did not take place.

By contrast, the far worse “Spanish flu” pandemic

of 1918-19 that killed 50 million people worldwide resulted in 12,000 deaths in Australia with only quarantining and social distancing and no lockdowns. This represented a death rate of 236 per 100,000 people or 0.59 per cent of the 40 per cent of the population who caught the flu.

This death rate from by far the worst pandemic to hit the globe in over 100 years is benign compared to the Holden-Preston figure of 882 COVID-19 deaths per 100,000, a factor of 3.7 times higher. The Spanish flu was indiscriminate, killing the young and healthy as well as the vulnerable, while COVID-19 is largely confined to the elderly and those with severe comorbidity factors.

What this analysis does not recognise is that, like Taiwan, Australia is an island nation. While both nations have similar populations, Taiwan is much closer to the Wuhan epicentre of the virus origin. Taiwan began testing arrivals from Wuhan for flu symptoms from December 31, 2019, but Australia did not restrict access from China until February 1, with a ban on all non-resident entry on March 20.

Today Taiwan has had 441 cases and seven deaths. Hence their infection rate has been 6 per cent of ours and their death rate 7 per cent. Moreover, their far superior result to ours, at least from a short-term perspective, was achieved simply by strict quarantining, banning of cruise ships, testing and tracing of carriers, with voluntary social distancing and hand-washing. As a result, their economy is suffering less than many others, with their exports expanding.

The Australian death rate is 0.4 per 100,000 residents, compared with 51 for the UK, France 43, and the USA 29. While it is likely that the 100-fold higher rate in Europe could be partly due to higher population density and adverse climatic factors including winter, a more plausible explanation is the ability of Australia to impose quarantining earlier and more effectively than in Europe.

Despite the slowness with which Australia closed its borders, and mindful of the *Ruby Princess* debacle, infections in Australia peaked before the introduction of severe lockdowns and domestic border closures that were always completely unnecessary. Interstate border closures were never supported by the Australian government on medical or other grounds and seem to contravene Section 92

of the Constitution. In the United States, the most common comprehensive social distancing policy adopted is a shelter-in-place order (SIPO) which requires residents to remain in their homes for all but essential activities.

Dave, Friedson, Matsuzawa and Sabia analyse the difference in the infection rate and death rate between the forty-two states which imposed SIPO laws and the eight Republican states which did not. The study finds that lockdown was effective in reducing the number of detected COVID-19 cases by 44 per cent, but was not able to estimate a statistically significant lower death toll other than noting that it appeared to be lower.

The study is unable to explain the much better record of some states such as Florida that did not lock down than states such as New York that did.

To date, New York City with lockdown in place has suffered 16,565 confirmed COVID-19 deaths and an additional 4749 probable deaths, which is a rate of 113 per 100,000, far above even the rate experienced by Belgium, the country which is worst in the world. This contrasts with Florida which has suffered 2233 deaths, a rate of 11 deaths per 100,000; while worse than Australia's performance it is good in comparison with many US states that did lock down.

The differences are in part due to philosophy. New York Governor Cuomo declared a universal policy: "We need everyone to be safe, or no one can be safe," in locking

down all "non-essential" activity, despite not closing either the airports or mass transit. COVID-19 sufferers in New York were forced to return to aged-care homes to free up beds in hospitals. As a result, many thousands of the elderly died in these infected homes.

By contrast, Florida Governor DeSantis prohibited visitors to nursing and aged-care homes and urged the most vulnerable to stay home. Florida is both more humid and less congested than New York City, perhaps accounting for some of the vastly lower death rate. But the large number of Florida retirees makes Florida even more vulnerable than New York City.

The very nature of lockdowns seems to be designed to promote more deaths in certain areas. People confined in cramped and poorly ventilated spaces indoors with insufficient exercise and limited access to sunlight are naturally going to become more vulnerable to flu-like viruses. This

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*The evidence from Taiwan, Norway and the US does not indicate that lockdown is either necessary or more effective than voluntary social distancing in combination with protecting the vulnerable.*

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was made worse in Australia as nearly all hospital beds were emptied for COVID-19 sufferers who never showed up. Over 7000 respirators have been provided but fewer than twenty have been used. Was this the precautionary principle in action or simply panic?

Contrast confinement on a cruise ship and being free to enjoy healthy beach and ocean exercise in warm sunlight. Police helicopters and boats, eight-foot fencing along much of the coastline and shores lined with police officers, were used in a hugely expensive and futile attempt to drive swimmers and surfers out of the water in many parts of Australia. Perhaps in a sustained effort to protect dolphins from the threat of COVID-19, socially-distancing surfers were driven from the water at McKenzie's Bay near Bondi on numerous occasions presumably by police concerned with animal rights. But the surfers with little regard for dolphins were back in the water within minutes.

Another study by Brzezinski, Deiana, Kecht and Van Dijke, using a panel dataset based on 40 million smartphone devices across the United States, combined with detailed data on state- and county-level government policies, finds that compulsory lockdown increased the time spent at home by up to 39 per cent but voluntary social distancing also increased the time spent at home. They find that higher socio-economic groups were more likely to respond to physical separation advice, and they recommend voluntary distancing as far more cost-effective than lockdown. However, they do consider stronger measures in areas where voluntary response is problematic.

Hence the evidence from Taiwan, Norway and the US does not indicate that lockdown is either necessary or more effective than voluntary social distancing in combination with protecting the vulnerable, in reducing COVID-19 morbidity. Two other South-East Asian countries, South Korea and Japan, urged voluntary social distancing and introduced strict tracing and testing but did not enforce lockdown. South Korea has suffered 263 deaths so far, a rate of 0.51 per 100,000, comparable to Australia but perhaps with a lower economic cost, and Japan has suffered 749 deaths, a rate of 0.6 per 100,000, also comparable to Australia's with lower social cost.

Edmond, Holden and Preston cite the absence of mandatory lockdown in Sweden as an indication of what might have happened in Australia if we had followed the same path. On the face of it, the Swedish experience does not look spectacularly successful in the short term with 3925 deaths to date or a rate of 39 per 100,000 residents. While this is far lower than many other European countries that

did lock down, such as the UK and France, and less than half that of Belgium with a rate of 81 per 100,000, it is far higher than Australia's and even its neighbour, Denmark, that did lock down and also instigated severe quarantine restrictions.

What accounts for the apparently poorer performance of Sweden relative to its near neighbour in the very short term? Most likely, it has little to do with the difference in lockdown policies but could be accounted for by the fact that, unlike its neighbour, it kept its borders open while at the same time, like Australia, it provides generous public subsidies to displaced workers and firms. Hence it is not surprising that its economic costs are not obviously much lower than Australia's and the initial death rate at least, higher due to the absence of quarantining.

Hence the evidence indicates that Australia's excellent COVID-19 record so far is due to relatively early closing of international borders and voluntary social distancing. Compulsory lockdown came late in the piece and has made very little difference other than greatly increasing economic costs and adding to the feeling of social isolation, increased threat of family violence, and the appearance at least of home detention.

It is true that people could venture out for exercise so long as they stayed confined to their local area and did not sit down in the park or anywhere else, while denied access to beaches, oceans, pools, gyms, holiday homes, hotels, pubs, restaurants, community sport and all forms of live entertainment and travel. How easily are people convinced that the government has the right to remove most of their freedoms on no more than a whim!

Most of the unpopular measures such as school closure, closure of beaches and water access, bans on sitting on park benches while still social distancing, bans on golf and fishing, and bans on entry to a number of states, were instigated by some state premiers contrary to medical advice provided to the Commonwealth government. Queensland's CMO, Dr Jeanette Young, stated: "while evidence showed schools were not a high-risk environment for the spread of the virus, closing them down would help people understand the gravity of the situation". In other words, people needed to be frightened "for their own good", a task which Holden-Preston have taken up with alacrity.

Can one argue that this peculiar medical advice to close safe schools was an improvement on the frightening medicine provided to patients in Florence during the plague of 1629, consisting of "oil of crushed scorpions in Greek wine"? Closing schools has contributed to the massive economic

burden on the economy and Australia's rapid decline in educational standards.

Estimating the cost in Australia of compulsory lockdown, state border closures and bans on travel is difficult, as voluntary social distancing would have reduced domestic travel and use of venues such as dining in restaurants, clubs and cinemas in any case. International travel restrictions would have reduced revenues for the university sector from foreign students and the international tourism industry would still have suffered.

Much of this extreme voluntary social distancing was doubtless excessive and not warranted on medical grounds but was promoted by alarmism and fearmongering from media, academic economists, public servants and all forms of government. Holden–Preston assume a 10 per cent fall in GDP this year alone, with no long-term effects and a very conservative cost of the COVID-19 crisis of \$180 billion but argue, inconsistently, that this grossly overestimates the cost of shutting down as voluntary social distancing would have been costly even without forced closure of much business activity. Might not voluntary social distancing have saved 225,000 lives even without lockdown? Paul Frijters argues persuasively that the true cost of the global pandemic on Australia is likely to be six times higher than that estimated by Holden–Preston, making it \$1,080 billion.

Holden–Preston, having already argued that voluntary social distancing was going to cost 225,000 lives without forced closure, are hardly consistent in arguing that half the total cost would have been incurred anyway. Hence, according to the Holden–Preston analysis, we are left with a net cost of \$90 billion from the shutdown but no sign of any benefit as voluntary social distancing, international quarantining, testing, and tracing would have done the job anyway at far lower cost. Their entire \$1.1 trillion, or more credible \$55 billion, benefit from lockdown is vacuous.

Holden–Preston then argue that a \$320 billion (16.4 per cent of GDP) cost of supporting the economy during the compulsory shutdown is not a cost but simply a transfer of resources from one part of society to another. Since it is paid for initially by borrowing, the immediate impact is on the young and future generations. While this figure

comes from Josh Frydenberg, a \$60 billion overstatement in the government's JobKeeper estimate means that it is actually lower at \$260 billion once this error is corrected.

So we learn that this sizeable boost to the social security budget to pay about three and a half million people to quit work and perhaps do nothing at home comes at no cost, other than "the economic distortions coming from raising the revenue to service the spending". In fact, we learn from Holden–Preston that this cost is likely to be "tiny" as it will simply raise our international debt obligations at a time when real interest rates are low.

Suppose we have two otherwise identical workers, each creating equal value of \$1500 per fortnight, but one is employed in an "essential service" and the other is not. The latter is placed out of work by shutdown orders and receives a JobKeeper payment of \$1500 per fortnight. Not only does GDP fall by \$1500 per fortnight due to the forced lockdown but the essential worker is now taxed \$1500 per fortnight to support the now unemployed person in idleness. Since he cannot afford to pay the tax, the essential worker joins the inessential worker in idleness. The cost of the lockdown has now doubled to \$3000 per fortnight. Hence, I cannot

*Forced lockdown in  
a highly responsible  
society such as  
Australia's yields  
no lives saved  
but huge and  
devastating economic  
costs and future  
deaths arising from  
economic despair.*

agree that a policy of paying people not to work is "costless".

If adding debt is essentially "costless", I am puzzled as to why we have taxes at all, since these are highly distorting and come at huge cost. Why not go one step further with this costless funding and pay the entire nation not to work? What is wrong with zero GDP? Surely, everyone would be better off if we exploited unlimited international borrowing capacity. Despite what one might infer from these statements, taxpayers will need to be slugged this additional \$260 billion cost in a year in which the budget was supposed to be in surplus for the first time in decades.

One can identify some benefit from JobKeeper subsidies, as they retain a link between employer and employee. It is the lockdowns which have forced about three and a half million people into idleness. According to Australia's CMO, this outlay has saved 14,000 lives at a cost of \$19 million per life, but in reality, probably close to zero lives.

Yes, in a world in which resources are essentially free, why worry about who is going to meet the largely unnecessary bill of \$260 billion or \$10,200

for every Australian man, woman and child? There is an upside for the non-economists in our midst. If resources are free, then there is no need to employ any economists and nor to train them. I find it surprising that a large number of top economists should argue that they are either redundant or perhaps should be made redundant.

According to the May 7 statement from the Australian Medical Association, between an extra 750 and 1500 more suicides may occur annually, in addition to the 3000-plus lives that are lost to suicide already every year, due to the expected increase in job loss and business failure arising from the shutdown. Could simply fear of the virus itself generate a sizeable loss of life from suicide? Very unlikely. The virus could have been presented simply as yet another form of flu that would affect a small vulnerable portion of the population but would be mild or unnoticeable for the bulk of the population.

Holden–Preston argue that these effects are small relative to the mass deaths of 225,000 people that they envisage but are unable to justify. Moreover, from the perspective of deaths, they envisage economic crises as being beneficial, as there are fewer deaths in the workplace and on the roads. Yes, almost certainly the mortality rate has fallen greatly during the COVID-19 pandemic with millions of people forced out of a job and travel largely banned. Would they wish to live in a COVID-19 world permanently, or do they favour more Great Depressions with 50 per cent unemployment, since fewer die on the roads or in the workplace?

Holden–Preston have a simple message: “The shutdown wins”, and they believe that there are high risks from relaxation of restrictions in the absence of a vaccine.

To the contrary, Holden–Preston are simply alarmist, frightening the public with entirely discredited pandemic modelling in which they argue that mortality from COVID-19 is far worse than the devastating Spanish flu of 1918-19 and would kill nearly a quarter of a million Australians if the economy was not locked down. Yet the current world COVID-19 death toll would have to rise by a factor of 202 times to reach their estimate of seventy million global deaths in the absence of lockdown.

It would be a mistake to think that Australia and Taiwan, and all the other countries that have employed similar strategies, have got off lightly from COVID-19 by the simple expedient of banning the entry of non-citizens and early quarantining. Quarantining is exceedingly disruptive and impossible to sustain for any length of time.

I agree with Paul Frijters that it is likely Sweden will emerge from COVID-19 better prepared than many other countries due to the creation of at least some herd immunity. Herd immunity does not rely on everyone being exposed to the virus. Rather, it relies on enough of the young and healthy being exposed with sufficient antibodies such that the elderly and vulnerable are protected from it. This would be especially important if it proves impossible to develop a vaccine in reasonable time. While Sweden may suffer because of the decline in the global economy, unlike most economies it has not deliberately forced millions into potential penury.

We can be sure that Governor Cuomo in New York and authorities in Belgium have exposed a sizeable portion of their populations to the COVID-19 virus, making “second wave” attacks less likely when borders reopen, as they must. However, they will never be “winners” in an economic sense because, unlike Sweden, they locked down the most productive while not taking care of the vulnerable.

Our actual current death toll of 102 would have been far lower if we had earlier implemented the quarantining, tracing and testing methods so successfully employed by Taiwan with their voluntary social distancing. Forced lockdown in a highly responsible society such as Australia’s yields no lives saved but huge and devastating economic costs and future deaths arising from economic despair. According to Australia’s CMO, some lives have been saved at a cost of \$19 million per life, but this is a gross understatement of the cost per life. The sooner we cease the lockdowns and travel restrictions, while retaining voluntary social distancing and protecting the vulnerable, the better.

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## The Clockmaker

A clock built with the biggest of hands  
(and the tiniest of instruments)  
Its gentle tock, tock, tock warm like his deep voice  
Big heart pounding like a pendulum

Her tiny feet dangling above the floor  
as she rests her head on his chest  
He'd ask:

*Can you hear it?*

*Da-dum. Da-dum. Da-dum*

*Oh, there it is, she'd smile,*  
her hand tapping the pattern  
on his leg:

*Da-dum. Da-dum. Da-dum*

Furrows creasing the corners of his face:

*You know, everyone's has a different tune*

But she swats at him like a fly,

*Shhh, I'm trying to hear*

Now silence in that big old house,  
decades left in the dust  
a life rendered in tracing paper

Heart heavy and clocks stilled  
Lonely faces at halted hours  
eerie scarecrows looming,  
long shadows spilt across the floor

He shows her his hands  
Heavy like clay they are  
still soaped and scrubbed  
before coming indoors  
Heavy boots clomp dust on the lino  
Her clockmaker

She notices:

A carefully scribed shopping list  
Meticulous notes on his daily whereabouts

Grasping at tangled threads

She tastes the rot of passing days  
like warped floorboards creaking,  
calling out in the night

Outbursts from the kindest of mouths  
A labyrinth of loose ends

Her heart a hundred-year-old accordion  
wheezing its last laboured sighs  
dust on its tired cockles

A museum:

*Du-dum. Du-dum. Du-dum*

One box at a time

The forfeiting of estates

Neighbours whisper:

*The flies are out*

*Things will go rotten*

*It doesn't take long*

But she knows  
that even evergreen trees  
lose their leaves sometimes

*Meg Courtney Hawke*

# The Prophetic Pessimism of Michel Houellebecq

Asked what the post-Covid world would be like, the most famous of contemporary French writers, Michel Houellebecq, replied with his customary asperity, “The same—only worse.”

This is because, according to him, if I have read him aright, deterioration in our modern world never misses an opportunity to take place. Man does not learn from experience or from anything else, for that matter; and because time’s arrow flies in one direction only, we cannot reconstitute or restore our civilisation once we have smashed it up. In short, we are doomed.

Strangely enough, this superficially depressing view, that everything is terrible and getting constantly worse, is in a way consolatory, which is perhaps why Houellebecq is so wildly popular (his last book, *Sérotonine*, had an initial print-run of 330,000 in France alone). If we are doomed whatever we do, we are absolved of responsibility for our own doom. Moreover, by the time we have finished reading his enumeration and examination of the vacuity of existence in consumer society, we feel much the better for it. At least we are not as bad as *that*, and we have had a good laugh *en route* to the dismal conclusion.

Houellebecq is a gifted and brilliant, but also somewhat limited, writer who has gross lapses of taste. His brilliance can be appreciated by consideration of the titles of his last two books alone: *Soumission* (submission) and *Sérotonine* (serotonin).

Submission is, of course, what Islam means, but in the book it is France that submits to submission, not because of the intellectual strength of Islam (no one could have been more contemptuous of Islam’s claims to intellectual value than Houellebecq, who famously said of the Koran that it was a wretched, a truly wretched, book), but because of the nihilistic lack of faith of the French population in anything spiritually transcendent: especially in the intelligentsia and upper echelons who, after all, decisively set the tone for the whole of society. And what is true

of France, of course, is true of the West in general.

As to *Sérotonine*, it captures brilliantly in a single, ironic word a contemporary, very shallow world outlook, namely that human beings are simply the vector or outcome of their brain chemistry (serotonin being one of the chemical neurotransmitters whose plenitude or insufficiency explains behaviour, or at least those unwanted behavioural phenomena that seem to require explanation). It is not uncommon to hear people say that they are suffering from chemical imbalance in their brain as a means of explaining away, to themselves and others, their bad conduct. Neurochemistry is much less often invoked to explain good behaviour.

It is easy to grasp the general tenor of Houellebecq’s work. His heroes, or rather protagonists, are usually educated, middle-class men neither old nor still young, with no financial difficulties, who are nevertheless in an existential impasse. Life is meaningless to them; their work is usually pseudo-work, in the sense that it has no intrinsic meaning or transcendent worth. Their private lives are a mess because of an inability to attain love. Sex for them is but an itch that has to be scratched, until the tickle returns and has to be scratched again, usually by someone else. They are so unlikeable as characters that one scarcely cares what happens to them; one doesn’t wish them well or ill or anything at all. They are specimens.

Here it is convenient to deal with the charge that Houellebecq is a pornographer. I think that the charge is fully justified. In book after book we get very similar scenes, graphically described, in which fellatio plays a very large or dominant part, scenes so similar both in detail and atmosphere that it is difficult not to believe that they correspond to the author’s private fantasies worked out in this way. But in order to get across the idea that sex has become purely physiological, without emotional implications or even complications, in a world in which all human relations have been thoroughly debased, it is hardly necessary to linger so lubriciously on the

actual details.

But I do not think that this pornographic aspect of his work explains his popularity—among readers, that is, not among intellectuals. If he were to omit the pornography, which in any case is episodic and does not take up a large proportion of his work, he would sell just as well (no one reads him for his eighteenth description of fellatio and what he calls “violent” ejaculation). He is read because there is no more brilliant observer, at least none who is known to me, of the emptiness of a human existence that is materially prosperous but at the same time deprived of religious, political or cultural meaning. France has become a country in which anticlericalism survives without there being any clericalism to oppose, the latter long-since extinguished as a social force; in which political life has been drained of significance by technocratic corporatism, so that right and left have hardly any meaning any more in its context; and culture is at most a kind of ornament like the nest or tail feathers of the male lyrebird. But in all of this France is not very different from other Western countries, which perhaps is why Houellebecq’s books have so wide a circulation and resonance outside his country.

There is another reason for interest in what he writes: its seemingly prophetic quality. His novel *Plateforme*, published in 2001, relates how an Islamist bomb in the Far East kills large numbers of Western holiday-makers who are enjoying all the freedom from sexual and other restraint that distance and relative wealth confer. (One of the rarely recognised corollaries of multiculturalism is that if we have to accept and make accommodation to others as they are, others have to accept and make accommodation to us as *we* are—and since we have, or at least had, the money, they have an additional, non-ideological reason to put up with our degeneracy.)

A year after publication, the Bali bombs killed 202 people. A lucky guess, then, on Houellebecq’s part, or real foresight? It is unlikely that his novel was itself an inspiration of the perpetrators. Suicide bombers have fantasies, but do not read novels.

The very day in January 2015 on which *Soumission*—a novel that describes the advance of Islamism in France and the enfeebled French response to its challenge, such that surrender in order to procure social peace is likely in the near future—was published, the offices of the satirical

weekly *Charlie Hebdo* were attacked and thirteen of its staff murdered by Islamic extremists. And in his last novel to be published, *Sérotonine*, written not long before the emergence of the *Gilets jaunes* (Yellow Vests) movement, there are scenes in which the disgruntled population of peripheral France, highly antagonistic to the metropolitan elites who know and care nothing of the hardship of their lives, start to behave exactly as the *Gilets jaunes* behaved.

At the least, then, Houellebecq seems to have finely-attuned antennae for the subterranean social rumblings that are about to erupt into political action or violence. Furthermore, he knows how to transform his intuitions into compelling prose. There is no contemporary writer, at least known to me, who can come near him for such insight. I should add that, though he is deeply pessimistic, he makes the reader laugh (optimists have little sense of humour).

Prophetic qualities aside, I have said that he is a somewhat limited writer. I mean by this that he has a dominant theme to which he returns again and again, obsessively, and whose import is quickly grasped even after only a few pages. Fortunately, his theme—the vacuity of life in the absence of belief in anything that transcends the individual—is one capable of infinite variations, thanks to his very acute powers of observation. He is worth reading for this alone, for his observations are both funny (rarely

do I laugh on reading a printed page as much as when reading him) and extremely well-chosen and brilliantly pointed, in that they capture to perfection our spiritual malaise. The *we* of *our*, by the way, is almost everyone in Western society, not just the French.

If I were to recommend a single piece of writing of his to a busy man who was unacquainted with Houellebecq’s work, and had limited time to explore it, it would be his novella *Lanzarote*, published in 2000. It condenses his thought to perfection—and, though short, contains a scene or two that appear to me pornographic.

It is written in the first person, and from the first sentence establishes the emptiness of the narrator’s life:

On the 14 December, 1999, in the middle of the afternoon, I realised that my New Year’s Eve would probably be a failure—as usual.

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In order to avoid this painful failure, which is presumably the result of social isolation and lack of close family relations or real friends, he goes into the first travel agency he comes across in Paris (in those days, one could still easily come across them) to arrange for somewhere to go. His solution to the problem is a purely geographic one, seemingly forgetting Horace's dictum that they change their skies, not their souls, who run across the sea: though not really forgetting it, because it is obvious from the first that he knows that this attempt to evade a problem of the soul, radical loneliness, by changing location is absurd and doomed only to exacerbate it.

The travel agent was busy with a client:

She was a brunette with an ethnic blouse and a piercing of the left nostril; her hair was dyed with henna.

Who among us does not know or recognise the type?

In two lines, Houellebecq, by making a simple and everyday observation available to anyone, suggests a great deal. The ethnic blouse and henna are symptomatic of the young woman's rejection of her Western heritage, no doubt (having been indoctrinated by Third Worldist propaganda for years) considered by her as purely oppressive, especially towards those whom the ethnic blouse symbolises or represents. She thinks thereby that she is demonstrating her sympathetic identification with the wretched of the earth, though the very term *ethnic* carries a large charge of condescension, for all that is not Western is deemed ethnic without distinction, distinctions between ethnicities requiring some real knowledge and genuine interest to make. As for the piercing, it sends a double message. While piercing still carries a fading connotation of transgression, with the intention of marking the wearer out as an independent and rebellious individual (rebellion, of course, being a good in itself), it also allows her to join an imaginary community of like-minded (or perhaps I should say, like-*feelinged*) people.

But the fact that she is in a travel agency, probably seeking an exotic destination, reveals her as a humbug and a hypocrite, insofar as her ability to travel to an exotic destination in the first place is dependent on the very society and economic activities to which she would claim to be opposed.

The narrator's turn is next. He tells the travel agent that he wants to go in January, but somewhere not too expensive.

"We have Tunisia. It's a classic destination, very affordable in January. The South of Morocco also. It's very beautiful out of season."

Why *out of season*? The South of Morocco is very beautiful all year round. I know the South of Morocco very well, probably better than this silly cow. It might be very beautiful, but it's not my style, it's that that I have to get into her head.

"I don't like Arab countries ..."

To this, he adds in his mind, "Arab countries would be worth going to, as soon as they manage to get rid of their shitty religion." And he tells the travel agent:

"It's not Arab countries I don't like, it's Muslim countries. You wouldn't have a non-Muslim Arab country, would you?" That would be a bit hard for a quiz champion. "A non-Muslim Arab country ... you have forty seconds."

The travel agent's mouth was half-open. "We also have Senegal," she said, to break the silence.

This, of course, is ironic, because 95 per cent of the Senegalese population is Muslim: thereby Houellebecq signals that the travel agent, a typical worker in a service industry, knows and is interested in nothing about the destinations to which she is sending her clients. She is empty. But the narrator thinks he knows about Senegal:

Whites are still very big in West Africa. All that is necessary for a white man to get a chick into his bungalow is for him to turn up in a nightclub. She won't even be a hooker; they do it for the pleasure. Obviously they like presents, little gold jewels; but what woman doesn't like presents?

But the narrator rejects Senegal: "I don't want to fuck," he says. This does not bring an end to the travel agent's quest for a destination for him, despite his outrageous remarks, for she is a slave to her job:

"Have you thought of the Canaries?" With a professional smile, she broke the silence. "People rarely think of the Canaries ... It's an archipelago off the coast of Africa, bathed by the Gulf Stream; the climate is mild all year round. I've known clients swim there in January." She left me time to digest this information before continuing: "We have a deal on the *Bougainville Playa*. 3290 francs the week all-in, departures from Paris the 9, 16 and 23 January. Four star plus hotel, local standards. Room with bathroom, hairdryer, air-conditioning, telephone, TV, minibar, individual coin-operated safe, balcony with a view of the swimming pool (or of the sea with a supplement). 1000 square

metre swimming pool with jacuzzi, sauna, hammam, gym. Three tennis courts, two squash courts, minigolf, ping-pong. Folk-dance shows, excursions from the hotel (programme available at the hotel). Health/repatriation insurance included.

This is both funny (ultimately tragic) and finely observed. The travel agent who sells the Lanzarote of the title has become parrot- or automaton-like, as do so many of those employed in service industries; she vociferates a description of a materialist heaven that has no connection with her own thoughts or emotions, a Muslim paradise for those without any religious faith. Holidays are important in Houellebecq's books precisely because they reveal what so many people dream of the year round as a release from their meaningless drudgery and an entry into a supposedly better or more gratifying life: that is to say a better life that, in reality, consists of little more than physical comfort and an absence of responsibility (how artfully placed is the reference to the hairdryer, suggesting the importance to potential clients of something so trivial!). Incidentally, the travel agent's assertion that the South of Morocco is very beautiful *out of season* is an implicit admission that mass tourism ruins or destroys everything it touches, rendering worthless what was previously worth going to see when few people go to see it: a typically pessimistic Houellebecquian paradox or observation.

I have dwelt on these two pages of text not because they are of crucial importance or significance in Houellebecq's work, but simply because they exemplify his manner of exposing the spiritual emptiness of so many people's lives in the Western world: an emptiness which, when it affects a large proportion of the population including, or especially, the most highly educated, will render it unfit to meet the challenge of countries or civilisations that actually retain firm beliefs, however absurd or retrograde they may be from an abstract intellectual point of view. And this is to disregard the constant subliminal misery than an absence of belief in anything causes people, once the raw struggle for survival has been won. There are hundreds of pages of observations such as those in *Lanzarote* in Houellebecq's books, and it is for them that I, at any rate, read him. He shows us what is before our face but we preferred not to see.

The economist Bernard Maris, who wrote for *Charlie Hebdo* and was killed in the attack on its offices in 2015, published a short book about his friend Houellebecq only a few months before he, Maris, was murdered. In this book, Maris claims that Houellebecq understands the modern economy better than any economist—not that Maris has any regard for his own profession or for economics as a discipline—and he quotes with delight the words of a university teacher of the subject who appears as a character in Houellebecq's novel *La Carte et la Territoire*, that her work consists of “teaching evident absurdities to arriviste cretins”.

Maris claims that Houellebecq's target is what the French call neo-liberalism. The latter is a lazy portmanteau word, because by no stretch of the imagination can France, or indeed any Western country, be called liberal, unless it be accepted at the same time that it is also socialist, in short that it is corporatist. It is not market relations that supposedly have replaced all others, even in the bedroom, that Houellebecq reprehends, but the destruction of the human personality by managerialism in the absence of all other belief. Houellebecq has nothing to say about, or against, the relations existing between customer and merchant in Adam Smith's famous

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passage about the benevolence of the butcher and baker; and indeed no one could have been harsher than he about French intellectuals' espousal, largely humbug, of left-wing economic ideology. His target is the dehumanisation of life by a Taylorism of the soul, which requires two conditions to come about: the necessity to work in large impersonal organisations and an absence of belief in anything, be it in God, country, or even an ideology.

It is to the absence of belief that Houellebecq gives causal primacy. Behind bitter denunciations of the status quo, there often lurks disappointment. Because all judgment is comparative, as Doctor Johnson says, behind every criticism there is, even if only inchoate, an idea of something better. For Houellebecq, whose disillusionment psychologists would no doubt trace back to his childhood (I don't think he was ever very illusioned in the first place), and to his betrayal by his parents, the something better is a past, largely mythical no doubt, but in any case completely irrecoverable.

Houellebecq was a poet before he was a novelist: a kind of Baudelaire of the supermarket, the high-speed train and the dual carriageway, as well

as of disillusionment in love. Even in his poetry, Houellebecq was highly confrontational, reintroducing both rhyme and classical lucidity into his work. Here is Paris:

Les humains qui se croisent au métro Invalides  
 Les cuisses des secrétaires, le rire des techniciens  
 Les regards qu'ils se jettent comme un combat  
 de chiens,  
 Les mouvements qu'ils font autour d'un centre vide.

(The humans who cross one another in the  
 Invalides Metro  
 The thighs of secretaries, the laugh of  
 technicians  
 The looks they throw at one another like the  
 fighting of dogs,  
 The movements they make round an empty  
 centre.)

Come, come, one almost feels like saying, are things really as bad as that? But it is not the duty of poets, novelists or prophets to be accurate in the opinion-poll sense of the word (besides which, a sixth of the humans who cross one another in the Invalides Metro are probably taking antidepressants). Tendencies, underlying realities, are their subject.

It was better before, when people believed in something:

We want to return to the old home  
 Where our fathers have lived under the wing of  
 an archangel,  
 We want to find again that strange code  
 That sanctified life up to the last hour.  
 We want to find something to be faithful to  
 As being tied to a sweet dependency,  
 Something that is greater than and contains  
 existence;  
 We don't want to live any more far from eternity.

But recovery of the home requires recovery of the faith, and this to Houellebecq is impossible, hence our modern tragedy.

Houellebecq is a chronicler of the exacerbated individualism (without individuality) that technocratic materialism results in when untempered by belief in the transcendent. But one of the reasons that he is able to chronicle it so well, so incomparably better than anyone else known to me, is that he partakes of it himself. His mode of dress—carefully chosen to look grubby, despite what by now must be great wealth—is in itself a message of exacerbated individualism: “I am not going to make an effort to make myself look agreeable *just for you.*”

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*Anthony Daniels has contributed his Astringencies column to Quadrant since October 2015. He lives in France.*

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## A Little Watercolour

At dusk, ants  
 hover on fragile wings  
 sufficient for the still air.

Fish in the pond  
 are colour smudges,  
 glinting variations in wavelength.

Swept up in the leaf-net  
 in full daylight, they are gold  
 or mottled white-and-silver.

These undulations  
 in the water-green depths  
 are changelings  
 hinting at the edge of things.  
 Thus Monet's water lilies.

*Ivan Head*

## The Green Parasol

*(After the painting by E. Phillips Fox)*

The nineteenth century still lingers on  
In summer 1912, a wicker chair  
A Brisbane girl in Paris *c'est si bon*  
The filtered sunlight tints her auburn hair  
And all is peaceful green, it bathes her face  
Her hands, her skin, the trees, the garden bed  
The creamy dress a shroud with verdant lace  
The flowers white and pink and poppy red  
She sits so calm, relaxed, untroubled there  
Upon her lap she strokes her little dog  
Her lustrous beauty shines through limpid air  
A sunlit joy before the yellow fog  
For few short years remain to live this way  
Bloody carnage will blast this world away

## Fortuna's Wheel

*(After the painting "Wheel of Fortune" by Edward Burne-Jones)*

You lift us high, decide our fate  
Fortuna driving with her hand  
Then crush us low beneath your weight

The slave in chains in lofty state  
He has achieved all that he planned  
You lift us high, decide our fate

The king with crown and sceptre great  
Is now thrust down and left unmanned  
You crush us low beneath your weight

Fortuna blind, hard-hearted, straight  
Relentless change is her command  
You lift us high, decide our fate

Great works this poet did create  
Wore laurel wreath but still was banned  
You crushed him low beneath your weight

I naked lie upon the slate  
The world once moved to my demand  
You lift us high, decide our fate  
Then crush us low beneath your weight

***Rohan Buettel***

# Reading *Paradise Lost* During the Pandemic

Our *soi disant* progressives tend to discourage us these days not only from reading the great books, but even from classifying any serious book from the past as “great” at all. Assuming, of course, that it is the European or Western past to which one is referring. Almost anything from elsewhere is to be accorded exaggerated respect. Hence the outraged response of scores of tenured academics at some of the country’s most prestigious universities a few years ago at the very idea of a degree course in Western civilisation, or a course in “great books”, in the manner of an American liberal arts college.

Now, there are, of course, many poor ways to teach a bachelor’s degree in Western civilisation, or to positively spoil the appetite of young people for reading great books. There are certainly important controversies, going back centuries, out of which the great books arose and which teaching a course in such books reanimates. Those controversies have always inspired partisan thinking of various kinds, and an ideological pedagogy of one kind or another can all too readily fail students, if it distorts, suppresses or overplays the meaning of any book or set of books. This, however, only underscores the necessity for great teaching and high standards.

When I was a young student, some forty years ago, there was no course in the greats open to me. I undertook, therefore, to read them myself, omnivorously and avidly. I began building up a personal library and reading everything from the collected dialogues of Plato, to Augustine’s *The City of God*, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* and Marx’s *Capital*—while working as a casual labourer on the Victorian Railways during my summer holidays. The strength, variety and richness of what I found was the core of my education; every bit as much as what I learned in formal courses in a History degree at the University of Melbourne.

But there is a large number of great books, or “texts” as they are often called these days and,

voraciously though I read, I never got through them all. One that somehow slipped through the net for most of my life was *Paradise Lost*. I owned a copy of the major writings of John Milton in the Viking Portable Library from 1978 onwards. Yet, even though one of my courses in my undergraduate degree was Reformation History, I somehow never immersed myself in his extraordinary epic poem. Quite why, I am not certain. I suspect it was because I moved rather quickly from the classical world to modern revolutions and *Paradise Lost* itself became lost in the forward rush to the vast complexities and dramas of the modern world.

In any case, the recent lockdown due to anxieties about COVID-19 had the unanticipated effect of slowing down my book purchasing and increasing somewhat my time for discretionary reading. In that context, I elected, finally, to read my Milton. What I discovered was that Milton is, in general, a classic “dead white male” eminently worth reading still and for exactly the reasons one might read any “great book”: his use of the English language is superb and will extend the range of almost any reader; his cognitive strengths in acuteness of thought and perception are an education, even for the well-educated; his erudition is impressive and his prosody powerful. Should one need another argument?

Yet there are several other reasons why reading Milton—not only *Paradise Lost*, but also “Lycidas”, *Areopagitica* and “On Education”, especially—is a thoroughly rewarding exercise in our time. The first is that Milton was steeped in the prior culture of the Western world and had absorbed it—Homer, Virgil, Ovid, the Bible, Dante—so thoroughly that *Paradise Lost* is like a vast museum of myth and fable, with tropes that open doorways into the past for the young reader. A good teacher would point to such doorways and open them, one after another, inviting the curious or imaginative student to explore, discover and absorb what lies within such portals. The educated reader, of course,

moves more easily within them, delighted by Milton's richness of allusion and daring attempts at synthesis or inflection.

Again and again, if one is already familiar with Homer, Virgil, Ovid, the Bible and Dante, one is struck by how Milton plainly aspired not only to compose an epic poem in the tradition of the classical and medieval masters, but to "sublate" them, as Hegel would have expressed it; to recast the earlier epics as antecedent to his own and as transcended by his masterpiece. The Bible, of course, is a special case; not being an epic poem. Yet even here, Milton exhibits a quite extraordinary boldness of invention. His detailed accounts of the War in Heaven, the fall of Lucifer and his rebellious angels, the landscape of Hell, the creation of the world, the fall of Adam and Eve and the divine plan for redemption go far beyond what is written in the Bible and have more in common with Homer, Virgil and Ovid than with Scripture as such.

In contemplating the prosody and the fantastic telling of the fable of creation and fall, one is impelled to inquire into the life, mind and times of the poet. As with the study of any great book, the discovery of the mind of its author is one of the most stimulating and challenging lessons. John Milton (1608–74) was, the deconstructionists and progressives would hammer into their charges, white, male, patriarchal and a man of his time and place. Indeed, he was; and at a number of points this stands out quite glaringly. But, of course, such reductionism is a mere tautology. What was distinctive about Milton's cast of mind is what made him and his work great. Very few individuals of any skin colour, gender or religious persuasion, or indeed of any epoch, have matched Milton's erudition, creativity or striking personality. Encountering him, through his writings, is an enriching experience whatever your starting point.

The editor of the Everyman's Library of Milton's complete English poems opens his introduction (written in 1992) with the remark: "Milton is the most learned poet in the English literary tradition, and it is remarkable that the weight of his erudition did not crush his genius for writing poetry." It becomes evident, as one reads *Paradise Lost*, that he had not only mastered his wide learning, but developed an acutely disciplined and thoughtful

mind. He didn't begin serious work on it until 1658, when he was fifty years of age. This was fifteen years after he had written *Areopagitica*, his powerful and lucid defence of freedom of expression, which is in some respects even more of a classic than J.S. Mill's celebrated *On Liberty* (1859); the more so because Milton was a more conservative figure than Mill. He was a champion of religious, civil and domestic liberties, but he was not in favour of the extension of the franchise and was outspokenly anti-Catholic.

Milton was a major thinker of both the Reformation and the English revolution. Reading his tract on publishing and censorship alongside his epic poem about the fall of angels and of humanity is a first-class exercise in humanistic scholarship.

A professor of philosophy a generation or two ago, in the United States, used to begin his seminar on Plato by declaring to his students, "The first thing to bear in mind is that Plato was smarter than you are." That was both throwing down the gauntlet and signally refusing to coddle infantile minds. The encounter with a classic should, in something like this manner, bring students face to face with a thinker more powerful than they are. Not in order to humiliate or indoctrinate them, but in order to challenge them to think harder and deeper than they have been accustomed to and to extend the reach of their imagination, their thinking and their vocabulary. Who teaches like that any more? In any case, reading Milton closely is that kind

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of experience. It's salutary.

Nevertheless, what is very striking about Milton's erudition is how very limited it was by his religious worldview. There is no sense in *Paradise Lost*, though it is his mature work and his most substantial, of anything resembling the scepticism and curiosity about the opening globe that one finds, for example, in Michel de Montaigne or Richard Hakluyt, though both had lived and died before Milton had reached the age of ten: Montaigne in 1592, before Milton was born; Hakluyt in 1616, when Milton was eight years old.

His focus, though he visited Galileo in Italy in his youth, was resolutely on the biblical account of humanity, its origins and its future. He was not greatly interested in the new discoveries, whether geographic or cosmological. He was interested in setting the literary and religious tradition in a

seventeenth-century frame of reference, which is to say an English Reformation one. Far from being an objection to the study of his work, however, this is an extra reason for immersing oneself in it: to explore the mindset we find here and think our way through it, rather than presuming, disdainfully, that it is merely “reactionary” or “irrelevant”—to encounter, as our good progressives like to say, the “Other” in Milton.

In *Paradise Lost* we are offered an epic poem in the Greco-Roman tradition. What, then? It is the shortest of the great epic poems in the Western canon. Whereas each of the Homeric epics has twenty-four books and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* fifteen, Milton’s epic has twelve—the same number as Virgil’s *Aeneid*; but it is a thousand lines shorter than the latter. Dante’s triple epic totals one hundred cantos, but each averages around 140 lines, so that the overall length is both greater than Virgil or Milton, about the same as *The Odyssey*, but considerably shorter than *The Iliad*. By far the longest of the set is *The Iliad*, at around 18,000 lines. Yet it covers the shortest period of any of them. *Paradise Lost* covers, by a very wide margin, the longest arc of any of the epics, yet does so with remarkable economy.

Perhaps the most striking thing about it, on the other hand, is that, compared with the account of creation and fall in the Book of Genesis, *Paradise Lost* is wildly prolix and expansive. In its pages, God becomes a figure remarkably similar to classical Jove and Jesus and the archangels like the lesser gods on Olympus; while Satan and several of his rebellious comrades assume the fully developed personalities of Shakespearean characters. The war in Heaven, between the armies of light and Satan’s rebellious hosts, resembles nothing so much as a Trojan or Roman war, horses, chariots and all. The chief difference is that the moral viewpoint tilts the field of battle. It is not a war between heroes on either side; not a tragic drama as in Homer or Virgil; but a divine comedy. The set pieces are dramatic and colourful. The soliloquies and stirring speeches in the counsels of war are eloquent and memorable. But virtue is all on one side.

Again and again, reading the great poem, I found myself asking, “How much of this does Milton expect us to take seriously?” It is so extravagant an invention by a committed Christian believer that

we must assume he took the central drama fully seriously himself. Why, however, did he not regard his invention of speeches by God the Father and Son, Satan, Adam and Eve, Raphael and Michael as a presumptuous and, indeed, blasphemous rewriting of what he plainly regarded as “Holy Writ”? If the Bible was the “word of God”, what status has an epic poem that rewrites the story in the most dramatic and colourful manner? The editor of the Everyman’s Library text made no comment on this matter, but I found myself bemused by it the further into the great poem I read.

Homer inherited a legend from the Bronze Age and a new, alphabetic system of writing and set down the epic poems that have been canonical ever since—or at least until our good progressive nihilists stepped into the educational arena. Virgil rewrote Ennius, greatly improving the telling of the legend of Rome’s origins in the process. Ovid took a vast literature of myth and legend and wove it seamlessly into the single most enchanting of all the great epic poems. None of them was treading on the turf of “revealed religion”, “Holy Writ” or religious doctrine. None was writing at a time of fierce sectarian religious strife and contention.

Dante and Milton plainly styled themselves poets in this classical tradition and each saw Virgil as a pre-eminent literary point of reference. But each was doing something very different in character from his Greek and Latin literary masters. This is particularly striking in Milton’s case, because he was writing in the seventeenth century, whereas Dante (1265–1321) was writing at the high tide of medieval Catholicism, long before the widening of the European sense of the world, both geographically and cosmologically. Milton’s own proem to *Paradise Lost*, however, makes no mention of theological concerns, but dwells only on his determination to write heroic rhythmic verse, in the tradition of Homer and Virgil and, in doing so, shuck off the “the troublesome and modern bondage of rhyming”. He plainly didn’t believe he was treading on God’s toes in his grandiose retelling of the creation and fall.

Our best clue to how Milton thought about such matters is perhaps what he wrote in *Areopagitica*—long before he set about writing *Paradise Lost*. There, still young and writing at the height of both the Thirty Years War and the English Civil War, he rebuked religious dogmatism:

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*The deconstructive  
demons might be  
likened to Satan  
and his rebellious  
angels, resentful of the  
heritage of the West  
and the achievements  
of its luminaries, from  
the ancient world  
to modern times.*

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There be who perpetually complain of schisms and sects, and make it such a calamity that any man dissents from their maxims. 'Tis their own pride and ignorance which causes the disturbing, who neither will hear with meekness, nor can convince; yet all must be suppressed which is not found in their syntagma.

We must imagine that, in this spirit, he saw his great poem as offering to a broad religious public something as enriching of their more or less shared religious traditions as Virgil's *Aeneid* was to Romans, concerning the legendary past of their imperial city.

It still reads that way. Should any of us seek a rich account of the fable of creation and the fall, Milton offers the most splendid and memorable synthesis. In so far as many citizens of the West—and millions elsewhere—still profess some form or other of Christian belief and biblical faith, it is a travesty that they might not be acquainted with this poem. In so far as the rest of us, though unbelievers, seek to understand the religious heritage at the heart of Western civilisation, this poem is a priceless heirloom; quite apart from its intrinsic attractions as a work of literature. And, when we seek a dialogue between believers and unbelievers, we could do worse than make this poem common ground—then seek agreement that it is, almost in its entirety, a great work of *fiction*. It is boldly imagined, brilliantly executed, but in no sense true. Yet it is none the worse for that. The unbeliever might then advance the dialogue by asking: Why can we not agree that the same is true of the Bible itself?

For a variety of reasons, including the progressive nihilism that seeks to obliterate the very idea of Western civilisation, we live in a time of cultural loss. The deconstructive demons might be likened to Satan and his rebellious angels, resentful of the heritage of the West and the achievements of its luminaries, from the ancient world to modern times, and Hell-bent on defying everything canonical as oppressive. If we play a little with this simile, we again find Milton's epic poem a rich resource. Not, let it be emphasised,

as a source of unquestioned religious truth or as a way of fanatically demonising those with whom we disagree, but as a charming simile and a representative case study in what is being pulled down and cast away by the barbarians within the gates.

Such, at any rate, were a few of my reflections as I read the great poem during May, amid the quiet of the lockdown and the disturbing news from around the world. It was easy to see the pandemic as an occasion to ponder pandemium in the geopolitical realm and as a metaphor in the light of which to gloomily contemplate the condition of so many of our cultural and intellectual traditions and institutions. Milton, astonishingly, wrote the entire epic while completely blind. Strangely, his editor offers no account of how he accomplished this feat. Perhaps, however, for those of us who can see, *Paradise Lost* is an especially fine lens through which to view the troubles of our time, because it is about creation and fall, but also, of course, anticipated redemption.

What is called for in the twenty-first century is a collective understanding of our condition in the context of the Holocene and the epic rise of *Homo faber* since the last glacial maximum. Milton doesn't provide this, of course. What he does provide, in *Paradise Lost*, is a wonderful example of what a cohesive and highly articulate vision of the world looks like. The chaos and vituperation in social media in our time, the polarisation and angry populism in much of democratic politics and the erosion of shared belief in standards, principles and methods across much of the West all point to the underlying need for a cultural renaissance. That doesn't mean merely falling back on classics as clichés. But an immersion in the richness and power of the classics—*Paradise Lost* not least among them—is a very good way to regain a sense of poise and perspective, both of which we stand in need of right now.

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## Hazlitt and Hate

It is a fortunate spider who resides in the first paragraph of William Hazlitt's essay "On the Pleasure of Hating" (1826). Its cantilevered body stands initially rigid. Its wide-set eyes observe the monster seated before it. It plods on, seemingly all too aware of an excess of legs. It stops, plods on again and then, adopting a more urgent and less confused gait, it scurries across the floor's matting. A lowering shadow belongs to him who watches. He lifts the edge of the matting and this allows the creature to escape.

Hazlitt's rooms were normally bleak, usually empty save perhaps for a table and a chair. The painter William Bewick tells of being captivated by a vacant space above the chimney mantelpiece in one such room. Here where normally a mirror or picture might hang were scribbled:

all manner of odd conceits ... abbreviations  
—words—names—enigmatical exclamations—  
strange and weird sentences, quotations—  
snatches of rhyme—bits of arithmetical  
calculations—scraps of Latin—French  
expressions—words or signs by which the author  
might spin a chapter, or weave an elaborate  
essay. The chimneypiece seemed to be his table  
of mnemonics—his sacred hieroglyphics—all  
jotted down without line, or form of any kind,  
some horizontal, some running up to the right,  
some down to the left, and some obliquely.

It seemed to Bewick that Hazlitt, who Samuel Taylor Coleridge had described as "brow hanging" and "shoe contemplative, strange", had somehow turned his modest living room into a sort of notepad.

Be that as it may, Hazlitt informs us that the reason he did not kill the spider is because his philosophy has come to a point where it might transcend such things. This is not to say that he does not hate the spider; he does: and the mere thought of it can still send a shiver through him and remind him that it will be a long time before we humans can collectively dispose of such essentially irrational fears.

It intrigues him that, while he remembers no ill-will directed towards the spider as it clumsily made its way, "the spirit of malevolence" has survived its exit. It appears a truism, Hazlitt believes, that we are quite able to perform the social niceties, even amongst those we do not like, despite the only possible outcome of such an experience being that we will come to like them the less.

Hazlitt once asked fellow essayist Leigh Hunt, with the sort of bluntness that made him so singularly unpopular, "Why is it that I am universally disliked?"

Perhaps an inkling may be surmised by his response after a bout of fisticuffs with John Lamb, brother of Charles. This had somewhat ludicrously been prompted by Hazlitt's over-reaction to comments made regarding the respective merits of Holbein and Van Dyke as colourists. Despite wearing a well-deserved blackened eye, he declared, "I do not mind a blow, sir; nothing affects me but an abstract idea!" Dorothy Wordsworth in an 1814 letter to Catherine Clarkson had offered: "for all his disagreeable qualities, he is a very clever fellow", while her brother William in a letter to the painter Benjamin Robert Haydon in 1817 had warned, "the miscreant ... is not a person to be admitted into respectable society, being the most perverse and malevolent Creature that ill luck has ever thrown my way".

This piece of unfortunate luck was down to Hazlitt's acquaintance with Coleridge. Hazlitt's *My First Acquaintance with Poets* (1823) recalls the year 1798. He is nineteen and intent on traipsing the ten miles, through early morning frost, to Shrewsbury so as to be part of that town's Unitarian congregation, eager to hear their newly appointed preacher deliver his first sermon. Such was Coleridge's effect on the younger man that, later in the year and after Coleridge had received an annuity from Thomas Wedgwood that drew him to the village of Stowey, Hazlitt would walk the two hundred miles (twenty-five miles per day for eight days) so as to maintain contact. The visit was full of excitement for a young

man eager to make his mark: Coleridge would read to him from the unpublished “Kubla Khan” and admit that he himself had no idea what it was about, since it had been “composed in a sort of reverie brought on by two grains of opium taken to check dysentery”. He would also recite his soon-to-be-published *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and the two enjoyed entering into spirited disagreements about such things as the merits of the *Arabian Nights*, Hazlitt’s dismissal of them being, according to Coleridge, due to his inability to dream. The two and Wordsworth walk together mile after mile and Hazlitt becomes familiar enough with the two poets to note the differences in the way each appears to think and compose. He cites Coleridge’s preference for working his mind while “walking over uneven ground, or breaking through the straggling branches of a copse-wood”, whereas the writing of the more reserved Wordsworth took its shape while he paced “up and down a straight gravel-walk, or in some spot where the continuity of his verse met with no collateral interruption”.

The “miscreant” fell from favour, not as one might suppose from Hazlitt’s brief infatuation with Wordsworth’s sister Dorothy, nor with her rejection of a proposal of marriage, since she claimed to be wedded to her brother’s poetry—but rather as a result of the abrupt termination of a Hazlitt stay with the Coleridge family at Greta Hall in Keswick in 1803. The poet had recently returned from an aborted tour of Scotland. He had intended (and had already failed) to deny himself the opium to which he was by now hopelessly addicted. Consequently, Hazlitt’s stay had not been without its tensions. For one thing, Coleridge had become prone to overblown reactions to their intellectual disagreements—the existence of God being one—and Hazlitt was by now well known for, and moreover, proud to boot of a refusal to take a backward step. Jottings in Coleridge’s notebooks of the time relay comments such as, “A most unpleasant Dispute” and “Hazlitt how easily roused to Rage & Hatred”. As well as this, it had become Coleridge’s habit to retire early, having succumbed to the plentiful quantities of brandy and opiates on which he depended, only to wake some hours later screaming and howling with a terror that upset the entire household. While this occurred, the visitor had taken to slipping out most evenings to the local tavern.

During what will become Hazlitt’s final evening

in the Lakes District, he interprets that one of the young local women is playing up to him. When he responds in his typically socially awkward manner—and salaciously according to the woman—she takes it upon herself to inform the entire establishment that she has been insulted. Having suffered a barrage of belittling and lewd remarks that make him the night’s laughing stock, Hazlitt inexplicably reacts by putting the raucous woman over his knee, raising her petticoats and slapping her behind. One easily imagines the village yeomanry taking umbrage at this, and as expected the “miscreant” is roughly ejected from the establishment. Spurred on by the abuse being hurled from the tavern door, he is last seen, much to the delight of all present,

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*Hazlitt relates that it has been his experience of humanity to see the various combinations of “hypocrisy, servility, selfishness, folly and impudence” celebrated, and at the expense of “modesty and merit”.*

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an ever-diminishing figure hightailing it, with an air of panic, on the road back to Greta Hall. Here a dazed, but awake enough to be dutifully paranoid Coleridge, tells Hazlitt that there is no doubt that a lynching party will be being assembled as they speak—later he would claim two hundred men—and that it is imperative he make an escape over the mountains with the utmost haste. By midnight a bedraggled and filthy Hazlitt has reached the Wordsworth household, Dove Cottage, at the edge of the village of Grasmere and while William, on hearing of Hazlitt’s plight, has

misgivings about harbouring a fugitive, the fact of the matter is that the man is exhausted to the point where he can travel no further. He is trundled off early the next morning.

The event proved diabolical for Hazlitt. It was inevitable that the story would grow wings and provide wonderful ammunition for a legion of detractors. Its exaggerated form, it must be said, was ably fostered by Coleridge and Wordsworth. As time wore on, Hazlitt’s “depravity” was considered a given and at the very least became a standard joke. Coleridge, being Coleridge, would claim to have saved the young essayist from the gallows or, if he had been lucky, transportation. He avoided actual discussion of Hazlitt’s actions, preferring to assure eager ears that he had practised “vices too disgusting to be named”.

Always willing to grind an axe, Hazlitt would write of country people:

All country people hate each other. They have so little comfort, that they envy their neighbours the smallest pleasure or advantage, and nearly

grudge themselves the necessaries of life. From not being accustomed to enjoyment, they become hardened and averse to it—stupid, for want of thought—selfish, for want of society. There is nothing good to be had in the country, or, if there is, they will not let you have it.

This tirade, which is contained in “On Mr Wordsworth’s Excursion” (1817) continues for several pages. The poem in question, *The Excursion* (1814), is elaborated upon further in “On the Living Poets” (1818) and is described as “stillborn from the press”, for unfortunately:

There was something abortive, and clumsy, and ill-judged in the attempt ... long and laboured. The personages, for the most part, were low, the fare rustic: the plan raised expectations which were not fulfilled, and the effect was like being ushered into a stately hall ... with nothing but successive courses of apple-dumplings ...

A bitter personal portrait of Wordsworth follows: “If he is become verbose and oracular of late years, he was not so in his better days.” And then:

... if Mr Wordsworth had been a more liberal and candid critic, he would have been a more sterling writer ... had he been less fastidious in pronouncing sentence on the works of others, his own would have been received more favourably ...

Hazlitt regrets a simplicity of feeling in Wordsworth, since it “renders him bigoted and intolerant in his judgements of men and things”. After all:

We exaggerate our own merits when they are denied by others, and are apt to grudge and cavil at every particle of praise bestowed on those to whom we feel a conscious superiority. In mere self-defence we turn against the world, when it turns against us; brood over slights we receive; and thus the genial current of the soul is stopped, or vents itself in effusions of petulance and self-conceit.

In a later piece that addresses Coleridge, Hazlitt paints a picture of a talker rather than a doer. Indeed, says Hazlitt, “He may be said to have lived on the sound of his own voice”, after having been reduced to “swallowing doses of oblivion”—a clear reference to his addiction—and that this leads him to “delight in ... digressions and ... spontaneous impulses, without object or method”. Furthermore,

the *Rime* is the only work by Coleridge that “we could with any confidence put into any person’s hands, on whom we wished to impress a favourable idea ...”

Coleridge could prove an easy catch:

I understand that when one of his [Hazlitt’s] Faction had declared in a pamphlet (“Hypocrisy Unveiled”) the Christabel “*the most obscene poem in the English Language*”, he [Hazlitt] shrugged himself up with a sort of sensual orgasm of enjoyment, and exclaimed, How he’ll stare! (i.e. meaning *me*) Curse him! I *hate* him!

So much hate! Why?

In the essay devoted to its pleasures, Hazlitt is adamant that “without something to hate, we should lose the very spring of thought and action”: and that there is “a *hankering* after evil in the human mind, and that it takes a perverse, but a fortunate delight in mischief, since it is a never-failing source of satisfaction”.

No news captivates us more than the bad news that might afflict others, Hazlitt says, and we read it with gusto daily in newspapers; crowds assemble in the streets, their sole intention the disagreement with other crowds, and we are, each of us, all the more self-congratulatory when we share our perceptions of the defects in others. And of course, it is a fundamental truth that none can hate with the vigour of the zealot, be they religious, patriotic or otherwise. Hazlitt relates that it has been his experience of humanity to see the various combinations of “hypocrisy, servility, selfishness, folly and impudence” celebrated, and at the expense of “modesty and merit”. Yet he admits that perhaps it is he who has been in error in both public and private life—perhaps he was wrong in judging others as he would choose to judge himself.

The essay concludes with the question, “mistaken as I have been ... have I not reason to hate and to despise myself?” He provides his own answer: “Indeed I do; and chiefly for not having hated and despised the world enough.”

**M**y interest in William Hazlitt’s essays began at a local book fair with the purchase of a group of volumes that had once belonged to a G.D. Richardson. Curiosity regarding their previous owner led to the knowledge, via an obituary notice in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 2012, that Gordon Dalyell Richardson—who had died in Canberra at the age of ninety-four—had been at one time the Chief Librarian and Archivist for the State of New South Wales as well as a judge for the Miles Franklin Literary Award. I also came upon

a reference to an appearance he had made on the television show *A Current Affair*, at the age of almost ninety-two, and in which, if initially reluctantly, he shared his experiences of the Second World War and in particular his memories of the infamous Singapore prison camp at Changi.

The newspaper obituary made mention that, in civilian life, Richardson “never lost his military bearing and manner” and that this was imbued in his running of the State Library of New South Wales. The stiffness implied in this, even if perhaps inadvertent, is not apparent when we watch the recording of the interview. Rather, we see a wholly compassionate man, who having experienced the degradation of unalloyed hatred has risen above it. He speaks of the vicissitudes of battle; of seeing individuals for whom he had felt a great fondness having been “cut up like the lumps of meat one sees in a butcher shop”. He also speaks of the “uncomfortable condition” of not being free; and of

the brutality that could be enforced at any time—and as the result of any whim—while he was in Changi. He describes this in his typically understated manner as “psychologically very demanding”. He does not believe in the idea of war heroes. To the question of survival, he refers to “sheer good luck”, yet emphasises the abiding necessity of the will to live. He knew several men who simply gave it up. He remembers longing for what might be termed a proper meal and he speaks of often dreaming of a time when he would not be hungry. When prompted by the interviewer, he recalls the joy of seeing his four-and-a-half-year-old daughter for the first time when he returned home at war’s end.

Had he not reason to hate and despise? His answer is an emphatic *no*.

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*Barry Gillard has contributed several pieces of fiction and non-fiction to Quadrant recently. He lives in Geelong.*

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### *In memoriam* Professor Wilkes

I remember his robes  
 Riffing en route  
 Striding the halls I hallowed  
 A magpie writ large  
 Eye keen, amused  
 'Neath shock fringe

Some called him God,  
 I thought Father Time  
 And he had time, to ponder, talk, discuss  
 Not always rushing to meetings  
 Turning spires into coffers  
 Poems into profit

He was old school  
 And in the tech and coin lingua franca of now  
 The measured parchment rustle  
 Of the old school  
 Is missed.

### *Kim Morrison*

*Barry Spurr, Literary Editor, writes: Professor Gerald Alfred Wilkes, Foundation Professor of Australian Literature and Challis Professor of English Literature at the University of Sydney, died on May 15, 2020, aged ninety-two. He is deeply mourned and remembered with profound gratitude by many as a champion of the discipline of English and the traditional values of the university as a centre of freedom of thought and expression.*

# The Berlin Congress for Cultural Freedom, 1950

Seventy years ago, in the last week of June 1950, the inaugural event of the Congress for Cultural Freedom was held in the ruins of the Titania Palace in Berlin. The Nazis had screened propaganda films at the Titania, which had just about survived allied bombardment. Now, many of Hitler's refugees—including Franz Borkenau, Alfred Weber and Berlin mayor Ernst Reuter—were among the attendees determined to deliver a public rebuke to totalitarianism.

The week-long Congress was a costly undertaking. The organisers had to pay for the travel, accommodation and expenses of a fair number of the eminences of the Western intelligentsia. Among the delegation from the United States were Sidney Hook and Arthur Schlesinger; Britain was represented by the famed author of *The Last Days of Hitler*, Hugh Trevor-Roper, the philosopher A.J. Ayer and the doyen of cultural criticism, Herbert Read. Jean-Paul Sartre was among those invited from France, but he predictably declined to have anything to do with condemning totalitarianism.

In a rather shadowy way, the money for the Berlin Congress was provided by the CIA, which continued to pay most of the bill for the activities and publications of the Congress for Cultural Freedom until the late 1960s. The story of the CIA's clandestine financing of the organisation has been amply told. In fact, since 1967, when it broke in the *Nation* and the *New York Times*, it has been the major theme of almost all commentary on the Congress. And the general tone of that commentary—from *The Agony of the American Left* (1967) by Christopher Lasch, to *Who Paid the Piper?* (1999) by Frances Stonor Saunders—has been denunciatory. Implicit in the question posed by Saunders—and explicit in the text itself—was the accusation that several of the most recognised writers, artists, historians and sociologists of the mid-twentieth century were nothing other than hired hacks of the CIA. Every word they wrote was to be discredited by the association.

But the inauspicious story of the inaugural Congress in Berlin is one which, in my opinion, calls for an altogether different kind of approach. Clive James once questioned why so many Western intellectuals seemed to find it harder to despise Mao Zedong than Richard Nixon. To answer it, he recommended the study of an “untapped academic subject: the sociology of the international intelligentsia”. In a Jamesian vein, I wonder if the more intriguing question about the Congress for Cultural Freedom is not where the money came from, but why, at the height of the Cold War, the CIA felt compelled to spend such exorbitant sums to shield Europe from its own intellectuals?

The initial prompting for a pushback against Soviet propaganda—on both sides of the Atlantic—came from ex-communists and other non-communists on the political Left who had learned all about the totalitarian nature of Stalin's Russia long before the Cold War. In the United States, the *New Leader* magazine, an endeavour of Menshevik emigres, had been waging a lonely war against Soviet communism since 1924. In Britain, George Orwell, famously chased out of Spain by the communists in 1937, tried in vain to launch a post-war League for the Rights of Man, but he complained to Arthur Koestler in 1946 that the intellectuals he approached were “timid” because they realised that such an organisation would, in practice, have to be “anti-Soviet”.

It was not until 1948, with the establishment of the Office for Policy Coordination (OPC), that the CIA began to take an interest in propagandising in Europe. By that time, the Americans were far behind the Soviets on that score. The USSR's aggressive early Cold War foreign policy—which included the 1948 coup in Czechoslovakia and the Berlin Blockade—had been attended by a campaign to foment anti-Americanism throughout Europe. Three years before the Berlin Congress for Cultural Freedom, the Soviets had convened a Congress of German Writers in the same city, where a visiting

Russian delegation had done most of the talking. Rather than literature, they focused their addresses on the stratagems of the Western imperialists. An International Writers' Congress followed in Wroclaw (1948), with prominent Western intellectuals invited along to be lectured on the same subject. The Writers' Congresses were part of an attempt to return to the successful Popular Front strategy of the 1930s, when European communist parties had taken advantage of liberals' horror of Nazism to establish front groups through which they became an influential political force. Similar gatherings were held in Western cities—Paris, Stockholm and New York—in 1949. The communists hoped to gain from widespread pacifist sentiment in the aftermath of the Second World War. They advanced the notion that the Soviet Union sought only peace, but that its attainment was imperilled by Western warmongers. The Soviets established the World Peace Council (WPC), and Albert Einstein was among the well-intentioned pacifists tricked into collaboration with it. Concurrently, aided by intelligence procured from American spies the Rosenbergs, the Soviets developed their first nuclear weapons.

Such was the intellectual atmosphere in post-war Paris that the OPC's first attempt to counter Soviet propaganda, with a Congress of its own in 1949, was an abject failure. Sidney Hook was among the prominent participants, and he reflected bitterly in *Partisan Review* about the *Franc Tireur* intellectuals who had turned the event into an anti-American demonstration. Things were different, however, in the American sector in Germany, where there was significantly more existential fear about a return to totalitarianism and a far greater determination to stand up to the Soviet Union. (Lali Horstmann's memoir of the final months of the Second World War demonstrates that it was a matter of indifference to nobody in Germany which army showed up to liberate them, and under whose occupation they were subsequently to live. The existential fear that runs through her text was proved well founded when the NKVD showed up with the request to borrow her husband for a few friendly questions. The reader subsequently learns that he was never heard from again.)

In 1948, the American Military Government (OMGUS) had helped to establish the journal *Der Monat*, under the editorship of Melvin Lasky. The first issue featured an article in which Bertrand

Russell argued that the life of the mind would be extinguished if the Russians won the Cold War. Such things had been unsayable before October 1947, as the Americans had faithfully observed the agreement made at Potsdam to refrain from criticism of other occupying powers. But the realisation had dawned that the Russians had been breaching it wantonly, and General Clay belatedly decided that all bets were off. When *Der Monat* finally arrived, it was gratefully received by Germans. Melvin Lasky, who was not yet thirty, had been schooled in the offices of the *New Leader*. He had made a name for himself when he had gone along to the Soviet-sponsored German Writers' Congress in 1947, in order that there might be one dissenting voice to make the case for the free world. He subsequently took a leading role in organising the Berlin Congress.

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*The British intellectuals were happy enough to support freedom in the abstract; they were not prepared to make a show of opposition to those that threatened it.*

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Many of the luminaries of the Paris intelligentsia refused to come to Berlin. However, it was a Frenchman, David Rousset, who first suggested that a Congress in support of freedom against totalitarianism should be held in the Western half of the city. Rousset was a survivor of Buchenwald who had embarrassed the *bien pensants* of the Parisian Left when he proposed that a commission of former inmates of Nazi camps should

investigate the Soviet labour camps. The aim of the commission would be to determine whether the regime's designation of them as "educational facilities" was justified. When a communist newspaper responded by vilifying Rousset as a "Hitlerite" and accused him of lying about the camps, he sued for libel. It was an ingenious move because it forced the French courts to pass judgment on the nature of the Soviet Gulag system. Rousset was able to produce several survivors as witnesses.

His idea of holding the Congress in Berlin seemed, on the face of it, another inspired move. West Berlin was a lonely democratic enclave whose hungry citizens had resisted a year-long blockade in bombed-out surroundings. The city's mayor, Ernst Reuter, who, like Rousset, was a veteran of Nazi camps, had famously addressed thousands of Berliners outside the crumbling Reichstag to urge resistance to the blockade. They had resisted—and successfully, too. Arguably, Berlin was the front line of the fight between the free world and Soviet totalitarianism.

In actual fact, the choice of host city for the Congress for Cultural Freedom only served to

expose the fissures on the democratic front. The German and Central European delegates at the Congress—Reuter, Borkenau, Koestler and Alfred Weber among them—along with a handful of exceptionally brave intellectuals who had travelled from the other side of the Iron Curtain, were uncompromising in their condemnation of the slave labour system threatening to impose itself upon them. And from the American delegates, they received nothing but sympathy. Sidney Hook, for instance, was a battle-hardened veteran of the campaign against the Moscow Trials, which had been chaired by John Dewey in the 1930s. Arthur Schlesinger, author of *The Vital Center*, saw communism and fascism as twin extremisms. It is true that, also among the American contingent was the increasingly unhinged James Burnham, who was becoming an apologist for Joe McCarthy, and who seems to have been positively excited by the prospect of nuclear war. But the account of Hugh Trevor-Roper, who reported on the Congress in Britain's leading liberal newspaper, the *Manchester Guardian*, revealed the chasm which separated the British intelligentsia from their German counterparts.

Trevor-Roper was incredulous at having had to bear so many ex-communists in Berlin. He concluded that the whole thing had been a political demonstration stage-managed by renegades. On the first count, he was right. The Congress was a political demonstration, and Arthur Koestler's impassioned stand against neutralism was generally held to have been the highlight. But it had been advertised as a show of intellectual solidarity against totalitarianism. What did Trevor-Roper expect to hear? How could a defence of freedom be mounted, in Berlin, in 1950, in an apolitical manner?

It was the same story that Orwell had reported to Koestler in 1946. The British intellectuals were happy enough to support freedom in the abstract; they were not prepared to make a show of opposition to those that threatened it. In any case, the British historian seemed to ignore the fact that most delegates—including the entire British contingent—had no history of communism; that there had been no dissension, to cite one of many examples that contradict the accusation of stage-management, to Herbert Read's paper about the decline of culture under capitalism; and that part of the reason that Koestler's opinions had not been balanced by any partisans of Stalin was that Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty had ignored their invitations.

The subjects of discussion had been advertised to all delegates in advance of the Congress, and one of them was "Science and Totalitarianism". A biologist who had worked in Moscow delivered

a paper on the errors of Lysenkoism—a wholly appropriate topic, which, given its dreadful impact on Soviet agriculture, captured exactly the baleful influence of totalitarianism upon science. Nevertheless, in Trevor-Roper's submission, a discussion of the topic was beneath the intellectual level of serious scholars. Conveniently, since he had managed to avoid any mention of the world as it stood in 1950, Trevor-Roper preferred A.J. Ayer's ivory-tower reflections on John Stuart Mill's arguments for tolerance. The Oxford historian's bitterest barbs, though, were aimed at the people of Berlin, whose temper he seemed completely unable to grasp. After questioning whether it was possible to discuss cultural freedom in a "city whose natives have never really believed in it", he was provoked by the reaction of the 2000-strong audience to a short speech by Franz Borkenau to accuse them all of Nazi sympathies.

The opening session of the Congress had been held the day after the North Koreans launched their invasion of the South. By the final day, President Truman had announced that the US would aid the South Koreans. Borkenau expressed gratitude for Truman's stand, and the audience broke into paroxysms of applause. Undoubtedly, the invasion of the non-communist half of a partitioned country by the communist half was a sinister portent for Germans—especially in the aftermath of the blockade. Nonetheless, Trevor-Roper portrayed the Berliners' show of support for America's Democratic President as "hysterical German applause" and declared it "an echo from Hitler's Nuremberg". With Borkenau's speech, he suggested, an alliance had been cemented between the ex-communist orators and the ex-Nazis in the audience. To lend verisimilitude to this fantasy, he used the adjective *hysterical* three times. Never mind that Borkenau and Koestler both had Jewish backgrounds; nor that Borkenau had been one of the best-known anti-Nazi publicists in Britain in the 1930s; nor that the Congress was being hosted by the Social Democratic mayor, Ernst Reuter, who had spent a significant part of that decade in a Nazi camp; nor, finally, that Alfred Weber had used the occasion of the Congress to make a public *mea culpa* on behalf of Germany for the atrocities of the Nazis—atrocities of which he had himself been a victim.

Responding to Trevor-Roper, *Commentary's* correspondent, Francois Bondy, pointed out that the "contribution of Professor Borkenau shocked some of his hearers perhaps not so much by its lack of tact as by its essential truth". Bondy observed that the "greater part of the Western European liberal and socialist intellectuals who were present ... did not relish being confronted with a situation in which

the issues of freedom and of peace [were] in conflict". That was the very heart of the matter. The British intellectuals certainly believed in freedom, just not enough to stand up to its enemies. Another response came from Melvin Lasky, who questioned whether the author of *The Last Days of Hitler* knew anything at all about any of the days of the German dictatorship. Indeed, if Trevor-Roper's misunderstandings were not wilful, the only explanation for it would be that he rarely got out of Oxford. Unfortunately, a reluctance to descend the ivory tower was a common affliction among British intellectuals. Ayer, too, took umbrage at the political atmosphere in Berlin. And it was on the strength of

the Oxford dons' combined accounts of the Berlin Congress that Bertrand Russell resigned his honorary role in the organisation (Sidney Hook persuaded him to reverse his decision, but Russell eventually resigned again).

Why relate the story of the Berlin Congress, seventy years after the event? Only to show that no amount of CIA money could have goaded the French intellectuals to abandon Stalin, nor roused the British intelligentsia from its splendid isolation.

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*Oscar Clarke is a British writer and a doctoral student at the University of Bristol. He is researching the political thought of Franz Borkenau.*

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### Ezra Pound: London and After

With *Tapers Quenched*, but with a mind on fire,  
 You came to London and you razed  
 That city's stolid and conventional towers.  
 Within days you knew everyone important,  
 Had blue stockings swooning at your feet:  
 A literary lynx, stalking her halls and salons.

Not everybody's cup of tea: bounding across the floor  
 Of a chop-house to give Aldington  
 The "low down" on Sappho; the green baize  
 Trousers, pink coat, goatee,  
 Silver-topped cane, scoop of flame red hair.  
 The calculated *distrain* of the *poète maudit*;  
 One blue earring. Some found you amusing,  
 Others: "not the thing".

Generously, you took over Bill Yeats's *soirées*,  
 Proffering *his* cigarettes, chianti, the bright fruits  
 Of your staccato genius. He didn't seem to mind  
 But others less genial envied your talent  
 And despised your bombast.  
 You were not always applauded.

Suddenly, stasis: no longer writing,  
 Finished with London. By your thirtieth year  
 You had founded a movement, created a language,  
 Had already met those of real interest; discovered  
 The important talents, set them into the current:  
 European Ezra, Yank exile, broadcaster ...

*Rodney Purvis*

# The High Price of Toppling Statues

The desecration of property has been an unfortunate by-product of the more extreme fringes of the George Floyd protesting movement. In Britain the vandalism and defilement reached new heights when historical monuments were the subject of protester wrath.

In Bristol on Sunday June 7, Black Lives Matter protesters toppled a bronze statue of seventeenth-century British philanthropist, politician and slave trader Edward Colston, provoking cheers from the enthralled witnesses. History has, correctly, not been kind to Colston and many viewed the act as deserved vengeance that was a long time coming. Bristol's own mayor acknowledged that he had never liked its prominent placement, which he called "an affront".

But when Sir Winston Churchill's statue in Parliament Square was defaced, the behaviour of the protesters was deemed by many to be a little less justifiable and a little more impetuous. Graffiti was scrawled on Churchill's monument during the same march in which a lone protester, just a block away, tried to burn the Union Flag flying at the Cenotaph, a memorial to Britain's war dead. It was indeed a bold move considering Churchill's place in the British pantheon of great figures. His pugnacious wartime leadership which led to the defeat of Nazi tyranny has resulted in many regarding him as the saviour of the Free World, the one who orchestrated its survival from the jaws of peril. Such is the adulation for Churchill that in 2002 he was voted in a BBC poll as the Greatest Briton of All Time.

While the wilful ransacking of businesses is a contemptible tactic of activism and a public nuisance, the trashing of historical monuments is that and much more. It is dialectically linked to the desire of many protesters to rewrite history or at least excise certain parts to manufacture a narrative that lends credence to the objectives they pursue. The trashing of national symbols represents a dangerous impulse and an intellectually reprehensible manoeuvre that

produces expenses extending far beyond mere graffiti-removal.

A phenomenon that is unfortunately creeping into the analytical toolkit with every year that goes by is the increased use of "presentism". Presentism is the tendency to interpret past events and people in terms of modern values and concepts. This penchant to judge our forebears against today's criteria is deeply unfair. We would not castigate our younger selves with the sagacity of today because to do so would be disingenuous and overlook the beauty of the learned lesson that is only cultivated over the passing of days. If the razor of presentism was wielded consistently and without selective prejudice, very few figures in history would escape ridicule. Thomas Jefferson owned slaves, Gandhi was a philanderer and Churchill was an imperialist who endorsed policy that caused a great deal of suffering to the people of the sub-continent. Such behaviours are rightly lamentable in this era. By the standards of their time, however, they barely raised an eyebrow.

History has a habit of making fools of us all. No doubt, in 100 years from now our great-grandchildren will be deploring the actions and policies of today. This is the beauty and the curse of history. If we are to become practitioners of presentism then we should at least be consistent and tear down every monument to a historical figure who would fall short of today's moral codes. Better still would be to leave them untouched as teachers of history rather than allowing them to be tyrants and racists from beyond the grave.

Another unfortunate aspect of the contemporary analysis of historical figures is the proclivity to focus more on the bad than the good, or in the worst cases, exclusively the bad. For men as politically complex as Churchill this leads to an unfavourable appraisal of their contributions and a tepid memory of their legacy.

In many ways Churchill was a walking

contradiction. The nimble attitude with which he approached politics resulted in him crossing the floor not once, but twice, and giving Stalin much of post-war Europe despite being an inveterate anti-communist. These actions and many more have left historians and biographers reaching an impasse in trying to categorise the seemingly uncategorisable. His views and politics could be defensibly termed—to borrow from the man himself—“a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma”. Many of his proficiencies were only possible because of his deficiencies. His past misfortunes paved his future fortunes, and a lifetime of mistakes was the carefully constructed scaffolding for unmatched successes.

It is therefore important that when you subject these people to the knife of criticism you take into your assessment the person as a whole. It is a cute irony that the desecration of his monument coincided with the seventy-sixth anniversary of the D-Day landings, the single day which perhaps best exemplifies the British people’s struggle against genocidal fascism. To say Churchill was important in those landings would be an unpardonable understatement. While the crowds decried perhaps his largest character flaw they conveniently overlooked his greatest achievement on one of its most important anniversaries—preventing the hegemony of a racist tyranny. I wonder how many of the protesters who revelled in the dirtying of Churchill’s monument later that day involved themselves in a moment of silent gratitude for the D-Day soldiers’ sacrifice and Churchill’s instrumental leadership in orchestrating such a monumental feat.

An obsession with someone’s failings is an ingratitude that leads to some of their greatest strengths being forgotten. That is a sad disservice

to history, let alone to the recipient.

The phrase “sunlight is the best disinfectant” was introduced to American legal discourse by Justice Louis Brandeis, who served on the United States Supreme Court in the early twentieth century. In essence, it declares that the best way to derive important lessons from something, particularly something vile and regrettable, is to put it out in the open for all to study. This point is far more pertinent to the less defensible Edward Colston than Churchill. I for one had never heard of Colston, and would feel cheated if I was denied the opportunity to visit Bristol and learn from his life and errors because someone was repulsed by his statue.

The figures of the past—most especially the tyrants, racists and bigots—can be our greatest teachers. The old saying, “Those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it”, is apt here. The most prominent example of this ideal in practice is Germany’s very public and thorough preservation of its shameful Holocaust history. The most regrettable and ugly chapters of history deserve to be displayed in prominent places—not because they should be celebrated, but rather because they serve as enduring reminders of how far we have come.

Churchill of course will survive this affair; the rhinocerine hide he developed from years of ridicule in the political arena will make light work of repelling a little graffiti. But it is an opportune moment for the rest of us to remember how essential it is to remain vigilant in the preservation of all shades of history. The cost of its desecration is far more than chipped bronze.

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*Tristan Heiner is a recent law graduate from the University of Queensland.*

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## Years

The website needed my year of birth, so,  
 feet on the floor, my finger launched them  
 and they slithered, like racing lemmings, so many!  
 Charging ciphers, mostly obscure, unremembered  
 (a few glittering eyes, glimpses of rushing feet)  
 and then they skidded to a halt under my hand,  
 their sides still panting, straining forward,  
 poised ...

*Katherine Spadaro*

# Mike Flynn's Higher Loyalty

For President Obama, the rise and rise of the billionaire property developer and reality television star Donald Trump constituted a danger to American democracy and a retreat from his peace-for-the-world doctrine. Trump, formerly an unserious political figure, became Enemy Number One.

Not everyone in the Obama administration was sold on the Obama Doctrine, not least the 2015 Iran Deal. The retired three-star general Michael Flynn, Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency until 2014, despaired at the direction of America's foreign policy—volubly so—and found himself fired. By the end of 2015 he was offering advice to an array of Republican presidential candidates. In early 2016, the lifelong Democrat Flynn took the next logical step and signed up as senior foreign policy strategist for the surging Trump campaign. By doing so, or so the conventional pro-Trump narrative goes, he made himself Enemy Number Two. The Great Kremlin Conspiracy is one way to describe the cloak-and-dagger operations against not only Trump but also Flynn. If we are to take solace from Shakespeare's admonition that “bloody instructions, which being taught, return / To plague the inventor”, then we might expect the deeds of those who perpetrated America's greatest political scandal to come back and haunt them.

One of the many ironies of the Great Kremlin Conspiracy or Russiagate is that its likely initiators, President Barack Obama and then-CIA Director John Brennan, were no longer in the White House when the project took on a whole new lease of life under then-FBI Director James Comey. This begins with Flynn being interviewed by FBI agents Peter Strzok and Joe Pientka in the White House on January 24, 2017. Trump's administration had moved into the White House only four days before, and Flynn was in his second official day as national security adviser (NSA). Why had Comey sent his agents on a mission to destroy Flynn? The Obama administration, on December 29, 2016, imposed sanctions on

Moscow as well as expelling thirty-five Russian diplomats as a result of America's intelligence community concluding that Russian government operatives tried to “interfere” in the 2016 presidential election by perpetrating a cyber-attack on the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and John Podesta (of the Clinton campaign) on July 27 that year, the very same day that Candidate Trump, at one of his election rallies, caustically called for the Kremlin to find Candidate Clinton's 30,000 missing emails from her tenure as Secretary of State (2009 to 2013). The intelligence community, the Obama administration, the Clinton campaign, Mueller's Special Counsel and the mainstream media have always insisted that Russian cyber-criminals passed their digital contraband on to Julian Assange who, in turn, Wikileaks it to the media in two instalments, at the end of July and then in October.

There are numerous problems with the “Russian hackers” narrative, including the fact that Comey's FBI failed to investigate the scene of the crime, leaving it to CrowdStrike, a private company with links to the DNC, to uncover the source of the cyber-attack. CrowdStrike indicated that, yes, the self-identified culprit, Guccifer 2.0, was Russian. Others, such as a 2018 Special Counsel leak to the *Washington Post*, later claimed that Guccifer 2.0 was a team of Russian intelligence operators attached to the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation. Nevertheless, Shawn Henry, CEO of CrowdStrike, went on record in May 2020 to say he “couldn't be certain” the Russians were to blame.

We cannot be sure if President Obama really believed “the Russians” hacked the DNC/Podesta, but he certainly acted as if that were the case. The mini-Cold War he tried to launch on December 29, 2016, was predicated on Russian intelligence perpetrating the July 27 cyber-attack. All other attempts to link the Russians to the Trump campaign had not delivered the goods. The FBI's Crossfire Hurricane

turned up nothing on the Trump–Kremlin collusion front. CIA Director Brennan and Director of National Intelligence James Clapper admitted as much when they later appeared as witnesses under oath before the Special Counsel. The genesis of the anti-Trump “dossier” might explain why Comey and not Brennan thought it might be genuine as late as 2018. Comey heard about Donald Trump’s supposed exploits at the Moscow Ritz Carlton Hotel from two *different* sources. He was, in the first instance, informed by Deputy FBI Director Andrew McCabe who, in turn, had been apprised of the salacious tale by Bruce Ohr, Associate Deputy Attorney-General in the Justice Department. What Comey might not have known is that Ohr’s wife, Nelly, was not only an employee of Fusion GPS, the organisation paid by the Clinton campaign to generate “opposition research”, but also a CIA contractor. During the latter part of the year, when Comey began receiving from Brennan instalments of the anti-Trump “dossier”, he erroneously came to believe the Moscow Ritz yarn had been corroborated. The master gamesman was being played.

This goes a long way to explaining Comey’s disdainful attitude towards Trump displayed in his memoir *A Higher Loyalty: Truth, Lies and Leaders* (2018). As I noted in “Big Brother’s Loyalty” (*Quadrant*, July 2018), Brennan and Clapper, on January 6, 2017, gave Comey the task of briefing President-elect Trump on the “sensitive material” about prostitutes in the Moscow Ritz. Doubtless Comey got the job because the other two sensed he still believed in the authenticity of the “dossier”. Comey’s contempt for Trump is palpable throughout *Higher Loyalty*. Being in close proximity with the man who supposedly made two prostitutes urinate on the best bed in the Ritz proved too much for Comey:

I walked out the side door, stepped into the armored car, and headed to the Manhattan FBI office to do what I loved. I walked floor upon floor of FBI offices and cubicles, thanking incredible people for their work. After the uncomfortable conversation I’d just had, it was like taking a shower.

Comey’s belief in the veracity of the “dossier” revealed itself during the promotion tour for *Higher Loyalty*, over a year later, when he continued to claim it was not just the product of Hillary Clinton’s opposition research. On Inauguration Day, January 20, 2017, James Comey was expecting to serve six more years as head of the FBI. He did not want to spend that time with the sordid Donald Trump occupying the Oval Office.

Comey, according to his own testimony, made his move on January 24, 2017, when he ordered agents Peter Strzok and Joe Pientka to insinuate themselves into the White House on the pretext of a friendly getting-to-know-you chat with the new NSA, Mike Flynn. Comey would later boast to an amused audience during his 2018 book tour that he chose this moment because security and vetting protocols were not likely to be in place at this point. Comey and the so-called “small group” at the FBI were under the impression they had Trump’s national security adviser in an impossible position as a consequence of intelligence community surveillance of Flynn throughout December and January, not least his December 29 and 31 phone calls with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak. Comey, through Andrew McCabe, wrangled an open invitation for Strzok and Pientka to visit the White House and casually ask if Flynn had perhaps discussed with Kislyak lifting the Obama administration’s December 29 sanctions imposed on Russia. The declassified FBI raw notes taken during the interview/interrogation suggest Flynn was (a) equivocal about the substance of his December phone conversations; and (b) did not appear to be lying to them when he expressed his uncertainty about the specifics of his brief exchanges with Kislyak.

There is every chance that then-NSA Flynn acted as if he had nothing to hide because, well, he had nothing to hide. His recollection of the December 29 and 31 conversations with Kislyak was unclear because his recollection was unclear. Evidence has emerged that, as Trump’s soon-to-be NSA, Flynn was making thirty to forty calls a day throughout December and perhaps another sixty person-to-person contacts, with only one assistant to keep a record of it all. For the December 29 and 31 calls, when he happened to be with his family on holiday in the Dominican Republic, there was no assistant. Flynn’s possible misremembering of specifics in that informal, getting-to-know-you chat with agents with Strzok and Pientka sounds entirely plausible. Moreover, the idea that Flynn committed “perjury” on January 24, a line Barack Obama is now promoting, says more about Obama’s desperation than Flynn’s guilt. How could Obama, an erstwhile law professor, claim Flynn perjured himself in an interrogation disguised as an off-the-record interview? The fact that the judge in Flynn’s case, US District Judge Emmet G. Sullivan, once referred to Flynn’s inexact recollections as “treachery” is no less odd.

The one possibility that Flynn deliberately misled agents Strzok and Pientka is ostensibly substantiated in an FD-302 report finalised as late as March 2017. We now know, however, that the FD-302 does not exactly reflect the spirit of the original

raw notes written by Strzok and Pientka. We also know, thanks to Sidney Powell, Flynn's lawyer, that during the Mueller investigation the FBI wrongly attributed Pientka's notes to Strzok. This matters, because Judicial Watch, through its use of Freedom of Information Act lawsuits, had revealed that Peter Strzok and his then-girlfriend Lisa Page, an FBI lawyer, were rabidly anti-Trump. Strzok, we have also discovered, was the FBI operative most responsible for absolving Candidate Clinton of any criminal wrongdoing relating to the disappearance of some 30,000 emails from a private server during her tenure as Secretary of State. Strzok was, additionally, the FBI officer in charge of Operation Crossfire Hurricane throughout the second half of 2016. In fact, the record now shows—thanks to acting Director of National Intelligence Richard Grenell's whirlwind of declassifications—that Strzok not only made the official legal case for initiating the FBI's Crossfire Hurricane but authorized it on behalf of the FBI. Moreover, we are not surprised to learn that he used the bogus Alexander Downer–George Papadopoulos “revelations” (outlined in “Downer Comes in from the Cold”, *Quadrant*, October 2019), to justify setting America's principal domestic intelligence agency on Candidate Clinton's opponent in the 2016 presidential race.

Therefore, the FBI's avowal that it accidentally mixed up this fellow's raw notes with somebody else's, as it did during the proceedings of the Special Counsel, is *unbelievable* in the truest sense of the word. Strzok, even more astonishingly if that were possible, served as a member of Robert Mueller's investigation team in June and July 2017. What does that say about Robert Mueller? What does that say about then-acting Attorney-General Rod Rosenstein, who green-lighted the Special Counsel? Sidney Powell, not only Flynn's attorney but also the author of *Licensed to Lie: Exposing Corruption in the Department of Justice* (2014), has questioned whether an earlier version of the Strzok–Pientka FD-302 report exists or, at least, used to exist. For example, Attorney-General Sally Yates went to the White House on January 26 with a warning from the Justice Department that the Russians might blackmail Flynn because he had misinformed Vice-President Pence about the nature of his December 29 and 31 discussions with Kislyak. Yates, an Obama holdover, mentioned nothing about Flynn lying to agents Strzok and Pientka two days

before. The FBI, two days after the White House interview/interrogation, was not satisfied Flynn had committed a criminal act. Why, then, had it become convinced of it in March 2017? What changed is that Lisa Page, FBI lawyer and then-girlfriend of Peter Strzok, helped the FBI agent edit the FD-302, which was later presented to the Special Counsel and used to charge Flynn with deliberately deceiving officers of the FBI.

The details of all this are important. They show that no citizen can be assured of fairness when interrogated by the FBI due to its last-century method of reconstructing an interview. Citizens have to assume, for their own protection, that they cannot be guaranteed justice when they speak with the FBI because their guilt or otherwise is not dependent on what they say but on a report constructed by the two agents (or a third agent who did not attend the interview) after the event.

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This method of inquiry, exploited by the FBI and its DOJ overseer, is a major theme of Powell's *Licensed to Lie* and pre-dates Russiagate by some time. Robert Mueller and Andrew Weissmann are singled out for particular opprobrium by Powell in her exposé of ruthless and unscrupulous federal prosecutors going back to the time Mueller himself was FBI chief. To defend Mike Flynn against the lawfare employed by Mueller, Weissmann, Comey, Rosenstein, Yates, Strzok *et*

*al*, and sanctioned by the likes of Barack Obama and Judge Sullivan, must feel like the fight of Powell's life, a grand showdown with the corrupt forces of the Deep State. The intricacies of the case against Mike Flynn are also important because the lawfare waged against him is a microcosm of the Mueller investigation's attempt to take down the forty-fifth President of the United States.

Mueller's FBI had television personality Martha Stewart imprisoned for six months in 2004 not for the original charge of insider trading, which could never be proven and which Stewart has always denied, but for obstructing justice by lying to FBI agents about mis-remembering the details of a past conversation. And so, a decade down the track we discover the FBI and the Mueller Special Counsel scheming to charge Mike Flynn with *no* underlining crime—that is, colluding with the Kremlin—but, instead, lying to FBI agents about not recalling the details of a conversation. No official under oath

has been prepared to accuse Flynn of colluding with the Kremlin. None of the high-profile figures in Obama's administration, including DNI James Clapper, were prepared to assert before the House Intelligence Committee or to the Special Counsel that Flynn was an agent of Russia.

The FBI wound up Crossfire Hurricane on January 4, which is *after* they had access to the December 29 and 31 Flynn-Kislyak phone conversations. The recently declassified transcripts explain why the FBI gave up the attempt to expose Flynn as a Russian asset. The designate NSA, who does initiate the calls, departs himself throughout with tremendous aplomb, never asking the Russians *not* to reciprocate President Obama's December 29 sanctions and expulsions. He makes it clear he cannot speak for the US government until January 20, and if the Kremlin feels the need to respond to Obama's actions then so be it. All he could do, as President-elect Trump's presumptive national security adviser, is point out to the anxious Ambassador Kislyak that a disproportionate response by President Putin was not in anyone's interests.

David Corn, author of the spurious exposé *Russian Roulette: The Inside Story of Putin's War on America and the Election of Donald Trump* (2018), cannot allow himself to admit the obvious. First, that his "inside story" on the Great Kremlin Conspiracy was primarily a result of highly placed members of the intelligence community providing him with disinformation. Second, that Putin's "war on America", if such a thing can be said of Russian intervention in the 2016 presidential election, makes more sense if its intended victim was Candidate Trump rather than Candidate Clinton. We shall have to await the declassification of material that shows then-CIA Director Brennan suppressing reports of Vladimir Putin's administration hoping for Clinton victory in the 2016 election. I am not sure how the likes of Corn will spin their way out of that one, but we should never underestimate their ingenuity.

Trump, after all, expressed his determination to revisit Obama's 2015 Nuclear Deal, which could only have the effect of disadvantaging Russia's key ally in the Middle East, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and in turn Assad's Syrian regime, Hezbollah and the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq. Moreover, the anti-Trump "dossier", which caused so much trouble for Donald Trump, probably had input from Russian dissemblers. Notwithstanding that, Corn's response to the declassified Flynn-Kislyak transcripts is that they show Flynn betraying his country by "making nice" with America's enemy.

There were many reasons why Trump's transitional team did not want to enter the White House on January 20 caught up in an

Obama-initiated Cold War, one of them being their identification of the People's Republic of China as America's primary geopolitical adversary rather than the Russian Federation. To recklessly inflame American-Russian relations would only serve the Leninist-imperialist ambitions of Xi Jinping's regime by drawing Moscow even further into Beijing's orbit. Only those overly invested in the naive and imprudent Obama Doctrine would disagree. Flynn committed no crime in his December 29 and 31 phone calls. A cabal of federal prosecutors nabbed him for deliberately lying to FBI agents about not recalling the details of a conversation, a conversation that was a non-crime. I would go further: Flynn's uncertainty about exactly what he said to or promised Kislyak is somewhat explained by the fact that, in the published transcripts, he never asks Russia to turn the other cheek, and yet that was the course of action subsequently undertaken by Vladimir Putin.

The Mueller investigation (2017 to 2019) was a repeat of the conspiracy against Mike Flynn only writ large. All the main ingredients are there, starting with comprehensive intelligence community surveillance of the subject, all justified on the pretext of a non-crime, or at least a crime that can never be proved or is never proved in court. We have the Mueller report (March 2019) itself to confirm that the Trump campaign never did collude with the Kremlin. Mueller's (or should we say Weismann's) conclusion that the Special Counsel could not prove the charge means, outside the bubble of the Deep State, that the Trump campaign was not guilty of the charge.

On the charge of Donald Trump "obstructing justice", which in this context means providing misleading information to the investigators probing his non-crime, Mueller and Weissmann were not prepared to "exonerate" Trump, even though they did "not conclude that the President committed a crime". This, as Attorney-General William Barr clarified, meant Trump was not guilty of obstructing justice. Certainly Jay Sekulow, one of Trump's personal attorneys, is adamant that an explosive private exchange between Mueller and himself in 2018 showed the real entire purpose of the Mueller investigation: to entrap Trump by interrogating him under oath and then, as with Flynn, charging him with deliberately misleading a cabal of federal prosecutors. President Trump, had he appeared before the Special Counsel, would have been swept from power for mis-remembering the details of some past (surveilled) conversation, a conversation that was in no sense criminal. Mueller never did subpoena Trump. He decided against it, despite a two-year \$32

million investigation involving 2800 subpoenas, 500 search warrants and 500 witness interviews, because he had no proof Trump's campaign "co-ordinated or conspired" with the Kremlin.

Understandably, Trump is keen to reconfigure Russiagate, featuring himself in the role of arch-villain villain, as Obamagate with Obama playing the anti-hero. That would mean connecting the scandal of the Mueller investigation directly back to the genesis of Operation Crossfire Hurricane and beyond. A White House meeting held on January 5, 2017, is emerging as a pivotal moment in re-casting (or challenging the re-casting of) Russiagate as Obamagate. On the one hand, Acting Attorney-General Yates was, in her own words, surprised to learn on January 5 that not only had the intelligence community been surveilling Flynn throughout the previous month but that President Obama already knew, in advance of the head of the Department of Justice, about the December 29 and 31 Flynn-Kislyak calls. On the other hand, in an unusual email sent to herself on the morning of Inauguration Day, then-DNA Susan Rice asserted that at the commencement of the meeting President Obama assured everyone he would not be "asking about, initiating or instructing anything from a law enforcement perspective". Obama reiterated—in Rice's January recount, now fully declassified—that "every aspect of this issue is handled by the intelligence and law enforcement communities 'by the book'". Barack Obama's hands, in other words, are clean; or at least they are in Rice's account, which she now admits was requested by "White House counsel".

Rice's "report", clearly intended for posterity, frames then-FBI Director Comey—rather than President Obama—as "potentially" unwilling to share national security concerns, including Russia's alleged interference in the 2016 presidential election, with the incoming national security adviser. Did Barack Obama and his confidants use the January 5 tête-à-tête as an opportunity to build a firewall between their role in the Great Kremlin Conspiracy and the FBI and Justice Department? Were Comey, Strzok, Page, Yates, McCabe, Rosenstein, Mueller and Weissmann, duplicitous lawfare veterans one and all, the unwitting pawns in a greater political game about which they were ignorant? All of these players are political in the narrowest sense—opportunistic careerists, PC-inclined and anti-Trump to a person—and yet it is unlikely any of them are political in a deeper philosophical way, as Barack Obama and Brennan have always been. James Comey, for instance, was a registered Republican for most of his life. His boyish hero-worshipping of

Barack Obama, as evidenced by *Higher Loyalty*, was personal. Perhaps Obama's greatest achievement was to persuade people like Comey that he was the Healer-in-Chief, both for America (Obamacare and so on) and then, with the unfolding of Obama Doctrine, for the world. Comey's feelings towards Trump were no less personal except characterised by disgust and contempt. Again, his memoirs are unambiguously clear on this. The politics of Peter Strzok, Andrew McCabe and Andrew Weissmann were more openly pro-Hillary Clinton than Comey's, and yet none of them had Obama's or Brennan's radical pedigree. They went after Flynn to destroy Trump. For Obama and Brennan, contrariwise, it might have been the other way around: they went after the Trump campaign—that is, unleashed the Great Kremlin Conspiracy—in order to destroy Flynn.

The Obama Doctrine was a calamity from start to finish, starting with outreach to the Muslim Brotherhood in 2009, moving on to the withdrawal of all US forces from Iraq in 2011 and the concomitant rise of the Islamic State and on to the 2015 Iran Deal. The whole wrongheaded enterprise has disaster written all over it. But there is every reason to believe Obama thought otherwise and reacted with icy silence when Mike Flynn, his Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency from 2012 to 2014, sent him a prescient report concerning the imminent rise of Salafi-jihadism in Iraq and Syria. The icy dismissal turned into something akin to fury when Flynn was not only proven right on that matter but began counselling against any attempt to achieve a nuclear deal with Iran. Obama had Flynn sacked in 2014, which prompted the lifetime Democrat Flynn to eviscerate the Obama Doctrine at every opportunity. In early 2016 he joined the Trump campaign.

It was at this moment, according to Lee Smith, author of *The Plot Against the President* (2019), that the Obama administration began co-opting sympathetic elements from within America's seventeen-member intelligence community to take down Flynn. Smith makes the case that Flynn was the one member of the Obama administration, albeit briefly and in a relatively minor role, who had the knowledge, ability and desire to demolish what Barack Obama believed would be his greatest foreign policy legacy: the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), also known as the July 2014 Iran Deal. Flynn was ousted from the Obama administration a month after the signing of JCPOA and likely knew President Obama "play'dst most foully for 't". For instance, Smith offers evidence that opponents of the Iran Deal, both inside and outside of Congress, were surveilled and know

they were surveilled. What secrets is Mike Flynn holding close to his chest? The man could not be allowed to return to the White House, let alone as a key figure in a Republican administration. It is entirely plausible, if deeply ironic, that all along it was Mike Flynn, and not Donald Trump, who was Enemy Number One. Maybe the quest to unravel Obamagate is only beginning. A report in the *Ohio News*, generated by a whistleblower, claims that the Obama Treasury's Office of Intelligence engaged in "straight-up political surveillance" of Mike Flynn from as early as March 2016. This would pre-date the FBI's Crossfire Hurricane by three or four months.

On November 10, 2016, two days after his start-line election victory, President-elect Trump was summoned to the White House. There were any number of helpful warnings President Obama could have given his successor but, according to his ensuing leaks to allies in the mainstream media, he focused on two: North Korea's Kim Jong-un and Lieutenant General Mike Flynn. If you bought into the Great Kremlin Conspiracy, like almost every mainstream journalist/talking head in America and Australia, you could view Obama's cautionary advice that Mike Flynn "wasn't up for the job" of NSA as not only helpful but prophetic. However, if you have now processed the cold hard reality that neither Crossfire Hurricane nor the Special Counsel were able to corroborate the collusion-delusion, then President Obama's "helpful warning" about a man who worked for his administration for two years and enjoyed a full security clearance during that time takes on a different hue.

What, exactly, was Obama's problem with Flynn? Why did Obama give Trump the "wasn't up for the job" baloney if he truly believed Flynn was a Russian operative? Why did he fail to inform Trump that his likely NSA had been the subject of an FBI counter-intelligence operation since August that year? Did President Obama not know about Crossfire Hurricane? Is that possible? Did he not know that, at the very moment he was chatting with President-elect Trump in the White House, the upper echelons of his administration had begun a torrent of "unmasking" requests concerning Mike Flynn (but also Trump's family) which would continue up until the morning of Inauguration Day? Lee Smith's thesis about the origins of Russiagate, "a purposeful extension of the Obama administration's Iran media campaign, and of the secret espionage operation targeting those opposed to Obama's effort to realign American interests with [Iran]" makes even more sense as Barack Obama's mask continues to slip.

Mike Flynn might not only have been the first target in the Great Kremlin Conspiracy but the person who did the most—and continues to do the most—to expose a conspiracy initiated by the Radical-in-Chief which, thanks to the machinations of the Deep State, turned into something more ambitious: an attempt to bring down the forty-fifth President of the United States. The compliant mainstream media has, in the service of the Great Kremlin Conspiracy, done much to tarnish Flynn's reputation. If you were to limit your research to the *Washington Post* or Wikipedia, for instance, the image emerges of a freeloader keen to sell his services to Russia or Turkey or whoever was prepared to pay. However, just the fact that Flynn vehemently opposed the Iran Deal makes nonsense of the idea he was a Russian asset; while his intention to destroy the pro-Turkish jihadists in Syria demolishes the claim he was in Erdogan's pocket. Paradoxically, perhaps, General Flynn's greatest achievement might have been the enhancement of real-time intelligence gathering on the battlefield and hostile environments in 2010. Here is an innovation that the cabal of federal prosecutors and intelligence bureaucrats, ensconced in Washington DC, were never likely to devise.

Mike Flynn pleaded guilty to one charge of deliberately lying to FBI agents in December 2017 because the Special Counsel presented him with a fraudulent FD-302 and, according to Flynn, threatened to prosecute his son if he did not comply. Mueller/Weissmann, we assume, anticipated Flynn would thereafter co-operate with the Special Counsel and assist them in their scheme to entrap President Trump, just as Flynn himself had been ensnared in their unconstitutional lawfare.

Flynn, a soldier of great courage who is loyal to the US Constitution, held out against the odds until the Special Counsel's two-year-long attack ran out of steam, and then hired the legendary Sidney Powell to undertake a counter-offensive, one that continues. Judge Sullivan, who refuses to dismiss charges against Flynn despite two requests from the Justice Department, has now hired himself a defense attorney, making him the judge, prosecutor and defendant in the very same case. The critics invariably scorn Trump's increasing use of the expression "Obamagate" and yet the very same critics have by now been wrong about the Great Kremlin Conspiracy for four years. "Strange things", as Shakespeare wrote in *Macbeth*, are afoot.

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*Daryl McCann, a regular contributor to Quadrant, has a blog at <http://darylmccann.blogspot.com.au>, and tweets at @dosakamccann. He contributed "Global Inc versus the People" to the June issue.*

# Pell: Thinkable Crimes and Unbelievable Testimony

The Royal Commission into Institutional Child Abuse has a list of achievements. It has terrified individuals and institutions, prompted policy and legal reforms, and removed the responsibility for investigating allegations of child abuse from institutions, whose instincts have too often favoured protecting their reputations, and put them in the hands of police. It has made sex crimes against children more vivid in the imaginations of the general population and, though I say this with less confidence, made us all more aware of the scope of psychological devastation that often afflicts victims into adulthood.

On the other hand, the limited scope of the Royal Commission may have given the community a false sense that the cancer of paedophilia relates more to indifferent oversight in institutional settings than under the noses of mothers and fathers at home. Unfortunately, the suburban version of this malady is a less fertile ground for award-winning books. There is no public acclaim for these survivors because the predators are too ordinary. *Mum Hates Dirty Old Grandad: I Miss Nana's Pikelets* would never have beaten Louise Milligan's *Cardinal: The Rise and Fall of George Pell* to the Walkley. And instead of sad men at the back of celebrity book signings, whose "PTSD eyes" no longer sparkle like the elven pools of Rivendell, mouthy junkies who can't look after their kids seem less likely to be as sympathetically treated.

But the most important outcome of the Royal Commission is the "thinkability" of sex crimes against children. If they are readily thinkable they are less likely to be dismissed. It is horribly important to be able to think that grown men (mostly), and especially close relatives and friends, can be sexually excited by children, go on to abuse them, and to repeat the crime, hundreds or even thousands of times, regardless of the trauma it causes, or the serious punishments if they are caught.

An example of "thinkability" comes from the Royal Commission's findings in parts of the Pell

transcript redacted for the duration of his trial and appeals:

We are also satisfied that by 1973, Cardinal Pell was not only conscious of child sexual abuse by clergy, but he also considered measures of avoiding situations which might provoke gossip about it.

They are saying it was on his mind, but only to the extent that it might provoke gossip. If that is true, someone who does that either doesn't really care or, in 1973, didn't know the gravity of the situation. Hard to believe? Well, here's Lucie Morris-Marr, author of *Fallen* and a trenchant critic of the Catholic Church, coming late to her own understanding of the problem (courtesy of Twitter, May 7, 2020):

It's literally now five years since I sat in a Ballarat courtroom and began hearing allegations that George Pell failed children. It was there I also learnt of the life long harm abuse caused. It's driven me. Fiercely. Today's full RC report brings at least some justice—truth.

It's as if as late as 2015, Ms Morris-Marr didn't know the "lifelong harm abuse caused". Perhaps her self-confessed ignorance softens her fierce drive enough to give others the same historical pass.

Thinkability as it relates to terrible things like child sexual abuse implies a number of other things, such as: what was vividly imaginable for the times, what were the imagined consequences of not thinking—which include damage to the victims—and the consequences of not dealing with the putative offender. Truly "unthinkable" crimes are considered unlikely, even preposterous; the consequences for the victim are unknown or unimportant; and the recidivist, compulsive nature of the offending is minimised or simply not known. Here, the child

is disbelieved because the allegation is incredible, the risk of lifelong mental illness is unimagined, and the perpetrator can be counselled, “treated”, and given a fresh start. The notorious serial paedophile priest Gerald Ridsdale was sent for all sorts of treatments here and overseas. Another Ballarat cleric, Paul Ryan, was sent to Rome and America for treatment. Many other religious and lay offenders were sent for treatment, sometimes to very expensive and prestigious facilities, by well-meaning and competent (for the times) professionals. And all a catastrophic waste of time.

Hopefully, these days, the child is taken seriously and supported, the allegation is independently investigated, and the perpetrator, if convicted, has lifelong constraints on their ability to reoffend, regardless of any “treatment”. And all because we know these things are real, the damage is truly terrible and “treatment” is not a meaningful consideration. The calculus is different in 2020 from what it was in 1970.

However, George Pell’s trial, conviction and acquittal demonstrate that in the minds of many, including important decision-makers, there has been a reluctance to learn the *whole* lesson of unthinkable human pathologies. This must include a vivid understanding of the pathologies of lying. It’s as if we overcame our horror about the nature and extent of child sexual abuse, only to balk at corrupt testimony, and yes, lying. For instance, it was perfectly easy to think, report and repeat the allegation—it was before the courts, after all—that Cardinal Pell might be a violent paedophile, but it was impermissible to think, say or report the possibility that his accusers over the years might have been liars. Sure, there was an occasional inference, findings of insufficient evidence, a possibility that “something might have happened”, but all ultimately filtered through the “memory is not a linear thing” alembic. So the ridiculous doublethink, that accusers can be wholly believed and yet the offence didn’t occur “beyond reasonable doubt”, prevails.

Journalists use their experiences to weight possibility, plausibility and ultimately thinkability. Here’s Louise Milligan (a senior journalist, whose pinned tweet, “Hug your children”, was added the moment Pell was acquitted by the High Court) relying on her experience. She is incredulous at a male judge’s “incredulity” about the likelihood of an archbishop in full regalia engaged in a public, violent, homosexual, paedophilic sexual assault:

Call me sucker for punishment, I read Weinberg dissenting #Pell judgment again. Incredulous re brazen grabbing of boy in back cathedral corridor. As lady, throwing to floor:

Has this happened in public where onlookers ignored/didn’t notice? Me, as youngster, countless times.

Well, “the floor” responded with alacrity: “All the time!”, “Lost count!” they cheered. And again, referring to Justice Weinberg, who gave the dissenting judgment (correctly as it turns out) in the Victorian Court of Appeal and why he might think opportunistic homosexual episcopal groping was anything other than quotidian:

His experience is Commonwealth jurisdiction. Not sexual matters. Perhaps why he thought grabbing boy’s genitals in busy corridor implausibly brazen. I’d invite his Honour to speak to women. Not sure about you ... but happened to me, many times. & my friends. Men do that stuff.

So these things are readily thinkable for Ms Milligan, and fair enough. But the open-mindedness required to stare down the most brazen dissembling of corrupt clergy seems to vanish when it comes to wondering if corruption or even mistakes were factors for Pell’s accusers.

The next defence against the unthinkable incredible witness is the tortuous logic of preventing further psychological harm by stymying further inquiry. In the Pell case, the act of criticising what turned out to be the most egregious failings of the Victorian courts in living memory, even the right of Pell to appeal against his conviction, was seen by some as at best regrettable and at worst explicitly immoral, because it might retraumatise the victim—who turns out to maybe not have been a victim—and other survivors whose ears ought not be privy to a hateful verdict that found sexual abuse didn’t occur as alleged.

Ms Milligan offers this to those who protested Pell’s wrongful conviction (overturned seven-to-nil in the High Court):

@Milliganreports says commentators who are railing against the conviction of George Pell are making the situation much worse for abuse survivors.

and

Sorry, survivors who’ve written feeling retriggered/let down by proceedings in #Pell appeal & pained for J. Open justice important but brutal for those who weren’t believed, cast as “liars”/“fantasists” as if courts teem w delusional maniacs electing to take on thankless ordeal.

Whilst the courts are indeed teeming, literally seething, with shameless liars (and perhaps merely “populated” by parents lying about abuse in custody cases) no one in their right mind suggests the same is true of allegations of child abuse, put by “liars”/“fantasists” and “delusional maniacs”. But, like it or not, those people do exist, even if they are undreamt of in Ms Milligan’s philosophy.

Here are some egregious failures to properly imagine, and therefore properly investigate, the pathologies of lying.

**Carl Beech.** Carl Beech is a notorious British paedophile and child-abuse hoaxer, now serving a sentence of eighteen years in prison. For years, Beech led the police, the media, the courts and a whole community of online supporters on a merry dance of execrable lies, defaming and ruining innocent people, his fantastic vulgar imagination unchecked by people who should have known better. Not content with destroying the living, he provided wickedly false narratives about historic paedophilic murders to the families and friends of dead little boys.

Beech so convinced British politician Tom Watson (Deputy Leader of the Labour Party from 2015 to 2019) who had been campaigning on the issue of historic abuse, that Watson wrote an article to accompany a piece in a Sunday tabloid newspaper on the death of Lord Brittan, a minister in the Thatcher government, about how one survivor (of Brittan’s predation) told him that Lord Brittan was “as close to evil as a human being could get in my view”. That “survivor” turned out to be Carl Beech.

Beech also convinced journalists, including Mark Watts, editor of the now defunct investigative website *Exaro*, to the extent that Watts provocatively invited the editor of the BBC *Panorama* documentary “The VIP Paedophile Ring: What’s the Truth?” which was investigating Beech’s lies, to meet an abuse survivor who attempted suicide after the program went to air.

Beech convinced his psychotherapist, Vicki Paterson, who saw him for 121 sessions. She told the court he expressed or developed his memories through drawing. He also engaged in “emotional writing” when he wasn’t doing internet research to fabricate his lurid stories. Paterson consulted a supervisor, Dr Ellie Hanson, an expert who advised the police, including on Operation Conifer—the

investigation into historic abuse allegations against the late British Prime Minister Sir Edward Heath. She said this of Beech (under one of his pseudonyms, “Nick”):

I have conducted a brief assessment of Nick’s credibility, exploring how he reports the abuse he alleges, the nature of this abuse, his process of disclosure and reporting, and its potential impact. The above results, taken together, indicate that Nick’s account of the abuse he alleges is credible. I did not find anything that raises doubts about credibility. In my view it is right that such an account triggers a methodical and thorough investigation.

**Billy Doe.** The Billy Doe story in Philadelphia has a similar fact pattern to the Pell choirboys case. *Quadrant* readers were alerted to this by Keith Windschuttle in the May 2019 issue. “Billy Doe” was a profoundly psychologically damaged, drug-addicted boy/man in Philadelphia whose incredible stories about child-rape by priests, when coupled with prosecutorial misconduct, put four men in jail. Amongst them was Monsignor Lynn, the first cleric in America to be jailed for covering up clerical abuse. Doe received US\$5 million from the archdiocese.

*Rolling Stone* writer Sabrina Rubin Erdely, who went on to write the discredited “Rape on Campus” story (see below) about another sexual abuse hoaxer, described Billy Doe as “a sweet, gentle kid with boyish good looks” who had been callously “passed around” from predator to predator.

Now just because Billy Doe is a liar, which seems beyond doubt, doesn’t mean terrible things weren’t done to him, even by the men who were jailed on his evidence. But no one should be in any doubt that he was a profoundly incredible witness and no one should have gone to jail on the testimony he provided.

Erdely is clearly a clever woman with a passion for the sexual abuse narrative. Maybe that means she is also a decent person. Her prose is vivid if entirely partisan. No doubt, in her day, she was a powerful ally if you had been mistreated. Yet she has also been guilty of failing to imagine the real possibilities of pathological lying.

Billy Doe’s public supporters, defending his disastrous testimony, revealed the other problem with elucidating abuse and memory. For these

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*Adult personality disorder, not all of whose sufferers are casual liars and fantasists, runs at as high as 10 per cent in community samples and several times that in clinical populations.*

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people, many of them credentialled in the caring professions, nothing can deprive the victim's narrative of its essential veracity, because the crazier, the more contradictory, confabulatory or physically impossible the recollections become, the more they simply demonstrate the terrible effect the abuse must have had on the mind of the victim. And around it goes.

*"A Rape on Campus"*. The Campus Rape Case is another of Erdely's mistakes. This infamous piece of reporting, "A Rape on Campus: A Brutal Assault and Struggle for Justice at UVA", was published in *Rolling Stone* in 2014. It involves the testimony of "Jackie", a young college student who was allegedly gang-raped as part of a fraternity initiation ritual. The problem is that it didn't happen the way she told it. *Rolling Stone* retracted the story in 2015 and has since paid millions in damages and settlements to the university and the fraternity.

There's no reason to suppose veteran reporter Erdely was gullible in other aspects of her life. That's never the way it goes. But she was convinced, and should not have been. Here's some reporting from the Charlottesville newspaper *C-Ville* on the 2016 libel trial:

"She tells it in such a real and emotional way," Erdely says on the witness stand. "She's so conscientious with her details I could feel it."

"Her level of specificity just reinforced her believability," Erdely testified. "She didn't just run into them at Walmart [her attackers]; she ran into them in the juice aisle."

In court, Erdely testifies that Jackie, who speaks at a rapid clip, seemed "outgoing and forthright" as well as "bubbly and enthusiastic."

Erdely's editor and the fact checker believed the story too:

"She wasn't just answering, 'Yes, yes, yes,' she was correcting me," the checker said. "She was describing the scene for me in a very vivid way ... I did not have doubt."

In 2016, "Jackie" deposed that she stood by her story and that she believed it was true at the time.

Her lawyers asked that she be exempt from giving further testimony because it might trigger her sexual abuse trauma.

If you believe these liars are so unusually clever that anyone would be fooled and that these scenarios must therefore be as rare as hen's teeth, read the original material. And if you believe the reporters are especially gullible or unintelligent, read the reporting. Neither is necessarily true.

And why stop here? The pathologies of lying are everywhere: the Jussie Smollett hoax in January 2019 is still being prosecuted. There have been hundreds of offenders exposed or suspected by the Australia and New Zealand Military Imposters Group. Munchausen syndrome and its proxy variant (now known as "factitious disorder imposed on another") are rare, but present in most paediatricians' case load. Adult personality disorder, not all of whose sufferers are casual liars and fantasists, runs at as high as 10 per cent in community samples and several times that in clinical populations.

The point is not that sexual abuse hoaxes or egregious errors of recollection are routine, but the failure to properly acknowledge the possibility leads to the nonsense of the Pell assault trial, where the hashtag #Pelldefenders or the slur of "paedophile apologists" was used to vilify incredulous critics; where former prime ministers John Howard and Tony Abbott were pilloried for their support of an innocent man. Here are two examples from people who were wrong to have said what they did. Richard Di Natale: "John Howard's character reference for George Pell says much more about the former PM's character than it does about the convicted pedophile." Peter FitzSimons: "Have a look at #pelldefenders A tidal wave of outrage sweeps the land."

The High Court overturned Pell's guilty verdict and found that there was "a significant possibility that an innocent person has been convicted". That means, at the very least, that there is a significant possibility that the allegations against him, despite everything, just did not happen as they were alleged. It is indeed possible that the accuser was confused or lied. Isn't it lucky that the process of justice rolled on, prioritising fairness over the sensitivities of other victims, and people who just didn't want to think?

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*Dr Murray Walters is a Brisbane psychiatrist.*

# Between the Lines: Decoding Witness J

In a long interview with Sky News after Cardinal Pell's acquittal by the High Court, Father Frank Brennan SJ, who had always expressed scepticism about the original verdict, went over the reasons for the paramount decision. But right at the end, he added:

And let's, above all, spare our thoughts for Mister J. He gave a very moving statement there yesterday about getting on with his life, but knowing that there are dark periods ...

Brennan also spoke of the great psychological burden heaped on J by the incompetence of the police and the Director of Public Prosecutions in pursuing a case so ludicrously improbable it should never have been investigated in the first place. This was a convenient, if unsupportable, way of maintaining the socially mandated "believe the victim" stance whilst simultaneously finding third parties to blame for the fiasco. Brennan wasn't alone in giving J a pass. Chris Kenny made similar comments, while the ABC reported that Melbourne's Archbishop Comensoli said he was "relieved" that the legal system had finally acquitted Cardinal Pell but added, "But at the same time, my heart went out to J and his family."

Nor was he alone. Archbishop Mark Coleridge issued a statement on behalf of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. It included:

Today's outcome will be welcomed by many, including those who have believed in the Cardinal's innocence throughout this lengthy process. We also recognise that the High Court's decision will be devastating for others. Many have suffered greatly through the process ...

Archbishop Coleridge finds many who have suffered as a result of the first trial, the second trial, the first appeal and the final appeal. I also find many who suffered, but the one who suffered

most of all was Cardinal George Pell.

The bishops and Father Brennan were not alone in praising J for his "moving statement". Clearly, that statement needs to be interpreted for the innocent of heart and the naive. Here it is, with my comments exploring the subtext.

I respect the decision of the High Court. I accept the outcome.

Because it can't be taken any further.

I understand their view that there was not enough evidence to satisfy the court beyond all reasonable doubt that the offending occurred. I understand that the High Court is saying that the prosecution did not make out the case to the required standards of proof.

Pell did it, but they just couldn't nail him.

It is difficult in child sexual abuse matters to satisfy a criminal court that the offending has occurred beyond the shadow of a doubt. It is a very high standard to meet—a heavy burden. I understand why criminal cases must be proven beyond all reasonable doubt.

Marvel at J as he defends the criminal justice system that ultimately let him down. The courts must be free to make mistakes, he says, even if a guilty man gets off. Admire him for acknowledging as much, even to his detriment.

No one wants to live in a society where people can be imprisoned without due and proper process. This is a basic civil liberty. But the price we pay for weighting the system in favour of the accused is that many sexual offences against children go unpunished.

The selflessness is being laid on with a trowel.

That's why it remains important that everyone who can report to the police does so. I would hate to think that one outcome of this case is that people are discouraged from reporting to the police.

Think of the poor lawyers missing out on all that work and their cut of the settlements.

I would like to reassure child sexual abuse survivors that most people recognise the truth when they hear it.

Unfortunately for J, the High Court, not being "most people", recognises falsehoods and impossibilities.

They know the truth when they look it in the face. I am content with that ...

And so J's statement goes on (and on and on).

The simple reality is that the anonymous J made up the story about Cardinal Pell. That he is a liar can be said now, thanks to the High Court, but this recognition of a fabulist has been strangely missing from all of the public commentary I have read. J's first statement, after Pell's original conviction, and second, after the failure of his appeal in Victoria, as well as this most recent one, must all be read with Cardinal Pell's innocence in mind. In that light they can be seen as masterpieces of deceit and misdirection.

Witness J's lawyer is Vivian Waller. According to her bio at Waller Legal (motto: "In pursuit of justice"), Waller has a PhD from Melbourne in "civil claims for compensation for childhood sexual assault".

J's second statement has this:

I have not instructed any solicitor in relation to a claim for compensation. This is not about money and never has been.

Well, given J's proclaimed integrity, we can cross that motive off the list. I guess it is just one of those mysteries. Yet despite insistence that money was never a motivation, there are conclusions we *can* reach, and then there are unnecessary speculations that are gross overreach. Father Brennan's comments, cited above, continue:

... and my regret is, those dark periods—sure, in the first instance they came because of some dreadful priest who abused him out in the suburbs or whatever, and I'm a Catholic priest, and I have to bear some responsibility for that.

Who is this priest, as anonymous as J himself? He is conjured into existence in another attempt to reconcile the innocence of Cardinal Pell with the ineluctable necessity to "believe the victim". J cannot be believed in respect of Cardinal Pell, so "some dreadful priest" is invented. It is reasonable to assume that, if this suburban monster actually existed, J would have identified him, would he not? J was, after all, so very definite about the circumstances of the Cardinal's purported predation, including the location, the timing (with the help of a little Victoria Police coaching), the robes of the archbishop (more or less), and so forth.

J's paean to his deceased mate was even more expansive in his second statement, after the dismissal of the Victorian appeal.

After attending the funeral of my childhood friend, the other choirboy, I felt a responsibility to come forward. I knew he had been in a dark place. I was in a dark place. I gave a statement to the police because I was thinking of him and his family.

The idea of going to the police came to J, not during the inevitable long decline of his heroin-addicted friend, when a valid complaint might have been helpful, but at the friend's funeral. Imagine that! Dead men tell no tales, but they can be recruited into a lie with no risk of being tripped up by differences in the telling and the whole thing coming apart under cross-examination. To do such a thing—drawing a dead friend into an edifice of perjury—could only be the action of a man devoid of any concern for the suffering of others, especially for the dead man's family, whose sense of outrage could be readily manipulated. And most especially of the man enmeshed in that web of lies, with his career, financial security and reputation in ruins.

J lied. He maintained those lies, and he retailed those lies under oath with vigour and conviction. This is not some rare phenomenon. We all have encountered and will encounter talented liars and been taken in by them. But now that the truth about the allegations has been laid bare by the High Court, there is no excuse for continuing to excuse J, if for no other reason than that by doing so Cardinal Pell is implicitly, in the eyes of those lacking Father Brennan's Jesuitical sophistication, condemned as a paedophile who has escaped justice.

There has been one outstanding victim in all of this: Cardinal Pell. Meanwhile, having tied up the courts for years and wrought chaos across the social and religious landscape of Australia, J continues to

hide behind the suppression of his identity; to hide behind his lawyer; to hide behind his family. Come on out, J. Break cover. Show yourself. Let your millions of fans get to know you, know the things you've done, the people with whom you've interacted.

Cardinal Pell had a place to hide but chose to return home from the Vatican, trusting, unwisely, to his day in court. Trusting, unwisely, in the

Victorian Court of Appeal. Trusting, finally and triumphantly, in the High Court.

Now it's your turn, J, if you are man enough to take it. Come out to your public. Maybe Tim Minchin will even write a song about it.

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*Peter West contributed "The Burden of Proof and the Pell Case" to the March issue.*

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## Brindabellas

If that peat wasn't searing infrangibly  
 or that dorsal cleft of fire  
 sifted vacancy, that drum would echo  
 with stars like a delirium of highways  
 and the warmth of the night would fumigate the clearing  
 with a monsoon of mosquitoes.

But the drum rumbles stably  
 and marbles the thick air  
 like a manicurist's file flashing and muttering,  
 and the trees weep only the crackle of shed leaves  
 into the gathering.

We may walk away from the intimate circle  
 long enough to catch the evening's cold  
 and return it suppliantly to the graceful fire  
 and bathe our limbs in the tender heat of its shallows.

Or we may wander up a high stretch of road  
 out of the clearing  
 and find ourselves among lambent suburban streets  
 and leaning casually on a cold frond of cars  
 discuss things that affirm their weight  
 even in the whistling hollows of evenings.

And we may sear stably into the morning  
 and let the sun pass much of itself  
 before like a log in a clearing like a fire rising.

But the evening deliberates  
 from its own assumptions of direction and exchange  
 and brings the morning flowing  
 like a white doona over the peregrinations of the fire.

*Constantinos Karavias*

## Bruce Pascoe as an Educational Resource

“When you’re on a good thing, stick to it.” Like most kids growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, Bruce Pascoe would have learned that adage. It has stood him in good stead, certainly in recent years. He has managed to parlay the extraordinary success of his fictional history *Dark Emu* into a children’s version, countless speaking gigs and media appearances, a two-part ABC documentary to be screened later this year and a digibook on the ABC’s Education webpage.

The same could be said of his Aboriginality. Why claim to be only Yuin or Burnurong or Tasmanian Aboriginal when you could be all three? A member of not just one but three mobs! You can’t get more Aboriginal than that, I wouldn’t have thought. But that’s another story.

When I embarked on the *Bitter Harvest* project, I did so because both Keith Windschuttle and I were horrified at the idea that Pascoe’s *faux* history would establish itself in our classrooms. That was our prime motivation in exposing *Dark Emu*.

Keith knew, from bitter personal experience, that facts don’t matter when it comes to much of what passes for history these days. But it certainly shocked me when, amongst others, the ABC, which has vigorously promoted Pascoe, simply ignored even the existence of my exposé let alone any arguments I presented.

Undeterred, we soldier on and now take a look at Pascoe’s ABC Education presence. It comprises a prologue and fourteen four-minute video clips on various topics such as Sturt’s encounter with a large tribe of Aborigines at Coopers Creek. This is a short summary of an episode described in *Dark Emu* where Pascoe claims, untruthfully, that this encounter took place in the desert, that Sturt and his party were dying and that the Aborigines rescued them. In another one he covers Aboriginal housing, wherein he first sets up a straw man along the lines that white people think Aborigines lived under a piece of bark leant up against a tree (many

of them did, in fact). He then quotes from Sturt and Mitchell to show that the Aborigines built huts of varying styles and sizes, somewhat undermining his basic premise of white ignorance. He describes these dwellings as “houses”, which they clearly are not, at least not in the way we would think of a house. He seems to think that the fact they built shelters for themselves (an activity at the bottom of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs) is somehow significant.

A chapter titled “Grain and Bread” looks at an archaeological survey that supposedly pushes Aboriginal occupation of the continent back to 65,000 years ago. Pascoe sets great store by this length of occupation and, in *Dark Emu*, uses it to buttress his claims of the sophistication of Aboriginal technology and culture, such as the baking of bread. Does it seem counterintuitive to him, I wonder, that he has to delve so far back in the past to prove the sophistication of nineteenth-century Aborigines? If they were so advanced back then, why were they so backward when Cook arrived? Pascoe would argue that their technology and culture were sufficient for their needs and suitable for their environment, which would prove only that they were content—not that they were sophisticated.

Other vignettes in the series are more spiritual. There is one about stone tools and another on birds and totems. They are superficial in the extreme. Just to give you a taste, here is the transcript of one titled “Trees and Connection”:

This is a grey box. This is one of the hardest timbers in Australia and a long time ago someone cut a shield or coolamon off here and the tree will start to repair ‘cause it doesn’t kill the tree. Our old people would be careful about not killing the tree but using the tree or asking the tree if it was OK to take a piece of bark. But this was done a long time ago ‘cause you can see the tree is trying to grow back over it. But they didn’t just do it over here. They did it twice ... This old grey box is still going.

This tree had company last night. A wombat came by. I love to see that around here.

I don't think this hill would have looked much different at all. They've always been here, these trees, and the old people would have been very conscious that this is family here and that tree is as much a part of the family as the little baby sitting in the coolamon by the fire, y'know.

We believe the country is our mother. So if the country is our mother and she is old we have to look after her. She doesn't have to look after us. It is our responsibility to look after her.

So everything we do on country we have to do in recognition of her needs. So if we want to grow food, if we want timber, if we want to grow vegetables or even if we want to sit in a beautiful place and go fishing, we've still got to ask our mother because she has given us everything and we have to acknowledge all her gifts. Even like this little stick. Y'know a young person might say that's a bit of dead wood. Well, have a look at this "dead wood". [*Fungus is attached to it.*] It's alive. It is never dead. It is creating new life. The new life is all around us. All the birds depend on these as well. [*Gestures to trees.*] Everything is related to everything else. Nothing is dead, nothing is wasted. Everything on earth is part of our life.

These [trees] are very old. I love the fact that they're here—all around here. Different types of trees. They're like family y'know. Everyone's different. Everyone's got a job to do. Everyone looks different. So do the trees. But these trees have known each other for a long time. Every morning when the sun comes up I look around and go, eh family here. All my family. Mmm. Beautiful.

Here is the text that accompanies this chapter:

Bruce Pascoe takes us for a walk on Country. We learn about the importance of trees, their cultural significance and how we can read their histories.

Bruce introduces us to the idea that the Country is our mother and that trees are family. How does this understanding of the environment shape the way it is cared for? Consider the way Aboriginal people used bark to make a shield or coolamon. What does the scar on the grey box tree tell us?

In this video, Bruce says everything is related and nothing is dead. What do you think he means by this?

What do you think "connection to Country" means?

Here's another one I couldn't resist, "Birds and Totems":

I care for the birds. I depend on them for my happiness y'know. Without the birds umm things could get you down but the birds are my saviour 'cause they keep me happy umm y'know. Hear that flycatcher whistling in the background now? The first time I've heard it this season. When it comes back y'know I've just registered it now. It arrived from somewhere else because this is its summer home and it turned up y'know four days before what we call summer. Umm but its arrival here is exactly the same day every year umm and I love to hear that. I love the continuity of animal life. [*Spots bird on the ground.*] There we go. See ya my brother. Have a good day. I'm going to. I love that association with the animals.

[*Spots birds in the distance.*] Snipe. Rare birds, very rare birds, snipe. Ah ha look. Black duck. Umburra! Umburra! Umburra is black duck. I don't know the aboriginal name for snipe but snipe is a rare bird these days. But umburra y'know, a sweet little bird like that, an inoffensive little bird. Aboriginal people have got totems. I have one which means I'm not allowed to eat it—a certain kind of seafood umm which I used to love but I'm not allowed to eat it. My job is to look after it. So I know that I look after black duck and those shellfish. I know that someone else is looking after flathead and bream, kangaroo. And I've got brothers who are kangaroos. I've got brothers who are bream and sisters who are wallaby, eaglehawk and so I know that all the country's being looked after 'cause someone has responsibility for it.

Here are the teaching points accompanying this gem:

We take a walk on Country and learn how birds can signify a change in the seasons. Bruce introduces us to totems and tells us about the importance of black duck to Yuin people.

Totems are part of a complex spiritual system interwoven into some Aboriginal cultures. A totem can be a plant or an animal inherited by a language group or family. Those people then have a responsibility to care for their totems.

How does Bruce know that summer has arrived?

Bruce teaches us a Yuin word. What does Umburra mean?

That's it? Two questions? What about: "Does Bruce know the Aboriginal word for snipe? Do you think Bruce has a calendar? What specific shellfish do you think Bruce is forbidden from eating? Do you think he is keeping that a secret so he can get away with eating it in weak moments? What keeps Bruce happy?" The possibilities for probing questions are almost endless.

I provided those transcripts, rather than just invite you to view the videos online, because I think the plain written word more fully conveys the utter vacuity of these reflective monologues. If you watched the videos you might be distracted by random thoughts such as "Why does Bruce Pascoe look so white?"

It might strike many of you that the episode on trees owes rather more to modern Green Left ideology than to anything found in Aboriginal culture. Aborigines may have been accidental environmentalists—their lifestyle, technology and numbers ensured that their impact would be minimal. But that's as far as it went. Simple people they may have been, but they were also practical and, certainly, not so simple-minded as to believe that trees were their family.

The whole series has no coherence. No underlying theme is developed. As an educational resource it's a bit like *Beano* but without the intellectual rigour.

The ABC website tells us that this "resource" fits into the subjects of history, geography, science and technology and is suitable for Years 1 to 10. I am not a teacher but I do have three grandsons at school. The youngest is cerebral, the middle one is more spiritual and the eldest is a smart-arse. Bruce Pascoe is unlikely to engage any of them.

But my main objection to this exercise in ABC self-indulgence is that they are purveying a product that is demonstrably fraudulent. To be fair, the text accompanying the prologue includes the following:

Note also that since 2019, Pascoe's work has been evaluated differently by some people, who don't agree with his interpretations of historical sources. This resource contains excerpts from the original texts and scientific

evidence that Bruce draws on. We encourage you to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of all historical sources.

Which is fine as far as it goes, but what kids are going to "evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of all historical sources", particularly when they have to go looking for them themselves? I should add that this caveat added by the ABC, for what it's worth, is almost certainly the result of the efforts of *Quadrant* contributor Marc Hendrickx, who formally remonstrated with the ABC about the outright falsity of Pascoe's work and got the anodyne response you would expect.

Reviewing this particular ABC offering caused me to reflect more generally on the entity that is ABC Education. A number of questions occurred to me. What is the budget of ABC Education? Why does it exist? The ABC Charter simply includes, in its list of services to be delivered, broadcasting programs of an educational nature. In this sense I take "educational" to mean informative. It says nothing about establishing an educational program in a pedagogical sense.

Some weeks ago I asked the ABC the following questions: What was the 2019 operating cost of the ABC Education unit? Who heads the

unit? How many staff are devoted full time to this endeavour? Who decides what resources are suitable for inclusion in the webpage? What qualifications do they have to carry out this function? What methodology is employed to select resources published and to ensure that they are suitable? What liaison is carried out with various curriculum authorities to ensure that resources conform to their needs? How much was paid to Mr Bruce Pascoe for his contribution on "Aboriginal Agriculture, Technology and Ingenuity"? What process was undertaken to determine that Mr Pascoe's work was rigorous and suitable for inclusion?

To date I have not yet received a reply from the ABC, but I look forward to sharing it with *Quadrant* readers when I do.

*Peter O'Brien's book Bitter Harvest: The Illusion of Aboriginal Agriculture in Bruce Pascoe's Dark Emu is published by Quadrant Books.*

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*The plain written word more fully conveys the utter vacuity of these reflective monologues. If you watched the videos you might be distracted by random thoughts such as "Why does Bruce Pascoe look so white?"*

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# The Children's Book Council and *Young Dark Emu*

I have been following the Bruce Pascoe *Dark Emu* saga with increasing despair. My opinion of Australia's literary scene reached a new low when I read that Pascoe's little book of bias and untruths, *Young Dark Emu: A Truer History* is now on the short list for the Eve Pownall Award. This award is given out by the Children's Book Council of Australia (CBCA) for "outstanding books which have the prime intention of documenting factual material".

*Young Dark Emu* is not factual material and is therefore not eligible. Even its subtitle is a lie: a "truer history" it most certainly is not. Pascoe makes many claims in an attempt to support his major premise that Aborigines were agriculturalists, not hunter-gatherers. These claims are easily rebutted by careful research. No qualified scholars or reputable academics agree with Pascoe's claims. The accepted scientific and academic view is that the Australian Aborigines were hunter-gatherers. The writings of reputable historians both past and present are clear on the subject and easily accessible to anyone searching for the truth.

Most particularly, Aborigines did not "construct a system of pan-continental government that generated peace and prosperity". Readers of William Buckley's memories of his three decades living with Aboriginal groups in Victoria in the early 1800s would recall his comments about the violence and bloodshed that were commonplace in Aboriginal life. Buckley was not alone in making such judgments. There was no Aboriginal nation united in peace and harmony, with its people tilling the soil, growing crops and living permanently in large towns of stone houses.

A particularly disturbing aspect of *Young Dark Emu* is Pascoe's interpretation of the interaction between the British arrivals and the Aboriginal people. His bias is extraordinary. The situation was far more complicated than Pascoe describes and *Young Dark Emu* is deliberately misinforming our children and doing them a disservice by pushing his

incorrect, guilt-ridden version of our past.

The CBCA awards have been in existence for seventy-four years. In that time, the public has grown to trust the CBCA to make reasoned, professional decisions regarding the merit of the works considered. The winners are chosen because they are worthwhile additions to a child's library. As a retired teacher with many years of working with children, I recall how we would always purchase the winning books for our school because we knew they would have much to offer our students. The CBCA "stamp of approval" on the cover meant that the book was of consequence. For seventy-four years the CBCA has been perhaps the most highly regarded body involved with quality children's literature in this country.

A politically biased book like *Young Dark Emu* has no place in a child's library. A book that purports to be the truth when in fact it is not has no place in a child's library either. We adults tread dangerous ground when we become a party to such dishonesty. The CBCA should not be complicit in spreading historical untruths. It should not be complicit in the wrongful indoctrination of young children.

The judges of the CBCA awards cannot fail to be aware of the problems surrounding *Young Dark Emu*. These issues were made public years ago and have been well documented by *Quadrant* contributors, mainstream journalists and many other concerned Australians.

The reputation of the CBCA awards will be tarnished by this connection with *Young Dark Emu*. Pascoe doesn't deserve a free ride to fame at the expense of the integrity of the CBCA and the truth. In this time of worry and uncertainty, it is more important than ever that we are able to rely on those in positions of trust.

I have recommended Peter O'Brien's expose, *Bitter Harvest: The Illusion of Aboriginal Agriculture in Bruce Pascoe's Dark Emu*, to the judges of the CBCA awards in the hope that they will make their

own investigations before arriving at any decisions about the veracity or otherwise of *Young Dark Emu*. They would be negligent and malfeasant not to do so. It's bad enough that *Young Dark Emu* is already being used as a school resource and that our educators are too lazy, uninterested or politically biased to work out that this book is false history, without Pascoe being considered for yet another award.

I have also asked the CBCA to consider with-

drawing their support for Pascoe's book and I would encourage those who care about what their children read to do the same. As yet, I have not had a reply.

"So what is going on here?" I ask myself from my coronavirus-induced isolation. "Why is nobody standing up and shouting to the rooftops that Bruce Pascoe has no clothes? What are you all afraid of?"

I listen for an answer but hear nothing. Nothing but the wind in the bullshit trees.

## Winter Break

Briefly unencumbered we travel to warmth  
on a lazy island in the Keppel Group  
close to Yeppoon, on the coast near Rockhampton.  
Our small boat churns across the turquoise swell.

A heavy rust-encrusted chain waits as mooring  
on a beach of white coral pieces, grey pebbles and sand.  
Pandanus nuts carpet the ground.  
Coconuts drop from trees and sprout warning signs.  
Brush thick-knees, the local curlews, stand like statues  
outside huts while a sacred kingfisher darts  
from a tree to glean insects.  
An osprey claims the nearby craggy peak  
to scan the ocean for prey as the sea eagle glides.

The eco huts are off the grid but lack little  
with small wind-power, solar panels, rain-water  
gas for cooking and a nightly log fire near the beach.  
Swimmers snorkel blue coral patches  
near where small oysters clad underwater rock faces  
and polkadot the shallow shoreline.  
Others fish the deep pools near rocky points  
or paddle-board and kayak to mangroves  
the bay protects from summer cyclones.

Woppaburra seafaring people lived here  
but were officially removed a hundred years ago.  
Now from hills of rust-stained hard sandstone  
folded and baked by volcanic plugs  
holiday-makers watch for humpback whales.  
Mercurial weather blows from the Pacific.  
Windy then not; cloudy then fine.  
Ten degrees warmer than freezing southern home  
it's hard to leave this winter.

*Paul Williamson*

# Letter from Budapest

## The Central European *Kulturkampf*

It is my good fortune that I currently live on the Buda side of the Danube in Pasarét, a name that supposedly combines the Serbian word *paša* and the Hungarian *rét* (meadow). The nomenclature Pasarét was actually “invented” in 1847 when many names of city regions were Magyarised. The folk etymology suggests a reference to Abdurrahmán Abdi Arnaut, the last pasha of Buda, who died in the reconquest of the city by the Habsburg armies in 1686. It is (in retrospect only, of course) rather a romantic notion that the rotund Turkish pasha would have taken his summer ease here in the former royal hunting grounds, no doubt enjoying the twelve delicious varieties of Hungarian pear so rhapsodically described by the seventeenth-century Turkish traveller Evliya Çelebi. Some four hundred years later, the pasha’s meadow has become a pleasant and elegant residential district of the capital.

It has been a lovely spring here and lockdown has enabled one to enjoy Pasarét’s leafy avenues lined with what Yeats called the “great blossomer” (flowering chestnut), ash, sycamore, black poplars shedding their white pollen, sprays of white hawthorn and the acacia that produces Hungary’s wonderfully aromatic honey. The adjacent gardens of pre-First World War villas have been a riot of colour provided by wisteria, Japanese cherry, elderflower, blushing almond trees and magnolia. The birds are back and our family of red squirrels has been emboldened to resume death-defying circus runs along the telephone wires. With few exceptions May has been idyllically warm and sunny, often with a refreshing light breeze, but the streets have been surrealistically empty of humankind.

However, like Coleridge, I have been imprisoned in my lime-tree bower. Not, of course, because Hungary is the all-but-prison Left-liberals would have us believe, but due to the coronavirus lockdown. The country is beginning to emerge from the outbreak—at the time of writing (late May) there have been over 3600 cases and more than 473 deaths. The fatality rate (12.9 per cent) looks high, but there

has been little testing, so it is reasonable to assume that the number of infections is actually very much higher. About 50 per cent of deaths have been persons over eighty years of age, almost all with “underlying health problems” (a medical euphemism for the assumption that many would have died rather soon in the natural course of events). Neighbouring Austria, a country with a similar population but four times the reported cases, currently has a fatality rate of only 3.9 per cent. Independent monitors have nevertheless accepted the Hungarian Health Minister’s statement that overall the country is in the bottom third sector in terms of coronavirus impact. This relatively good outcome (Poland seems to be another case in point) is insufficient to attract media attention, which has instead focused with venom on the decision passed through Parliament to allow the government emergency powers to act by decree.

The rumpus this has caused is not without its entertaining side. While Viktor Orbán, Hungary’s conservative and “take-no-prisoners” Prime Minister, was receiving the familiar abuse from the *bien-pensants*, the legal and constitutional experts for the European Commission were considering the Hungarian Parliament’s decision. In due course the responsible Commissioner for “Values and Democracy”, a Czech lady called Věra Jourová, announced the result of their deliberations. The decree, she said, was constitutional, compatible with EU law and not out of line with similar measures in other European countries.

The effect was roughly the same as if Angela Merkel had suddenly made a speech saying that Hitler was a much misunderstood fellow. Like a tide of molten lava that abruptly changes course, vitriol was now directed at the unfortunate Jourová, who stuck to her guns but added vague caveats about monitoring how the decree was implemented. This did nothing to appease the anti-Orbán symphony orchestra which had been in full *tutti* mode even before the legal people had even considered the

matter. Former President of the European Council of Ministers, Donald Tusk, who seems to be rather demob-happy, played the Nazi card, making an indirect allusion to the *Ermächtigungsgesetz* of 1933; Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, professed herself greatly perturbed, while the EU Parliament, which has long been suffering from irritable bowel syndrome in respect of Hungary, passed another motion saying the Budapest government was acting in defiance of “European values”.

The evident frustration of Orbán’s critics may largely have been the result of miscalculation. In a revealing outburst, one Dániel Hegedűs of the German Marshall Fund said (the italics are mine): “Even if she [Jourová] has no solid basis for a proceedings against Hungary for Treaty infringement, why is she so *unpolitical* as to admit that? Why didn’t she just keep her mouth shut?” The expression of such a view is what sports commentators describe as an “unforced error”. After all, it seems to confirm what Orbán and his supporters have maintained all along, namely that the attacks on his government are politically motivated, for which motivation lofty concerns about democracy are simply a convenient fig-leaf.

On the whole the parliamentary opposition had felt obliged hitherto to support the government’s measures to combat the coronavirus crisis—always an unhappy position for an opposition to be in, even were it not the opposition in highly polarised Hungary. The emergency powers controversy seemed to offer an opportunity to get back on track and further capitalise on the opposition’s electoral success in the autumn of 2019. In October a coalition of five left-of-centre parties took back control of Budapest from the governing Fidesz party. Some readers may be puzzled as to how such a victory could even have occurred in what the late Agnès Heller, a disciple of the communist philosopher György Lukács, has characterised as a “tyranny”. However that may be, the difficulty in making a plausible case that Hungary is a full-blooded dictatorship is partly a technical one—*Index*, the oppositional online news source, puts it like this:

Contrary to the common misconception, Parliament has to extend the effect of only the extraordinary government decrees every fifteen days (*Section 53 (3)*), but not the state

of emergency itself: that has to be terminated when the danger has subsided by the “*organ entitled to introduce the state of emergency*” (*54 (3)*), which, in this case, is the government (*53 (1)*). The text of the bill does not change that, no matter what politicians on either side keep saying. [The references are to clauses of the Hungarian Basic Law.]

Knee-jerk misconceptions spilled over into an interview the Foreign Minister, Péter Szijjártó, gave to CNN’s Mother Superior of liberalism, Christiane Amanpour. This lady also made a mistake in claiming that “Parliament in Hungary had been suspended”, was corrected by Szijjártó, and then began blustering. She ended with the accusation that the government was blocking a bill on transgender rights. The relevance of that to the matter in hand was hard to fathom, even if you believe, with the transgender lobby, that the health of a democracy may be judged by whether or not governments immediately cede any “rights” that the lobby takes it into its head to demand. The interviewer on BBC World’s *Hard Talk* program fared little better, especially as Zoltán Kovács, a Hungarian Secretary of State, was armed with the EU’s statement of absolution. Stephen Sackur was reduced to increasingly long-winded questions and loud interrupting, always a sign in BBC

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*Orbán has aimed to eradicate what he regards as the structural traces of communist hegemony by transforming politics and society in a way which he hopes will be irreversible.*

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interviews that things are not going to plan. These two incidents are worth mentioning as both went out to a worldwide audience; and both of them, like the statement from Dániel Hegedűs, revealed how a much narrower Left-liberal ideology (such as transgender rights) was actually being touted under the ostensible “concern” about democracy.

The virulence of the attacks on Hungary, though nothing new, has now spilled over into a wider problem for EU federalists and the Left-liberal firmament. On May 5 the German Constitutional Court in Karlsruhe overruled a judgment of the European Court of Justice (ECJ), by saying that the latter had acted *ultra vires*. The point at issue was whether the European Central Bank was breaking the rules in massively buying EU government bonds, a practice quite a lot of German lawyers, economists and politicians believe constitutes national bailouts theoretically forbidden under EU law. The ECJ had dismissed their complaints, in effect saying that it could deem anything legal if

it so chose and national governments had to comply. This might seem an arcane matter to the man in the street, but the perils which it posed for the EU project were not lost on the latter's protagonists. The *Financial Times* immediately had a hissy fit and nine days later demanded in an editorial that action must be taken against Germany for EU treaty infringement (*sic!*). This was an interesting reaction from a paper that professes undying allegiance to the rule of law—especially as infringement disputes end up in the ECJ, which would thus become judge and jury in its own case.

But there was more: the same paper and numerous liberal commentators identified as one of their major objections to the German court doing its job “the encouragement it gives to other countries looking to defy the ECJ”, in which context Poland and Hungary were almost invariably cited. To the modern liberal mind, which interprets conservatism not as a political philosophy but as a pathology, judgments in the highest courts should only go in one direction, namely that which pushes the boundaries of liberal ideology. In this case there is considerable irony in the fact that the *Financial Times* and others now want infringement proceedings against such a pillar (and paymaster) of the EU as Germany, especially when similar proceedings were taken under Article 7 against Poland (later dropped) for its judicial reforms which seemed designed to entrench the power of the Law and Justice Party. “Lawfare” is one of the major tools of liberal lobbies to obtain leverage through the creation of international legal precedents, but of course it works best if the judges are themselves sympathetic to the ideology. It appears that the German judges have offended by their temerity in showing that they still regard the interests of Germany, and in particular adherence to its sacred Basic Law, as paramount.

From a Central European perspective, the open split between northern “Hanseatic” countries and the “Mediterranean Club”, though ostensibly based on differing economic circumstances, runs parallel to the different political cultures that bedevil relations between the EU and Central European states. In their book *Mittleuropa Revisited*, Erhard Busek and Emil Brix (both strong opponents of anti-democratic tendencies) point out that the invariable application of a Western European model has led to a perception of “arrogance” in countries like Poland and Hungary. Understanding of historical and social context is often lacking and, after all, both countries were functioning as nation-states long before Germany or Italy were united or Belgium even existed. Luxembourg is particularly loud in its invocations of “European values”, which is rich coming from a country built up by a former

President of the European Commission as a tax haven and money laundromat.

**D**elve deeper and you find that both Hungary and Poland are themselves in the throes of a *Kulturkampf*. Their underlying conservatism is not simply a rejection of “progress”, however tendentially that is defined by neo-liberals, liberals and socialists, but part of the struggle to emerge from the attempted Sovietisation of their societies over fifty years. On the whole, they prefer not to replace Soviet domination with petitioning at the court of Brussels, although economic circumstances have rather forced them into that position.

There is no more enthusiastic *Kulturkämpfer* than Viktor Orbán, who has aimed to eradicate what he regards as the structural traces of communist hegemony by transforming politics and society in a way which he hopes will be irreversible. Often he goes too far, as in the latest law effectively removing academic autonomy from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, a move that has evaporated what exiguous support he still had among Budapest intellectuals. This followed the ousting of the Central European University (known to Fidesz supporters as “the unofficial opposition”) from Budapest by the government using spurious legal arguments. Orbán's reform of the judiciary has extended government control over its administration, though more adroitly than in the Polish case where a dissident and parallel set of judges has been established to resist government overreach. His autocratic style, as well as corruption and cronyism, have outraged liberal opponents and often dismayed even his supporters.

On the other hand Orbán has supplied political and economic stability since re-election in 2010 when he took power to clean up the mess left by the corrupt and incompetent Gyurcsány regime that led to IMF intervention. Against all (politically motivated) predictions, he succeeded in this mission, while his opponents fought him every inch of the way. Indeed, before the coronavirus pandemic hit, independent analysis was predicting that Hungary would have the highest rate of growth in Europe in 2020, closely followed by the EU's other bad boy, Poland. Already motor engine manufacturing for Audi has restarted in Hungary, but the real hit to the economy from the virus may be tourism which had grown to 8.5 per cent of GDP on the back of strong marketing in the last few years, but especially due to the sophisticated attraction of Budapest (evidently tourists have not noticed they are subsidising a “tyranny”).

According to whether you are an opponent or a supporter, Viktor Orbán is either shameless or unshamed. He is a Hanseatic insofar as he believes in

fiscal discipline and has reduced the deficit and the national debt, but a Mediterranean Clubber insofar as Hungary has relied on large EU funding; but then again he dislikes the prospect of lavish uncollateralised grants to fellow Clubbers like Italy as now proposed, since that will reduce finance coming to Hungary. That could be all the more worrying if the achievements of the Fidesz years in power were undermined by the fall-out from the virus.

A non-partisan survey by the liberal think-tank Solutions, working with Friedrich-Ebnart-Stiftung, has found that financial protection for the family, migration policy and the reduction in non-wage labour costs have been Fidesz policies for which there has been considerable support in Hungary across party divides (even in the younger generation). Approval of a tough line on illegal migration and asylum seekers after the chaos of 2015 is strong, probably also privately among many who adopt a high moral tone in public. However, even Fidesz supporters say the health system is on its knees, starved of cash and badly administered, despite its many world-class doctors and dedicated nursing staff. One of the consequences of EU membership has been the flight of freshly trained doctors from the former Eastern Bloc to the lush financial pastures of the West. During the pandemic the Hungarian health authorities have had to recall doctors over the age of sixty-five who had been furloughed due to fears of infection.

Is Orbán beginning to lose his grip, as the losses in the 2019 local elections seemed to show? Blowhard liberals are already putting it about that he will not leave office if he loses an election; but they said that in 2002 when he lost narrowly and bowed out, as a democrat must. (Socialist Gerhard Schröder in Germany seemed rather less keen to yield in a similarly close finish with Angela Merkel in 2005, but has since been consoled by becoming a board member of the Russian energy giant Rosneft. Which is odd, as the Left is constantly berating Orbán for being too close to President Putin.) The leftist propaganda suggests an uncertain confidence in the voters, who have regrettably long memories, but maybe Hungary has made enough economic progress to take a chance on tax-and-spend environmentalists and socialists. The country could be at a crossroads made all the more challenging by the pandemic. The great Hungarian reformer of the nineteenth century, Count István Széchenyi, famously said, “Many people think there once was a

Hungary; I would like to believe there will be one!” Now, as then, the opinions as to what that Hungary of the future should be are riven with partisanship, rivalry and very differing views as to how a Hungarian patriot should be defined.

Back in my corner of Budapest I have been doing some deplorably unscientific testing of the current mood. A Fidesz supporter asserts that the opposition won in the capital by enlisting Chinese voters (there are thought to be some 20,000 Chinese in Budapest, many with dual citizenship or voting rights) by telling them they would all be sent back to China if Fidesz won. He also complained that three new deputy mayors have been appointed as jobs for the boys and that there are longer intervals between the trams and constant breakdowns. My usual taxi-driver is indignant about the numerous new cycle lanes marked or planned which snarl up the traffic, while my green liberal friend is delighted with the promise to plant innumerable trees.

As for my extremely feisty hairdresser, she was furiously concerned that Orbán would include hairdressers in the lockdown, but he did not. (“Probably he has a barber friend,” she observed to gales of laughter among the ladies waiting to be blow-dried.) Together

with pedicure and cosmetics salons, she has therefore remained open and has done a roaring trade servicing bored customers otherwise confined to their homes by the pandemic. Not, I suspect, that she would have taken much notice if she had been ordered to close. How then to assess her politically—a sardonically alienated working-class voter, or a former Fidesz one about to return to the fold?

These are deep waters, Watson. Recently the new mayor of Budapest, Gergely Karácsony (his surname means “Christmas”), has made an impact sparring with Orbán over the lockdown (after all, if you rule by decree, you can hardly blame others when things go wrong). He has also secured large funding for the city from the Prime Minister’s arch-enemy, George Soros, maintaining that the government has been punishing Budapest for voting the wrong way in October. It is quite an effective line, but then again there are still two years before the next election; it remains to be seen if the voter turkeys will vote for Christmas in 2022.

*Nicholas T. Parsons’s most recent book is **Civilisation and Its Malcontents: Essays on Our Times** (2019).*

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## God, *Lebenswelten* and Conservatism

This article has its genesis in a letter by Dr Paul Monk in the May issue of *Quadrant*. This letter concerned my review of the life and work of Sir Roger Scruton published on the occasion of his passing (“The Conservative Odyssey of Roger Scruton”, *Quadrant*, March). More specifically, Monk addressed the role Christianity/religion historically has played as the basis of traditional forms of conservatism. While he recognises that “Christianity ... has embodied a great deal of our cultural heritage”, he believes that it is no longer capable of bearing this burden in our postmodern/post-Christian world, especially in the light of advances in the natural and human sciences. However, he claims that it should be possible to base such a conservatism on some form of philosophical atheism. He concluded:

If the underlying premises of the conservative position are taken philosophically, rather than religiously, it seems to me that a perfectly rational and constructive dialogue ought [to] be possible between believers and atheists about meaning, phenomenology and the overlap in experience and perception between their *Lebenswelten*. We do badly if we see the issue as an either/or issue of organised religion versus “faddish atheism”. I would like to think that *Quadrant* could be a forum for the exploration of just such dialogue.

This article seeks to contribute to such a dialogue.

To clear the decks at the outset: Monk notes the references in my article to a “faddish atheism”, and an “arrogant scientism”. The latter is best dealt with later in the context of a discussion of the phenomenological approach that Roger Scruton employs in discussing the social and cultural role played by religion. Here I will clarify my mention of “faddish atheism” and also set up my discussion of the fundamental nature of Scruton’s conservatism.

The faddish atheists I had in mind were such popular authors as Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*, 2007), Sam Harris (*The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, 2006), Christopher Hitchens (*God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, 2007) and Daniel Dennett (*Breaking the Spell*, 2006). Known apparently as the “Four Horsemen of the Non-Apocalypse”, together with the British philosopher and anti-Christian polemicist, A.C. Grayling (*The God Argument*, 2013; *The Good Book*, 2016), they have been described as “evangelical atheists” and serve as the vanguard of the “New Atheism”. This is a militant intellectual movement that goes back to Bertrand Russell’s 1927 essay “Why I Am Not a Christian”, but got a major boost after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, when a coterie of secularists decided to throw the religious baby out with the Islamist bathwater.

The New Atheism promotes a belligerent oppositional stance towards religion and particularly Christianity, which they seek to expose as mere superstition and bigotry. For Harris, organised religion is absurd and dangerous and “represents so uncompromising a misuse of the power of our minds that it forms a perverse cultural singularity”. He made his own singularly adroit decision to regard only fundamentalist religion as genuine, dismissing any other “moderate” versions (which would include about 90 per cent of historical Christianity) as not “true” religion. With this move, his polemic against religion practically wrote itself.

However, it was Grayling who I had particularly in mind, as he had recently visited Australia to publicise his new *History of Philosophy* (2019), had enjoyed some fawning articles and reviews of what is a rather ordinary book, and had then regaled a writers’ festival with his views on religion and the glories of a fully desacralised world. With nobody game or capable of challenging him, he enjoyed a dream run. Those folk with some theological knowledge might have found the spectacle rather galling, but typical of the faddish enthusiasm unleashed at

writers' festivals in the antipodes.

Grayling is explicitly an anti-Christian polemicist, pursuing objectives on three fronts. (1) The demotion or removal of all religious organisations from the public sphere beyond the status allowed secular groups such as trade unions and NGOs. (2) The replacement of the Judeo-Christian foundations of the Western ethical system by secular, humanist values allegedly guided by human reason. (3) A determined philosophical attack on any and all notions of the supernatural or transcendent—Grayling is adamant that the universe contains no such thing. This last point suggests some over-confidence on Grayling's part, and a brief discussion of it helps illuminate the wonder at things that informs Scruton's philosophy (as in *The Face of God*, 2012).

Grayling's insistence appears over-confident because the observable universe alone contains about 70 sextillion (70,000,000,000,000,000,000,000) stars, and is some 93 billion light-years in diameter. However, this may be only 10 per cent of its total size, and it may in fact be only one of a possibly infinite number of inter-connected "multiverses". Also, apparently some 95 per cent of the universe is composed of dark energy and dark matter, both of which are undetectable by any known form of instrumentation, meaning that the portion we can observe is only about 5 per cent of the total contents of the universe, while the rest is invisible to us. Moreover, according to the currently preferred Superstring Theory, the universe exists in ten different dimensions, of which we are aware of only four, leaving six dimensions in which anything could be going on. Under the circumstances, making categorical statements, à la Grayling, about what may or may not exist in the universe is rather courageous. An alternative stance would be to cultivate the "sense of wonder" that humans have perennially experienced at the immensity of the universe and at the miracle of their sentient existence within it, as Scruton does.

As an atheist, Grayling is a "grim absolutist", as one reviewer (*Guardian*, March 7, 2013), summed up his position: "Religion, he argues, is immoral in itself and in its consequences: a set of life-threatening delusions that no one would succumb to unless they had been debauched by the forces of unreason." He takes pride in showing no mercy to his opponents, even if this places him in otherwise strange company:

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*Anselm was  
insisting that anyone  
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the singular nature  
of "that than which  
nothing greater can  
be thought" would  
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must exist.*

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Grayling sees himself as a champion of the Enlightenment, but in the old battle over the interpretation of religious texts he is on the side of conservative literalist fundamentalists rather than progressive critical liberals. He believes that the scriptures must be taken at their word, rather than being allowed to flourish as many-layered parables, teeming with quarrels, follies, jokes, reversals and paradoxes.

If you resist this simplistic approach, "if you suggest that his vaunted 'clarifications' annihilate the poetry of religious experience or the nuance of theological reflection, he will mark you down for obstructive irrationalism".

In *The God Argument: The Case against Religion and for Humanism*, Grayling rehearsed some age-old objections to classical arguments for the existence of God. Most prominently, he addresses St Anselm's famous "Ontological Argument", and spends much of the first half of the book developing a refutation of this unique and mysterious argument that has bemused philosophy and theology for over 900 years. The crux of this conundrum is the proposition that "God is that than which nothing greater can be thought". Attempted refutations began in Anselm's lifetime, when a monk, Gaunilo, argued that the same logic could be employed to "prove" the existence of "an island greater than which nothing can be thought", or a turnip, or a cockroach. Anselm was unfazed by this because he believed that Gaunilo had missed the point, as Grayling did again nine centuries

later. Anselm was insisting that anyone who *fully* grasped the singular nature of "that than which nothing greater can be thought" would immediately see that such a being must exist. Grayling couldn't do this, and he wrote half a book to explain why nobody else should be able to do it either. For those who find Anselm's case persuasive—that is, those who "get it"—Grayling is like a blind man insisting there is no such thing as sight.

(Understandably, all of this is mere gobbledygook to Grayling and other convinced atheists, and this illustrates the unbridgeable gap that exists between those who believe in the existence of God, or a supernatural or transcendent realm, and those who don't—two categories of people who usually talk past each other and will continue to do so, presumably until the final denouement.)

In the second half of the book Grayling presents

a case for humanism. He means by this not the successor of the great intellectual movement that began in the Renaissance as the *studia humanitatis*, but an agenda of secular, rational and liberal causes, values, prejudices and aspirations derived from the Enlightenment and the contemporary progressivist zeitgeist. He supports this with *The Good Book: A Secular Bible*. This is really a self-help book that parodies the Bible, offering its own books (such as Genesis, Parables, Lamentations, Songs, Proverbs, Acts, Epistles, and The Good), with each divided into chapters and verses, so that people can properly cite the wisdom and teachings of Grayling. For example, “The Good” provides Grayling’s “Ten Commandments” (Love Well, Harm No-one, Respect Nature, Be Informed and so on). Adherence to all this, Grayling insists, will deliver humanity into a secular Golden Age of peace and tolerance.

Indeed, the New Atheist attack on Christianity involves a contest between two fundamentally different conceptions of god. Left behind will be the traditional Judeo-Christian God, who is transcendent and other-worldly; while being promoted is the Progressivist ideal of a god-like mega-state (currently exemplified by China), which is entirely immanent and this-worldly. Instead of salvation being sought through a transcendent God, it will be sought from an all-powerful state apparatus whose presence is entirely immanent, seeking to control every aspect of individual and social life and promising to transform human nature and society into a paradise of the here-and-now.

In the shadow of the twentieth century, Grayling simply ignores the apparently irrefutable evidence that human beings are subject to irrational and destructive forces that make such a utopia highly unlikely. Moreover, as another reviewer observes, “he presents a vision of the good life without taking seriously enough the possibility that we could equally despair at the meaninglessness of it all”.

Roger Scruton didn’t suffer this problem of meaninglessness; indeed, he faced a surfeit of meaning, weighing down upon him, as the profound reflectiveness of many of his fifty or so books attests. His posture before the universe is the opposite of the New Atheists’. Put concisely, they are seeking to radically simplify (“flatten out”) the universe by suppressing or eliminating the second concept from each of the following binary pairs: natural/supernatural; immanence/transcendence; profane/sacred; corporeal/spiritual; nature/grace; earth/heaven; worldly/otherworldly; reason/faith; truth/Truth; science/revelation; material/ideal; enlightenment/mystery, and so on. Scruton, in contrast, sought to embrace such concepts and was

seeking fully to comprehend them within a coherent philosophical worldview that he identified as resolutely conservative.

The key to Scruton’s endeavour is the concept of *Lebenswelt* (“life-world”). This is one of a family of concepts, including “forms of life” and “worldview” that Scruton has adopted from various philosophers, notably Husserl and Wittgenstein, but also Durkheim. While these concepts don’t completely converge, they are used by Scruton to communicate his conception of the crisis of contemporary Western civilisation, the locus of which he finds at its most fundamental level. For our purposes here I will generally use the term “*Lebenswelt*”, which I will more carefully define shortly.

Scruton believed that the scientific and industrial society underpinning modernity has devastated the traditional *Lebenswelten* within which people had for over a millennium lived and made sense of their lives, producing a crisis of disorientation, dislocation and alienation. Scruton himself suffered a deep sense of isolation: first as a conservative in the academic world, but more deeply in terms of being “out of time” with his era. To represent this situation Scruton took a metaphor from Matthew Arnold’s famous poem “Dover Beach” (1867). This poem gives expression to the pervasive sense of loss and longing found throughout Scruton’s writings. As the most comprehensive study of his work concludes, much of it was a response to an increasingly nihilistic situation, “an attempt to restore some joy, love and light to a world”. Indeed, Scruton has “given us a way of philosophically affirming traditional institutions and forms of life, in a world dedicated to their extinction”. Consequently, “if you want to identify a single theme that unites his philosophy, politics aesthetics, and cultural criticism, the rootlessness and alienation of modern man is it” (Mark Dooley, *Roger Scruton: The Philosopher on Dover Beach*, 2009).

“Dover Beach” was written in “the true era of ‘the Death of God’ [in] a world preparing itself to absorb the Darwinian theory of the Survival of the Fittest [while] the studied godlessness of the Marxist creed was to give birth to convulsions all over Europe which excited reactions of Nietzschean and Wagnerian tragedy” (A.N. Wilson, *God’s Funeral*, 1999). On a moonlit night on Dover Beach we find a solitary poet contemplating the fading religious faith of his world. He sees this as a remorselessly receding tide. Whereas “the sea of faith [once] lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl’d [around the world], now I only hear its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar”. For Arnold and Scruton, something crucial—enfolding, comforting—had gone from the world, leaving only a simulacrum of life:

for the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,  
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain ...

In this stark reality, stripped of illusions, “we are here as on a darkling plain / Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight ...”

This recourse to poetry is essential because the experience Arnold and Scruton were trying to evoke is intuitive rather than rational. It is concerned with a mood, a disposition, a sense or insight into a darkening and fractured world that doesn't yield to purely rational formulations, but demands creative, imaginative and tentative expression. This is why creative nineteenth-century writers of nihilism and cultural despair like Turgenev, Kierkegaard, Wagner, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche came to the fore and remain iconic figures, and why Arnold's poem still haunts our culture—because it communicates something sad and profound, of which many other people came to have a visceral sense, upon which they reflected deeply.

These latter folk created much of the canon of conservative thought, as Russell Kirk documents in *The Conservative Mind*. These can't be discussed here, but John Ruskin can be taken as an example. The mid-Victorian champion of the Gothic style and the Pre-Raphaelites, Ruskin gave expression to this sense of cultural despair and loss, and Scruton (*Gentle Regrets*, 2005) found in him a kindred spirit:

The Gothic style, as [Ruskin] described and commended it, was to recapture the sacred for a secular age. It was to offer visions of sacrifice and consecrated labour, and so counter the dispiriting products of the industrial machine. The Gothic would be, in the midst of our utilitarian madness, a window onto the transcendental, where once again we could pause and wonder, and where our souls would be filled with the light of another world.

One has only to venture inside the soaring Gothic cathedrals of Europe to grasp what Scruton meant by “a window onto the transcendental”.

The window onto the transcendental is also the portal out of the metaphysical loneliness that Scruton believed characterises the human condi-

tion. Crucially, “the separation between the self-conscious being and his world is not to be overcome by any natural process. It is a supernatural defect, which can be remedied only by grace.” And it is the tragedy of life under the modern dispensation that the failure to find God or experience this grace is “the cause of deep disquiet”. “That,” he concluded, “is the conclusion to which I have reluctantly come.”

This sense or intuition of existential aloneness that finds varying expression among such writers arises from the disintegration of the *Lebenswelt* in which their lives had previously been embedded.

It suggests that this traditional realm—enfolding people “like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd”—was damaged or torn; that this was experienced as alienation, anomie, anguish or even angst, absurdity and despair; that such pathologies were prototypical characteristics of modernity; and that this situation arose because secular modernity and the new, insurgent *Lebenswelt* of which it is an expression were proving to be a deeply inadequate “form-of-life”.

Such insights have empowered much of conservative thought for the past two centuries. However, these are strong claims and they

depend substantially upon the viability of the concept of *Lebenswelt*.

As noted above, *Lebenswelt* is one of a somewhat diverse family of concepts that Scruton has adopted from several sources. The concept of “form-of-life” (*Lebensform*) originated with the later Wittgenstein (e.g., *Philosophical Investigations*, 1953) and was linked to similar notions including “language games” and “worldview” (*Weltanschauung*), all of which emphasise the extent to which knowledge is contextual and localised, embedded in concrete activities and experiences, and constrained above all by language. It refers to the infinitely complex networks of inter-subjective communication and interaction, constructed over time, and experienced implicitly as the “straight-forwardly intuited world” that a community shares. Scruton also had recourse to Emile Durkheim's concept of the “collective consciousness” that underlies and shapes religion, culture and mental life:

Religion, as Durkheim pointed out in his great study of its elementary forms, is a social fact. A religion is not something that occurs to you; nor does it emerge as the conclusion of an empirical

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*Arnold's poem  
still haunts our  
culture, because  
it communicates  
something sad and  
profound, of which  
many other people  
came to have a visceral  
sense, upon which  
they reflected deeply.*

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investigation or an intellectual argument. It is something that you join, to which you are converted, or into which you are born.

It thus possesses the essential “enveloping” quality, the loss of which is experienced as alienation, anomie and (as with Luther, Kierkegaard and many others) anguish and despair:

Losing the Christian faith is not merely a matter of doubting the existence of God, or the incarnation, or the redemption purchased on the Cross. It involves falling out of communion, ceasing to be “members in Christ”, losing a primary experience of home.

The concept of *Lebenswelt* itself came from phenomenology and specifically from *The Crisis of the European Sciences* (1936) by Edmund Husserl. There it refers to the “intuitive surrounding world of life, pre-given as existing for all in common”. It is the universal framework of human endeavour, the ultimate horizon of all human activity, and is a pre-given realm in the deepest, most comprehensive sense, preceding even “common sense”; indeed it is “the most obvious of the obvious” dimensions of reality. Inspired by this insight, Husserl called for a new form of inquiry, a “science of the universal *how* of the pre-givenness of the world, i.e., of what makes it a universal ground for any sort of [scientific] objectivity”.

This new form of inquiry was to be phenomenology, and one of its tasks was combatting the pretensions of what came to be called “scientism”, the elevation of science to the status of supreme arbiter of knowledge. It contested the assertion that science can completely grasp the nature of the universe, including the human world. As Simon Critchley (*Continental Philosophy*, 2001) explains:

Scientism rests on the fallacious claim that the theoretical or natural scientific way of viewing things provides the primary and most significant access to ourselves and our world, and that the methodology of the natural sciences provides the best form of explanation for all phenomena.

Specifically, scientism “overlooks the phenomenon of the life-world as the enabling condition for scientific practice”, or indeed any form of systematic thought, and this pre-cognitive role played by such *Lebenswelt* is central to Scruton’s philosophy.

**T**he obvious problem with such concepts is that they can appear inherently relativistic: Isn’t one person’s worldview as valid as another? Or one civi-

lisation’s “life-world” as valid as another?—and so on. This objection arises because those proposing it fail to grasp the profound pre-cognitive depth at which a *Lebenswelt* operates, or the *longue durée* over which it evolves. (Western civilisation had its origins in the synthesis of Classical, Christian and Germanic cultures that took shape in Western Europe during the early Middle Ages.) Relativisers tend to think of it instead as a much more recent product, as an optional intellectual system, paradigm or perspective that one might choose to adopt. In fact, it is the *Urgrund* of thinking—the prior realm from which thinking emerges—that makes possible the existence of such apparently optional systems or perspectives.

It therefore actually precedes any notion of relativism (or absolutism, for that matter), indeed it itself makes such notions possible. For example, the emergence of “relativity” as a scientific notion is itself an expression of the shift in the dominant Western *Lebenswelt*, and was announced by Einstein’s discoveries before the Great War. Such shifts are historically tectonic—rare, slow-moving, but epoch-shaping. As Paul Johnson (*A History of the Modern World*, 1983) points out: “the discovery that space and time are relative rather than absolute ... is comparable, in its effect on our perception of the world, to the first use of perspective in art, which occurred in Greece in the two decades c.500–480 BC”—in the middle of the Axial Age, which laid the foundations for the religious and philosophical systems that were to dominate the subsequent 2500 years. Einstein’s discoveries exemplify the West’s broader civilisational transformation into a “Relativistic World”, as Johnson called it.

This shift has its distant roots 700 years ago, according to the conservative theorist Richard Weaver. As he explained in *Ideas Have Consequences* (1948), the key figure was William of Ockham and his forceful championing of philosophical Nominalism against the prevailing Realism of Scholasticism. According to Weaver, “the defeat of logical realism [by Nominalism] in the great medieval debate was the crucial event in the history of Western culture”. Thomas Aquinas and other Scholastics had achieved a great synthesis of reason and faith, built upon the notion of universals. This established a viable boundary between philosophy and theology, and showed how the existence and nature of God could be open to rational investigation. Nominalism eliminated universals and drove a stake through the heart of this confident Rationalism. Whereas Aquinas and others had been sure that reason could prove the existence of God and the truth of the Christian religion, Ockham swept that certainty

away; from then on, believers could rely only on faith as the bedrock of their religion. And, along with certainty about God went the divinely ordered universe; suddenly, human beings were exposed to the chaos that underlies their world. Even the fierce secularist Bertrand Russell (*History of Western Philosophy*, 1946) noted how the displacement of the all-encompassing Christian system by the scientific outlook that flowed from Nominalism left humanity marooned on a small island of assumed scientific certitude amidst an “ocean of nescience”.

An example of a more recent religious response to this epoch-shaping shift in the *Lebenswelt* underlying Western civilisation was the strenuous reaction of the Catholic Church, which sought desperately to stabilise matters in the face of an advancing modernity. It called the First Vatican Council in 1869, instituted the principle of Papal Infallibility, and then, in 1910, required all clergy, pastors, seminary professors and teachers to swear the Anti-Modernist Oath. This directly confronted both the “errors” of modernity, and the Liberal Theology that had emerged during the nineteenth century. The latter tried desperately to accommodate modernity by “humanising” Christ and by relativising and historicising key aspects of the faith. In response, the Oath required a commitment to the principle that the core doctrines of the Church are “absolute and immutable truths” that may never vary. Then, in 1914, Pope Pius X decreed that “the capital theses in the philosophy of St Thomas Aquinas ... are to be considered as the foundations upon which the whole science of natural and divine things is based”. This established Neo-Scholasticism as the intellectual orthodoxy that reigned in the Church until Vatican II in the 1960s.

Within Protestantism the response was similar (although not as monolithic), and there was a concerted effort to put the brakes on the juggernaut of modernity by giving the faith some absolute moorings. This led to the appearance of *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth* (1910–15). A huge collection of articles defining the essential doctrines of Christianity, these became the foundation of modern Christian fundamentalism. An alternative Protestant response was the similarly influential “Crisis Theology” initiated by Karl Barth’s epochal commentary on *The Epistle to the Romans* (1921). This countered Liberal Theology by propounding an extreme vision of transcendence based on the notion of the “infinite qualitative distinction” between humanity and God.

By 1935 even the scholarly and apolitical Husserl was himself declaring that “the European nations are sick [and] in crisis”. A Jew, he was abandoned by his famous student, the Nazi philosopher Martin

Heidegger, and only his demise in 1938 saved him from the death camps.

And of course, there was Oswald Spengler’s bombshell best-seller, *The Decline of the West* (1923), which foretold the imminent death of Western civilisation, as it lost its *élan*, morale and self-belief. Scruton, in *Gentle Regrets*, has described how, much later, Spengler’s apocalyptic vision affected him at a time of youthful despair and how it drove home the depth of the crisis:

[It] told me that the sense of decline that troubled me was no personal foible but the sign of a cosmic tragedy that was playing itself out in me. It linked my own paltry emotions to the destiny of civilization itself. I had been caught up in a drama of untold proportions and ... so did I become happy in my mournful emotions, knowing that it was not I, but culture itself, that was alive in them, and also dying there.

Scruton went on to describe how bereft he felt as the enfolding comfort of the traditional cultural certitudes unfurled from around him:

I was disinherited, like all my generation, from [culture]. Culture ... lives in us, and us in it; and what is living must also die ... My experience of art came to me with a sense of loss, a knowledge that I was among the last to whom it would be offered, and that, with the passing of my generation, the light of civilization would be extinguished forever and all meaning gone from the world.

As these brief historical allusions illustrate and Scruton’s experience exemplifies, over the past two centuries people have felt the cultural ground shifting violently under their feet. The slowly evolving and widely shared *Lebenswelt* within which their faith and core beliefs had for eons enjoyed a comfortable cultural home began cataclysmically to give way to something different and alien. Suddenly, there was no place for the threatened concepts noted above, such as transcendence, the sacred, the spiritual, grace and mystery. Instead, the world has been simplified and handed over to reason, science, materialism, the corporeal and the obvious. Our civilisation has fallen away from a rich and profound realm anchored in the transcendent, into a radically diminished world of transient therapeutic titillations and trivia anchored in the merely immanent.

Challenging this latter netherworld may be what Dr Monk is alluding to when he remarks in his letter that this:

is where the great inquiries and debates of the twenty-first century need to anchor themselves ... this is where the most intractable challenges confront us: our need for a sense of lived and cherished human reality as against the glib, the superficial, the evanescent or the domineering and alien.

And this brings us to the crux of the present discussion: can an *atheistic* version of conservatism, paralleling that proposed by Scruton, be constructed on the basis of the concept of a *Lebenswelt* and this phenomenological account of human being in the world? Given the central role played in Scruton's philosophy by the transcendent and related concepts, this seems highly unlikely ... unless. That is, unless some substantial immanent, this-worldly force or factor can play the anchoring role previously performed by God, the transcendent and the Christian faith.

It is not the task of this essay to make the case for this possibility, but it can't be ignored that various attempts have been made over the past century to find a candidate to play this pre-eminent role. The most prominent attempts have been collectivist, based on the state, the nation, the *Volk*, the proletariat, or the people, embedded within abstract notions of history or racial destiny. An alternative has been based on the heroic individual living according to exalted notions of the ego, reason, or natural law, as with libertarianism or Randian objectivism.

A further alternative might be to elevate the arts to a supreme status, to offer "redemption of the soul

through art", perhaps as Wagner had in mind with his proposed "total work of art" (*Gesamtkunstwerk*). This would use all the arts to express the most profound truths embedded in the collective memory of a people—their myths, legends, religions, histories, folk tales and other essential elements of their *Lebenswelt*. Scruton was a life-long devotee of Wagner, and his very last book was *Wagner's Parsifal: The Music of Redemption* (2020). There he observes how Wagner based his mature works on such material and how

his intention was to extract their core of truth and to present it to his contemporaries, however surprised they might be to discover themselves in this old material. In this way, he believed, art would serve as the successor to religion, a way of acquainting sceptical modern audiences with the truths once made available by faith.

Most of these attempts to find an alternative to the transcendent have been failures and even catastrophes. (And, in Wagner's case, all three paths—the *Volk*, the Ego, and Redemption through Art—converged, with highly questionable results.) However, this doesn't necessarily mean the project is doomed; rather it suggests that the construction of a viable conservative *Lebenswelt* is a laborious and long-term project. Sadly, we had one but let it slip away.

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## The Eyes of Artists in the Brochure

This is not normal. They are the lookers,  
drinking in the world. They trap it, haul it in,  
persuade it to undress on their canvas.  
Their eyes look out now from black and white squares,  
framed by flesh, intense. Human enough to  
know they are objects (that one knows she's beautiful,  
while he's dressed his eyes in an arty moustache),  
they're uncomfortable, wary of exposure.  
Even photo-flattened their eyes can't be stopped:  
assessing, comparing, judging, consuming.  
That one is laughing, just like a normal person,  
but his eyes, crinkled with greed, betray him.

*Katherine Spadaro*

DANIEL J. MAHONEY

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# Reflections on the Counter-Revolution in France

## Part II: Confronting Communism, Islam and Western Self-Hatred

In the first part of this essay on liberal conservative thought in France (*Quadrant*, April 2020), I laid out the broad parameters of democratic conservatism as understood by some of the best thinkers in France today. These thinkers represent a “counter-revolutionary” current, not against democracy or modernity *per se*, but against the endless radicalisation of democracy and enlightenment premises that was inaugurated by the movement of thought associated with May 1968. That movement was both indulgent towards communist totalitarianism in faraway places like Cuba and China, and thoughtlessly and recklessly opposed to those moral principles and authoritative institutions that underlie any free and decent society. Contemporary French liberal conservative thought is thus equally opposed to the grave evil that is totalitarianism *and* to the seductive corruption of democracy that is the “pleasure principle”, or unfettered human autonomy, divorced from civilised norms.

As we saw in Part I of this reflection, the fore-runner of that noble defence of liberty under law was Raymond Aron (1905–83) who stood firmly and unequivocally against the totalitarian temptation in both its Red and Brown manifestations. In the final phase of his storied career, Aron also stood up eloquently and courageously to the moral anarchy and frenzied rejection of legitimate authority that marked the “revolutionary psychodrama” of May 1968. As the American cultural critic John Leonard once remarked, when professors lauded students who resorted to violence and refused to learn, Aron was the only adult in the room. The great French political thinker could not comprehend how any thoughtful and mature human being refused to respond to slogans like “It is forbidden to forbid” with the derision they so richly deserved.

The celebration of the “May events” still plays an

essential role in the progressive vulgate in France and elsewhere. The “*pensée de soixante-huit*” still dominates the humanities departments of the universities of the Western world, such that their products instruct senior secondary school students to spout off about “deconstruction” and “intersectionality”. Michel Foucault’s juvenile confusion of authority with insidious “domination” is simply taken for granted by the dominant elite opinion today.

It is easy to think that the blindness of Left-antinomian thinkers towards totalitarianism of the Left is simply a thing of the past. How many Maoists are left in Paris? But that judgment would be both premature and false. To be sure, communism is largely forgotten, its evils relativised or explained away. But the progressive-minded among the young see it as an unqualified force for good, and fashionable intellectuals like Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou sing its praises.

Communism’s record of lives and souls destroyed by “utopia in power” is a massive moral fact that has barely been passed on to subsequent generations. The great French Russianist and philosophical historian Alain Besançon has provocatively, if accurately, spoken of the “hyper-memory” of Nazism and the contrasting “hyper-amnesia” that has greeted the crimes of communism. What accounts for this glaring blindness, and this striking and insidious civic and moral abdication?

### Coming to terms with communism

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago* had a dramatic impact on French public opinion, and intellectual life, when the first of its three volumes was published in France in early 1974. The scales of ideology, and ideological justification for criminality and tyranny that posed itself as progressive and emancipatory, seemed to fall massively from individual and collective eyes. But that positive

reception to the greatest anti-totalitarian work of the twentieth century was, in retrospect, rather misleading. Many French intellectuals turned almost immediately to an ideology of “human rights” as the alleged alternative to the totalitarianism that had deformed so much of the twentieth century. They thus received Solzhenitsyn through the lenses of a modified version of the “thought of ’68”—opposition to domination, to “heteronomous” institutions, to power in all its forms, was the effectual truth of anti-totalitarianism as they understood it.

As Raymond Aron and the political theorist Marcel Gauchet both wrote almost simultaneously in 1980, such an anti-political understanding of human rights does not make for an effective or viable politics. It is another form of utopianism that tends to confuse authority as such with “totalitarian domination”. In this new understanding, rights have no ultimate ground and no recognizable limits, and thus become a form of self-assertion that limits true political deliberation and a reasonable articulation of a civic common good. This has also been a major theme of the recent political and philosophical reflection of Pierre Manent, most recently in *Natural Law and Human Rights: Toward a Recovery of Practical Reason*, just published in English translation. When human rights are affirmed in contradistinction to the goods of our nature, they eat away at those authoritative institutions (the nation, the churches, the army, the family, the university) that once exercised salutary authority in free and decent societies. True anti-totalitarianism thus demands an affirmation of the moral law and legitimate authority and institutions. Moral anarchy is an invitation to lawless tyranny, and not its opposite or antidote.

Aron, who had always been reasonably but adamantly anti-totalitarian and anti-communist, drew exactly the right lessons from his reading of *The Gulag Archipelago*. It might even be said that his engagement with Solzhenitsyn deepened his understanding of, and opposition to, communism. He came to see that the “idealism” undergirding communism was in fact as criminal and monstrous as the open brutality and cruelty heralded by Nazism. A humanism, such as Marx’s, without any acknowledgment of unchanging moral principles above the human will, could not support ordered liberty or liberty under law. Far from it. As Aron wrote in 1976, in a lucid and passionate reflection on Solzhenitsyn and Sartre, Solzhenitsyn taught all of

us committed to authentic liberty and human dignity that there is no other defence “against the raging of fanaticism” and “no other hope for the future than in respect for moral laws and the rejection of ideological knavery”. Liberty without an acknowledgment of the sempiternal distinction between good and evil was a dead end, one that provided no ground for opposition to modern tyranny and no support for a principled recognition of the inherent dignity of the human person.

In an interview with the radio network France Culture in 1975, Aron declared himself, like Solzhenitsyn, “essentially anti-revolutionary”, since revolutions of an ideological stamp “cost very dearly and finally cause more evil than good”. Aron added that since personally witnessing the barbarism of Nazi totalitarianism unfold in Germany in the winter and spring of 1933, he had always tied together opposition to totalitarianism with the firmest rejection of the allure or illusion of revolution. Ideological revolution was both inherently nihilistic and an invitation to the most inhuman tyrannies in history. These lessons, affirmed in distinctive but complementary ways by Solzhenitsyn and Aron, are among what the distinguished French political theorist Chantal Delsol calls “the unlearned lessons of the twentieth century”.

Too many intellectuals and activists associate hope in history with the revolutionary transformation of human nature and society. But as Aron often pointed out, the rejection of messianic illusions was a precondition for true politics, and in no way a reason for despair. Authentic politics has a dignity all its own.

The publication of *The Black Book of Communism* in France in 1998 was a revelatory moment. Some of its contributors rejected any affirmation of moral symmetry between Nazism and communist totalitarianism, but all of them saw communism as a grave threat to the lives, liberties and inherent dignity of human beings. But as Alain Besançon has pointed out, far too many intellectuals, journalists and politicians, in France and abroad, insisted in response to this great work, that 85 million to 100 million deaths at the hands of communist regimes (and this estimate is a conservative one), and political and intellectual tyranny on an unprecedented scale, “did not in any way tarnish the communist ideal”.

One could not be a Nazi in good conscience after Auschwitz, and surely that is a very good

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thing. But one could be a communist in good faith despite the gulag, murderous collectivisation, the Cultural Revolution in China, and the killing fields in Cambodia. Emancipatory ideals justified every crime, every murder, as well as endless, soul-destroying mendacity. Like the decorated historian Eric Hobsbawm in the United Kingdom, these apologists for the unjustifiable would do it all over again if given the chance. And for the twenty-two years since the publication of the *Black Book*, esteemed intellectuals such as Badiou and Žižek have continued to applaud the “communist idea” as the only real hope for humanity. That ideal, it appears, is never capable of being falsified or rejected. It is immune to moral and political judgment. It has the right to what Pierre Manent has called “human extraterritoriality”.

As Alain Besançon has told me on many occasions, the semi-educated fail to see the “moral destruction” at the heart of communist ideology and every known communist regime past or present. As Besançon has argued in several books of unusual insight and penetration, the communists used homonyms (peace, freedom, equality, social justice, fraternity) to spread evil through the world. They gave murderous and mendacious meaning to old and venerable words. In some respects, Besançon argued, communism was even more perverse than Nazism, precisely because it engaged in a massive “falsification of the good” (the term is Vladimir Soloviev’s) that has misled so many people of good will.

The Catholic Church, for example, once led the way in exposing the monstrous lies and illusions undergirding communist theory and practice. But since the Second Vatican Council, important elements in the Church have succumbed to a para-Marxist political or liberation theology, and have even justified leftist tyrannies that persecute, imprison and kill their coreligionists. These Christian progressivists confuse solicitude for the poor with “proletarian” regimes that promote systematic lawlessness and murderous class struggle. The Church has all the resources in the world to criticise unjust oligarchies or oppressive military regimes in places like Latin America, without resorting to the moral and political destruction inherent in communism. Yet when confronting the ideological illusions of the age, even the once firmly anti-totalitarian Catholic Church has largely lost its way. The moral destruction promoted by communism is thus insidious and shows no evidence of abating. These are largely unlearned lessons of the twentieth century, indeed.

In a recent correspondence with me, Pierre Manent lamented that “communism has been largely

forgotten—washed out”. At best, the intellectual and political establishment acknowledges, somewhat reluctantly, that “communism doesn’t work, that is all”. Manent points out that one can remain a member of the intellectual elite in good standing even if one says amiable words about Stalin, Mao, or even Pol Pot. For progressive elites, “all the evil of humanity is condensed in Nazism”. But even more ominously, it has become fashionable to see Nazism as the effectual truth of national self-affirmation, no matter how humane, moderate or civilised the nation might be. Nazism was in truth a murderous pagan barbarism, “a revolution in nihilism” that was at war with liberal and Christian civilisation. Great patriots and democratic conservatives such as Churchill and de Gaulle understood that Nazism was at war with everything that was choice-worthy in Western civilisation. They fought Hitler to save national independence and honour, to prevent the rise of an unprecedented form of tyranny, and to preserve Christian ethics against pagan barbarism. Only a mixture of pathological self-hatred with utopian illusions can account for the degeneration of Western self-criticism into a juvenile but perverse *reductio ad Hitlerum*.

**I**n an atmosphere where the moral and intellectual resources of Western civilisation are said to culminate in Nazism, or racial, class and “gender” oppression more broadly, there is no room to confront the truth about communism. Manent suggests a deeper reason for this shocking moral and intellectual blindness and abdication: there are obvious affinities between hard and soft despotism, between communist ideology and humanist-humanitarian ideology.

As Aron came to appreciate fully under the impact of Solzhenitsyn’s moral witness, both communist ideology and the new antinomianism reject the moral law in the name of an unbounded freedom that gives rise to limitless despotism, where it does not merely excuse it. The French liberal conservatives stand out by their recognition that totalitarianism and moral nihilism are two sides of the same ideological coin. As Philippe Bénétou and Chantal Delsol have often noted, late modernity shares with the communism of the past a Manichean impulse to divide humanity into those who are on “the right side of history”, and those who are ontologically guilty because they stand, unbeknownst to themselves, for heteronomous domination in all its forms.

In opposition to this dual mutilation of the moral law, the French liberal conservatives affirm with Solzhenitsyn, Vaclav Havel and others that “the line between good and evil” can be found in

every human heart. Every class, group, party and individual is capable of succumbing to moral blindness and excessive self-assertion. The most meaningful distinction for human life is the permanent distinction between good and evil in every human heart or soul. The ideological distinction between “progress” and “reaction” in contrast is a chimera that leads to new forms of tyranny and oppression. It is incompatible with political moderation and serene and balanced human self-knowledge and self-limitation.

## Islam: Beyond illusions

The contemporary French conservative liberals whom I have highlighted also have no illusions about Islam and Islamism. They are not “Islamophobes”, a cheap, ideological category which has little or no meaning, and serves to cut off meaningful conversation and intellectual inquiry. Rather, students of Islam such as Rémi Brague and Alain Besançon refuse to succumb to intellectual self-deception.

Many pious Muslims are indeed decent souls who appeal in the few prayers they know to a compassionate and merciful judge, as Rémi Brague, an Arabist as well as a Catholic philosopher-theologian, pointed out to me. Some Muslims even convert to Christianity when they actually read the Koran and discover its toleration for oppression and violence against those who do not belong to the “House of Islam”, or those at home who challenge its harsher premises.

Besançon has even spoken about naive indulgence towards Islam as a fundamental temptation for the Catholic Church today, with too many bishops, theologians, and even recent popes, uncritically proclaiming Islam to be both an Abrahamic religion and a “religion of peace”. Besançon has also argued that Islam, like communism, makes its way in the world by using and abusing certain “homonyms”. The Abraham, Isaac, Moses, Jesus and Mary of the Koran have little or nothing to do with those great souls who come to light in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. The Koran viciously mocks the Trinity, denies that Jesus was crucified, and forbids Muslims from even reading the Old and New Testaments. We are not people of the same “Book”, however much that falsehood is proclaimed in the name of false ecumenism and easygoing religious political correctness.

Besançon and Brague do not wish to encourage

endless enmity between Christianity and Islam. Rather, they aim to promote an engagement and scholarship rooted in facts, moral realism and true theology. In a recent dialogue with the Islamic scholar Souleymane Bachir about the nature of Islam, *La controverse: Dialogue sur l'Islam*, Brague spoke bluntly but with no animosity towards decent Muslims. Among other things, he highlighted all the problems associated with treating the Koran as “the uncreated Word of Allah”, and thus incapable of real interpretation. The Bible is not the “word of God” for Christians in anything like the same sense. The biblical writers were *inspired* by the Holy Spirit, but the letter and spirit of the two great testaments is always open to thoughtful reading and interpretation by believers. Furthermore, Brague points out that basic moral norms, not to mention the laws of civil society, are, for Christians, found in human nature, the moral law, and in the exercise of prudent judgment.

Christianity leaves much more room for human intelligence, and judgment, and fundamental human liberties, than the Islamic law does. Christianity in its dominant forms esteems human reason while Islam speaks of a “submission” to divine law and will that has little place for human freedom. In the end, Brague suggests, Islam is prone to fatalism while Christianity, with a few exceptions, allows human beings to respond freely to the grace of God our father and friend. Despite theological tensions between free will and predestination, the mainstream of Christianity moves strongly in the direction of rejecting determin-

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*An important part of French Islam sees in any criticism, however decent, calibrated or fair, in any request, “however reasonable”, “a sign of Islamophobia”.*

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ism and defending free will as an essential response of the human person to the goodness and greatness of God.

There is nothing in Christianity that is the equivalent to what Leibniz and others have called the *fatum mahometanum*. Islamic fatalism has troubling religious and political implications. For Christians, grace perfects nature, and the natural virtues serve as the indispensable starting point for the theological virtues. There is no equivalent of nature and grace, or the full range of the virtues, in Islamic thought or practice.

Muslims now live in large numbers in what Pierre Manent has called Western nations of a “Christian mark”. A place must be found for them as citizens in a common national framework, or community of destiny. French and European Muslims must, however, reject *sharia* as well as guidance and funding from illiberal Islamic regimes and religious

currents. They must also accept that they live in free societies marked by the Christian heritage and its deep-seated spiritual ties to the covenant with God announced by the Jewish people. All of that is non-negotiable, a precondition for authentic civic reconciliation, as Pierre Manent has wisely argued. And some decent, patriotic Muslims have responded positively to this challenge. But as Manent pointed out in a recent piece in *Commentaire*, republished in English in *Law and Liberty*, an important part of French Islam sees in any criticism, however decent, calibrated or fair, in any *request*, “however reasonable”, “a sign of Islamophobia”.

Manent judiciously, but firmly, argues that France’s Islamic community must move away from putting all their energy into denouncing Islamophobia. Good will and civic friendship require a rejection of all deeds that violate the moral law and the requirements of civic amity. French Muslims must effectively combat “the excesses or pathologies of Islam that ought to be repulsive to Muslims themselves”. There is nothing immoderate, oppressive, hateful or unreasonable about making that request. It is the *sine qua non* of any civic project that will allow Christians, Jews, secularists and Muslims to live together as one people, one nation, under the rule of law.

## Beyond Western self-hatred

In the first part of this article, I spoke a great deal about the role that a self-hating “culture of repudiation” (the late Roger Scruton’s inimitable phrase) plays in contemporary European intellectual and political culture. Recently, I asked the relatively young Italian-born political theorist Giulio de Ligio (a student of Pierre Manent’s who has written brilliantly on the deepest political and philosophical resonances of Raymond Aron’s thought) how the old nations and the old religion still might speak to the hearts and souls of the younger generation. De Ligio freely acknowledged that the young, even the best of the young, have succumbed to the rejection of large parts of the Western heritage out of a misplaced sense that they are *unjust*. With rare exceptions, he added, they do not *hate* the Western inheritance even if they have come to perceive it as resting on an unjust foundation of inequality, ecological devastation and colonial exploitation.

The great task lying before those of us who

affirm the goodness of our free and self-critical Western tradition and inheritance, must be to lead the younger generations to a deeper appreciation of the fact that self-criticism, and even penitential impulses, are perfectly compatible with a *complete affirmation* of a civilisation built on the four great pillars of reason, revelation, self-government and liberty under law. Without that transformation of excessive self-criticism into a reasoned choice for civilisation itself, the West will sink further into a “double sterility”, as the Catholic poet and essayist Charles Péguy diagnosed it over one hundred years ago, one where the “deChristianisation” and the “derepublicanisation” of France and Europe reinforce each other and undermine the vitality of a civilisation that should still inspire the commitment of decent young men and women. Unreasonable demands for perfect justice that jettison moral and civic prudence, and lose a sense of historical proportion, readily give rise to nihilism, passivity and a deep sense of spiritual forlornness. Educators and scholars like de Ligio can point the way forward through a revitalisation of the essential truths of Western philosophy, the Christian

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*Self-criticism and even penitential impulses are perfectly compatible with a complete affirmation of a civilisation built on the four great pillars of reason, revelation, self-government and liberty under law.*

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religion, and the Western civic tradition of liberty under law. That is one way of recovering, or rather rejuvenating, the full powers of civilisation and the soul.

As Pierre Manent has recently pointed out in *Natural Law and Human Rights*, this dispiriting double sterility of which Péguy and de Ligio spoke can lead to a warped and dehumanising understanding of death, one with pernicious social and political consequences. Whether one is believer or unbeliever, human beings guided by a sense of the duties and obligations inherent in both the moral and civic spheres do not obsess over death or attempt to “survive at any price”. They are self-conscious mortals who gladly carry out their larger moral and civic responsibilities.

That is a lesson that has been largely forgotten in the present global crisis occasioned by the spread of COVID-19. Individually and collectively, we seem to have put what Aristotle called “mere life” above the “good life” which is the crown of human temporal existence. By all means, we must protect the weak, the vulnerable, those who are at risk of death as the ravages of the pandemic do their work. That is an imperative for all decent people. But shutting down civilised existence hardly reflects the exigencies

of Christian charity or Churchillian fortitude. As Pierre Manent recently stated in an interview with *Le Figaro*, free men and women do not readily accept house arrest, or the indefinite prohibition of all forms of worship. Following Aristotle, Manent reminded his readers that politics is the “queen of the sciences”, one that should not be usurped by “experts” who display no special capacity for moral and political judgment, and sometimes quite the opposite.

The present crisis should give rise to renewed introspection on the part of a Western world in danger of losing its soul, immediately or through a not-so-slow process of moral and civic attrition. In this task of moral, political and philosophical self-interrogation and renewal, there is no better guide than the French liberal conservative thought I have highlighted in this two-part essay and reflection.

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### Sources and suggested readings

Raymond Aron’s *La révolution introuvable* (2018) will remain the unsurpassed discussion and critique of the mix of political utopianism and moral antinomianism that defined the “May events” in Paris in 1968. Aron also stood nearly alone at the time in forthrightly defending the liberal university against what he did not hesitate to call intellectual terrorism.

For Aron’s most moving account of the impact Solzhenitsyn had on his thinking, see his 1976 essay “Alexander Solzhenitsyn and European Leftism”, in Daniel J. Mahoney ed, *In Defense of Political Reason: Essays by Raymond Aron* (1994), pp. 115–124, especially pp. 123–124. Aron’s comments on the intimate connection between anti-totalitarianism and opposition to ideological revolution can be found in *L’abécédaire de Raymond Aron*, texts chosen by Dominique Schnapper and Fabrice Gardel (2019), in the entry titled “Antirévolutionnaire”, pp. 17–18.

I have drawn freely on conversations with Alain Besançon over the years as well as on his superb but sobering reflection on the tragedies of the twentieth century titled *A Century of Horrors: Communism, Nazism, and the Uniqueness of the Shoah*, translated by Ralph C. Hancock (2007), especially pp. 36–37. I am also indebted to Besançon’s book *Trois tentations dans l’Église* (1996) which deals with three

looming temptations in the life of the Church: reactionary anti-modernism, the religion of humanity or indulgence to democracy in its least wise and sober forms, and a misguided effort to exaggerate the intellectual, moral and theological affinities between Islam and Christianity.

In my discussion of the lamentable consequences of the West’s failure to come to terms with the true meaning and legacy of communism, I have drawn on correspondence with Philippe Bénétou, Chantal Delsol and especially Pierre Manent.

In my discussion of Islam, I am indebted to correspondence with Rémi Brague and to his luminous analyses in *La controverse: Dialogue sur l’Islam* (2019), pp. 2, 30–31, 37–38, 71–72, 76, 87–89, 159–161. I am also indebted to Alain Besançon’s discussions of Islam in *Trois tentations dans l’église*. For Manent’s striking account of the evasion which is the constant recourse to accusations of Islamophobia, see Pierre Manent, “Islam in France”, translated by Daniel J. Mahoney and Paul Seaton, in *Law and Liberty*, April 1, 2020.

I am grateful to Giulio de Ligio of the Institut Catholique in Paris for his insights on the younger generation’s receptivity to the culture of repudiation, a well as his penetrating remarks on Charles Péguy’s account of the “double sterility” of a Western world turning away at the same time from both authentic religion and authentic republican politics.

For a truly penetrating account of our debilitating fear of death and especially our misguided tendency to treat it as an “extrinsic accident”, see Pierre Manent, *Natural Law and Human Rights: Toward a Recovery of Practical Reason*, translated by Ralph C. Hancock with a foreword by Daniel J. Mahoney (2020), pp. 89–92. On politics as the “queen of the sciences” and the limits of scientific or technical expertise in the moral and political realms, see the interview with Pierre Manent (“Time to Wake Up!”) in *First Things*, April 28, 2020.

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## The Electric Didgeridoo

Riverbeds, twisted  
as the unkempt hair  
of a homeless person,  
  
and framed by an aircraft  
porthole, form patterns  
where they meet  
  
the sand dunes  
that are the colour  
of a peeled  
  
sweet potato, and break  
like waves against  
other dunes,  
  
on a vast  
waterless coast.  
Those patterns  
  
bring to mind  
the paintings  
that humans devised  
  
to describe themselves  
once to strangers  
coming on ships,  
  
and those painters  
left descendants  
who have  
  
continued to use  
the methods  
passed down  
  
through the ages,  
the dabs and points  
and lines  
  
that echo the forms  
one can see  
from the air.

The land beneath  
our plane is vaster  
than Europe,  
  
and arid  
as a scene  
in the Bible,  
  
yet people  
adapted to it  
without the need  
  
for roads and buildings,  
and instead of towns  
they created  
  
art that has survived  
countless centuries.  
Now a group  
  
of artists  
from the Territory  
have been flown  
  
to a city  
art museum  
to talk about  
  
traditional practice:  
their explanation  
of the spiritual  
  
content  
of works that seem  
no more than  
  
abstract designs  
resonates  
as we learn  
  
that every brush stroke  
is loaded  
with meaning,

referring to myths, taboos  
and totems  
that are as real  
  
to them as the modern  
world. Then they turn  
from those mythologies  
  
to iPads and mobile phones  
that they are  
as grateful for  
  
as for their houses  
and four-wheel drives,  
and send out  
  
messages  
as deep as  
the songlines.  
  
A heritage  
of living stones  
and animals  
  
that spoke  
is present  
to us all  
  
as we listen  
to the tones  
filling the room  
  
emitted from  
an amplified  
electric didgeridoo.

*Jamie Grant*

# Money Printing in the Age of COVID-19

Debasement of gold and silver coins and printing fiat notes has a long history of feeding the reckless spending ambitions of rulers and governments. It has never ended well. Governments today are again creating money out of thin air. Will it end badly or are these times different? We will need to wait and see. However, as I will posit, there are reasons to believe that the outcome, while cheerless, will be relatively benign.

Governments have spent big to provide succor to the citizens they threw out of work and the businesses they closed down in their overwrought response to the Wuhan virus. To be precise, this is not stimulus spending, though it is commonly so described. I am not sure what to call it; relief spending, perhaps. Stimulus spending is a modern-day Keynesian term used to describe government spending *intended* to boost economies which have fallen into recession. If economies, once reopened, struggle to regain lost ground, as seems inevitable, then further government spending, particularly of a capital nature, can be described as stimulus spending. And we are likely to see plenty of it.

It is important to make a distinction between the two types of spending. Relief spending, absolutely essential in the unique circumstances of an economic lockdown, crowds out no private sector economic activity; there's none to crowd out. Stimulus spending, on the other hand, can crowd out and distort private sector activity. But, that to one side, there is a common factor whether government spending is by way of relief or stimulus.

The common factor is that each dollar of spending without offsetting taxation ("deficit spending") increases the money supply by one dollar. That dollar appears in the bank account of the recipient and also in the bank's account with the central bank. In this latter iteration it is called base money, because banks, in a fractional reserve deposit system, of the kind we have, can use it to underpin lending of multiples of the dollar. And each dollar they lend becomes a bank deposit alongside the original dol-

lar, and part of the money supply. The money supply primarily encompasses bank deposits plus the public's holdings of cash (notes and coin). In normal course, bank lending contributes most to growth in the money supply.

Two questions arise. Will money creation or, to use literary licence, "money printing", in the age of COVID-19, cause inflation? And also, as a related matter, will borrowing to finance deficit-spending produce burdensome government debt? While my reference point is Australia, a similar account applies *pari passu* across all countries with sophisticated banking systems.

A first point to make is that Australia, like other advanced countries, does not have a cash-based economy. Cash accounts for only a small proportion of the money supply. What this means, if hyperinflation were ever to occur, is that people would not be delivering wheelbarrows full of fiat notes to buy a loaf of bread, as they did in revolutionary France, the Weimar Republic and, more recently, Zimbabwe. And, precisely because cash is no longer king, hyperinflation, or anything close, is almost certainly a phenomenon of the past. Uncomfortably high and debilitating inflation is another matter and remains an extant risk.

A second point to make is that price inflation cannot occur unless it is driven or accommodated by increases in the money supply. Think of it this way. Inflation can be equivalently expressed as untoward rises in the prices of goods and services or, alternatively, as falls in the exchange value of a unit of money. Obeying the normal laws of economics, the more money there is, the lower is its exchange value and thus, conversely, the higher are prices. As Milton Friedman definingly put it in *Counter-Revolution in Monetary Theory*: "Inflation is always and everywhere a monetary phenomenon in the sense that it is and can be produced only by a more rapid increase in the quantity of money than in output."

A third point to make is that the only effective constraint on governments engaging in deficit

spending is inflation. Inflation signals that the demands of government cannot be met by the economy's capacity to produce goods and services. This is not to say that any amount of government spending, sans inflation, is beneficial; simply that only inflation impedes spendthrift governments.

Government spending itself does not cause inflation. Inflation jumps, if it jumps at all, as a result of increases in the money supply contingent on the spending. When governments offset their spending with taxation, or by mopping up increases in the money supply by bond sales into the marketplace, inflation remains dormant. No increase in the money supply means no inflation. Can it be more complicated than that? Well, scenarios can be dreamt up in which each dollar turns over more rapidly than normal and hence produces inflation. But, in practical terms, the answer is no. Only increases in the money supply can produce, accommodate and sustain inflation. And only marked increases in the money supply can result in marked inflation.

In the age of COVID-19, bonds sold to finance deficit spending are being largely or wholly bought up by respective central banks. This is manifest in banks' holdings of deposits with their central bank and of treasury notes or bills.

Correspondingly, and equally, it is manifest in an increase in the money supply. The money supply is variously defined.

Money narrowly defined ("M1") encompasses cash in the hands of the public and on-demand deposits with banks and other deposit-taking institutions (building societies and credit unions in Australia). There are broader definitions of money which include a range of term deposits. However, it is the narrower definition of money that I will focus on. It is the category of money spent.

In Australia, in the year to the end of April 2020, M1 money increased by a whopping 37 per cent (in the US it was 29 per cent) compared with just 3 per cent (4 per cent for the US) in the year to the end of April 2019. Bank lending did not account for this disparity. In each year, outstanding loans grew by only about 4 per cent. It is all down to deficit spending. And deficit spending will likely go on adding markedly to the money supply in the months and immediate years ahead. The government will struggle to get anywhere near to balancing the budget and the Reserve Bank will continue to buy bonds in quantity to prevent interest rates from rising.

Monetary growth of the magnitude of 37 per cent in just one year, and more of the same ahead, lays the groundwork for inflation. Unless, that is, each dollar turns over much less frequently than in the normal course. The turnover of each dollar on average is called the velocity of circulation of money. It is conventionally calculated as GDP divided by the money stock. An increase in velocity cannot of itself fuel inflation. At the same time, velocity does tend to increase during the upswing of an economic cycle and decline during a downturn. This is to be expected. Money more quickly leaves bank accounts when times are buoyant and tends to sit for longer when times are depressed.

The upshot, in these depressed times, is that we could expect velocity to fall and partially offset the increase in the money supply. But to fall by as much as it has? Absolutely not. GDP (the numerator in the calculation of velocity) is falling as a result of the lockdown and is unlikely to rebound into robustly growing territory very soon. At the same time, the money supply (the denominator) has been soaring. Throw away textbooks. Unsurprisingly, textbook theory never envisaged governments taking the extraordinary step of closing down their economies. We are in uncharted waters, which makes it

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difficult to predict the outcome. With that proviso I will go back to the two questions I posed above: Will inflation take off? Will government debt burden the future?

**I**nflation is unlikely to take off, at least over the next few years. The government has crippled the Australian economy, as other governments have crippled theirs. So, leaving the inscrutable case of China aside, not much mutual transnational help can be expected. Additionally, the need for banks to repair their impaired balance sheets will keep their lending contained. Moreover, inflation cannot sustain itself unless wages keep pace with prices. To elaborate, prices cannot go on rising unless wage increases underpin spending. The unemployment hangover from the lockdown and the longer-term malaise of the tourism industry and, no doubt, the government's eagerness to ramp up immigration again, will keep wage rises in check—as, in the Western world more generally, will the inevitable resumption of immigration from the developing world.

We will see a rising money supply offset by low and falling velocity for some considerable time.

Result: no inflation. Does this contradict Friedman's dictum? Not really. The dictum says that inflation can only be caused by the money supply increasing faster than output. It is silent on whether a rapid expansion in the money supply must cause inflation. Mind you, as Friedman considered velocity to be "a relatively stable magnitude" (*Monetary History of the United States*) he would undoubtedly have thought that the current monetary expansion would be inflationary. But then, like textbooks, he did not envisage a scenario in which governments would create so much money while, at the same time, crippling their economies.

As to the debt burden, government debt as a result of this episode of "relief" deficit spending is unlikely to burden future generations, despite the popular wisdom to that effect. Much of the debt will be held by central banks; effectively, a government-sector in-house arrangement. Stephen Grenfell, a former deputy governor at the Reserve Bank, wrote in the *Australian* on May 11 that paying interest can't be avoided because the "cash created when the central bank buys bonds finds its way directly to banks' reserves at the central bank, which earn interest". True enough. However, the current interest rate on the banks' exchange settlement account balances at the Reserve Bank is just 0.1 per cent. Treasury Note yields are a few tenths of a per cent.

Similarly, interest rates on Australian government bonds are extremely low (the yield on ten-year bonds was around 1 per cent in early June) and will not burden the future, even if held in private hands, provided the economy starts growing again in nominal terms, even slowly. It will be a different matter if the government throws money around on ill-considered stimulus projects once the lockdown is over. Such projects might hold the economy back and in so doing add to the debt burden. Decreases in red and green tape and in business taxes are the best way to get the economy growing, and to more easily service the debt and progressively reduce its level in proportion to the size of the economy.

President Reagan's economic policies provide a case study. Reducing government spending and a tight monetary policy to curb inflation were in his armoury but primarily his policies were to cut regulations and taxes to spur economic growth. Under the eight years of his presidency, from January 1981 to January 1989, real GDP grew at an average annual rate of 3.5 per cent. Government revenues grew strongly. Of course, predictably, he failed to control spending. Nevertheless, but for the high interest rates prevailing at the time, the ratio of debt to GDP would have fallen significantly. Then the average interest rate on outstanding US federal debt was about 8 per cent. Now it is less than 2 per cent

and falling as new issues are made. Ten-year US government bond yields were around 0.75 per cent in early June.

To be clear, being sanguine about deficit financing in the age of COVID-19 does not in the least back up Modern Monetary Theory (MMT). MMT, embraced by a section of the modern Left, is an economic theory which postulates that permanent full employment can be achieved without undue inflation through the application of expansive fiscal and monetary policy settings allied with a buffer scheme to employ additional people on the public payroll during economic downturns and release them onto the private-sector job market during upturns. Cut down, MMT is a theory which sees no limit to applying government spending, borrowing and money creation to remedy unemployment. Does any of it have merit? No, not in normal times. But this time is far from normal.

In 2009 Carmen M. Reinhart and Kenneth S. Rogoff gave their well-known and impressive account of eight centuries of economic and financial cycles the ironic title of *This Time is Different*. In 2020 it is the plain truth. This time really is different.

Extremely low interest rates and deliberately damaged economies have combined to allow debt issuance and money creation much more scope before they come up against the economic roadblock of runaway inflation. Where it will end is another matter. Abnormally low interest rates will allow economies to grow; and grow enough, with any luck, to outgrow debt. Reagan's policies of deregulation and lower business taxes would help if they were implemented in part or in whole. But, under any likely scenario, it's hard to see a return to vibrant economic growth in the near future.

If history is any guide, continuing stimulus spending will fund value-sapping public-sector investments. Low interest rates will encourage low-value private-sector investments. Anaemic growth probably lies ahead for most countries. Though you can't discount the lucky-country effect coming into play for Australia courtesy of China. Nor can you discount the marvellous-Trump effect coming into play for America—provided the American electorate is savvy enough to keep the forty-fifth president around beyond January 2021. However, best not to pin too many hopes on serendipitous developments. Somehow we need to get back to balanced budgets, to normal levels of interest rates and to accompanying vibrant growth. That seems a long way off.

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*Peter Smith wrote "Making Sense of Bottomless Interest Rates" in the December 2019 issue.*

# The Careless Journalism of Kate McClymont

The Sydney investigative journalist Kate McClymont, in her Andrew Olle Media Lecture in November 2014, said:

The night before any major story is published, you can't sleep. And it is not from excitement it is from sheer, unadulterated terror. Have I got that right? Can I prove this fact? Will the source give evidence if we are sued? The death threats I receive are not nearly as horrific as those nasty little white envelopes, with the law firm's address in the corner, which generally arrive by express delivery the day after your story.

McClymont's revelation that it is the threat of defamation action which terrifies her the most perhaps explains why she can be so careless when writing about dead people. No need to lose sleep when the relatives of the dead don't have the right to arrange those nasty little white envelopes.

Eric Bedford, a minister in the Wran government, who died in 2006, has been a favourite target of McClymont's. In her book on Labor identity Eddie Obeid, *He Who Must Be Obeid* (2014), written with Linton Besser, she makes several corruption allegations against Bedford but provides no credible evidence. The most fanciful claim is that Bedford, as Minister for Planning and Environment (from 1980 to 1984), had solicited bribes by asking developers to admire his wife Jo's paintings, hanging on his office wall, and commissioning similar paintings from his wife for a nominated sum.

The authors' source is a "former Bedford staffer", whom they don't identify. Since these alleged offences occurred more than thirty years ago there is no justification for this person to remain anonymous. There can be no possible fear of retribution and, with Bedford dead, no chance of legal action.

The book was later withdrawn because of an acknowledged defamation of a living person. The publisher announced it would only be reissued after

being thoroughly fact-checked. I therefore provided to the publisher statements rubbishing the allegation made by two former Bedford staffers, and by the former head of Bedford's department, all identified by name, and all confirming that Jo Bedford's naive art had never been displayed in her husband's office.

In the withdrawn edition of the book, the authors wrote:

Other Bedford staff members have since confirmed that the minister was indeed on the take. But instead of cash in a brown paper bag, Bedford had come up with an ingenious method for corrupt payments. The staffer said that developers were advised that when they went to lobby Bedford about a rezoning they had to "admire" the artwork hanging on the office wall, which had been painted by his wife. If Bedford intended to assist, the supplicant was told that for a certain amount of money Bedford's wife would be happy to bend her brush on a similar artistic endeavour for the developer.

In the reissued edition, this was changed to:

One Bedford staffer recalled that the minister had come up with an ingenious method for corrupt payments. The staffer said that developers were advised that when they went to lobby Bedford about a rezoning they had to "admire" the artwork hanging on his office wall, which the minister suggested had been painted by his wife. If Bedford intended to assist, the supplicant was told that for a certain amount of money Bedford's wife would be happy to bend her brush for a similar artistic endeavour for the developer. In fact, Mrs Bedford had nothing to do with the minister's artworks, which were on loan from the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

The changes tell us much about how the authors now view the original allegation. First, they belatedly concede that this was made by “one Bedford staffer” (singular), not “other Bedford staff members” (plural). Contrary to standard journalistic practice, however, they have still made no effort to corroborate the anonymous allegation.

Second, note the subtle change from “which had been painted by his wife” to “which *the minister suggested* had been painted by his wife”. This change is an admission by the authors that their source had got it wrong in claiming Mrs Bedford’s art was displayed in the office. If the source got this crucial element wrong, surely there is no reason to believe the rest of the story. Are we meant to accept that Sydney developers were so stupid they gazed at heritage-value paintings and believed these were the “artistic endeavour” of an amateur painter?

This allegation about Bedford is obviously nonsense. The authors should never have reported the implausible claim without corroboration and should never have persisted with it once other staff members had debunked it. The revised paragraph, particularly with the important caveat of the final sentence, shows the publisher no longer believes it is true. If this was fact-checked, and found wanting, it should never have been republished.

McClymont’s other allegation about Eric Bedford concerns

a proposed residential development in Perisher Valley pushed by furniture retailer Nick Scali and Eddie Obeid. The development required an alteration to the park’s plan of management, which was opposed by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS). The odd thing about this episode is that, by the end of McClymont’s account, she has demonstrated Bedford’s behaviour was exemplary.

McClymont records that on four occasions in 1982 Bedford had contacted the relevant NPWS regional director, presumably as a result of persistent lobbying by Scali and Obeid. On each occasion the official resisted the proposal as being inconsistent with the park’s plan of management.

The book is in error in stating the opposition to the proposal was because it exceeded the park’s accommodation limit under the plan. In fact, the developers were seeking a strata title subdivision—so that individual lots could be sold—which was permitted at Thredbo but not at Perisher. Approval would require an amendment to the plan of management.

McClymont’s account shows that Bedford took the matter no further. We know this because she reports that in 1988 Scali and Obeid were still lobbying Bob Carr, who was then the relevant minister, to approve the proposed development.

I sought the advice of one of Sydney’s leading planning lawyers. He advised that Bedford had the power, under section 73B of the National Parks and Wildlife Act, to propose an amendment to the plan of management and to require the NPWS director to make it. No such amendment was requested by Bedford.

Bedford behaved as one would expect an honest minister to behave when under political pressure. He sought departmental advice, on several occasions; he did not lean on departmental officials to alter their advice; and, ultimately, declined to exercise his lawful discretion to overrule the department. Far from being evidence of corruption, McClymont’s account confirms Bedford behaved honourably. Her prose is convincing to everyone but herself.

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Despite providing no evidence of Bedford’s alleged corruption, McClymont has persisted in her campaign to blacken his name. In her most recent book, *Dead Man Walking: The Murky World of Michael McGurk and Ron Medich* (2019), written with Vanda Carson, she repeats another astonishing allegation. She claims: “During the 1980s ... Eric Bedford and one of

his staffers, Francesco Labbozzetta, had come to the attention of police. Labbozzetta was described as ‘Il Capo’ of the Australian mafia in the South Australian Parliament.”

Franco Labbozzetta was employed in Bedford’s electoral office as a liaison officer among the ethnic community. Bedford’s electorates of Fairfield, and later Cabramatta, were ethnically diverse communities. Labbozzetta’s role was to try to resolve problems brought to the electoral office by Bedford’s constituents, particularly those among the migrant community.

Richard Smyth, who was Director of Planning when Bedford was the minister, says:

Labbozzetta often came to the department with development problems in the Minister’s electorate seeking to get a solution. Like all staff from the Minister’s office he was requested to work through me or one of my deputies in the first instance. The problems came from across the community. Sometimes we could help him,

sometimes we could not. I have no recollection of any pressure from him. He tended to accept our responses and go.

What evidence does McClymont offer for alleging that Labbozzetta was an Australian Tony Soprano? Her “proof” of this “fact” is the claim that Labbozzetta had been named in the South Australian Parliament but she declines to state whether this was by someone in authority, such as the Police Minister or the Attorney-General or, perhaps, the result of a parliamentary inquiry into organised crime.

It was none of these, but you won’t read what happened in the book. Labbozzetta was described as “Il Capo” by a Liberal backbencher, Peter Lewis, in a question on notice clearly intended as a political smear. The questioning occurred during a period of what can only be described as “corruption hysteria” in South Australia in the late 1980s, much of it directed at the then Attorney-General, Chris Sumner, who was subsequently found innocent of all allegations.

A flavour of the hysteria can be gleaned from the text of Lewis’s question on notice. Lewis asked the Minister representing the Attorney-General in the House of Assembly:

Since January 1980 has the Attorney-General visited Plati or any other part of the Calabrian region of Italy and, if so, (a) on how many occasions; (b) what was the purpose of each visit; (c) was a Mr Francesco Labbozzetta, also known as Il Capo, involved in any way in the arrangement of any part of the itinerary of one or more of such visits and, if so, how? (d) where was the Attorney-General accommodated and if he did not stay at a recognised hotel, who paid or met the cost of that accommodation; and (e) who paid or met the cost of his transport?

The minister subsequently responded, on November 14, 1989:

The only visit which the Attorney-General has made to Calabria was in November 1974. From April to November 1974 he was studying Italian at the University for Foreigners at Perugia in Umbria. In November, he made a tourist visit of ten days or so to the south of Italy, namely the regions of Campania, Calabria and Sicily. He travelled by train. In Calabria, he spent one night in Cosenza and then travelled by train to Catanzaro, and then on to Taormina in Sicily. He met his own travel and accommodation expenses. The

Attorney-General has not visited Plati. The answer to (c) is “No”.

Since all the other claims inferred by Lewis in his question on notice were duly demolished, why should any credence be given to his claim that Labbozzetta was the head of the Australian mafia?

Peter Lewis, who died in 2017, had a colourful and erratic parliamentary career. In 2002, having left the Liberal Party and now sitting as an independent, he reneged on a deal with the Liberals to form government. He then accepted an offer of the speakership from the Opposition, enabling Labor to take office. He was forced to resign as Speaker in 2005, ahead of a no-confidence motion, after making unsubstantiated allegations against a serving member of parliament. Labor’s then Deputy Premier, Kevin Foley, described Lewis’s behaviour as “shameful” and “reckless”.

There is no evidence that McClymont bothered to check Hansard and, if she did so, no evidence that she investigated the credibility of the person who named Labbozzetta. If she did so, in fairness she should have identified Lewis as the relevant person. If she didn’t, she is guilty of careless journalism.

Chris Sumner has advised me that Lewis subsequently apologised for the question and said it had been handed to him by a senior Liberal in the Parliament who didn’t want to put his own name to it. So McClymont’s “evidence” turns out to be anonymous political smearing.

McClymont’s desire to tar Labbozzetta as a mafia don reaches even more ridiculous levels. In the book on Obeid, McClymont wrote about a business partnership involving Labbozzetta’s wife: “Whether the name of their company Capolab was a play on Labbozzetta’s rumoured position as Il Capo is not known.” A simple check would have confirmed the commonsense conclusion that the head of the mafia was unlikely to have deliberately drawn attention to himself in this way. According to Labbozzetta’s daughter Michela, Capolab was a venture involving two families: the Capobiancos and the Labbozzettas, hence “Capolab”!

We now come to McClymont’s claim that Bedford and Labbozzetta had drawn the attention of police. She writes:

In December 1987 [Labbozzetta] was interviewed by New South Wales police. Among the many questions they asked him was, “Would you care to tell us if you had any suspicions or knowledge of Mr Bedford receiving large amounts of money for development approvals or rezoning applications?” “No, no suspicions at all,” replied Labbozzetta breezily. He also

denied he had received money for development approvals or rezoning applications.

In her recent book McClymont supplies no information about the circumstances which caused Labbozzetta to be interviewed. In the earlier book on Obeid, however, she says Labbozzetta came to the attention of police because his “business card, as Bedford’s ethnic affairs advisor, was found among the papers of Bruno Brizzi, who had been arrested in the early 1980s over a \$6 million marijuana crop near Bourke”. Nobody can be expected to do due diligence on a person before handing over a business card, so this is hardly evidence of criminality. It is reason enough, however, for police to interview Labbozzetta. Since the police took no further action the proper conclusion should be that the police found no evidence that either Labbozzetta or Bedford had been involved in criminal activities.

Eric Bedford is not the only dead Wran government minister to be traduced by McClymont in the Obeid book. She also alleges corruption on the part of Bedford’s immediate predecessor as planning and environment minister, Paul Landa, who died in 1984. Before examining this allegation, it is necessary to sketch some background, which McClymont does not provide.

In May 1978 Landa announced an inquiry into a contentious mining proposal at Diamond Hill, near Kurrajong, at the base of the Blue Mountains. The inquiry would be conducted by the head of the State Pollution Control Commission (SPCC), Eric Coffey. The inquiry followed the refusal by the Colo Shire Council of a development application to mine for basalt by a newly formed company, Kurrajong Aggregates. The council had unanimously recommended the application be refused by the New South Wales Planning and Environment Commission, the relevant determining authority.

Despite the name, it was basalt, not diamonds, that was considered likely to exist below the surface of Diamond Hill. Basalt was valuable as the aggregate for road surfacing. The associated breccia—more plentiful, with plenty of substitutes, and therefore less valuable—was still useful as road fill. There had been several mining proposals for the area, beginning in 1968 with an application by Farley and Lewers, a quarrying and cement company, but all had been rejected.

Landa’s decision to hold an inquiry seemed sensible, given the continuing controversy over Diamond Hill and the fact that a previous SPCC inquiry into extractive industries in the Hawkesbury had made no reference to a resource in this area. McClymont and Besser tell a different story, however. They claim Landa extracted a bribe of \$50,000 in exchange for “setting up an inquiry that would allow the mine to proceed”. The authors rely on claims by two people from Kurrajong Aggregates, Karim Kisrwni (who claimed he paid the bribe) and Dr Peter Solomon, a Liberal Party activist.

According to the book, Landa chose the wrong man to conduct the inquiry. Coffey found against the proposal. The authors claim the minister “had no wriggle room—the money paid to Landa was for nothing”. They further claim Kisrwni demanded Landa repay the bribe. In what must be a first in the history of criminal activity in New South Wales, they report that Landa handed back the cash.

There is no evidence the authors have interviewed others involved in these events, such as former Landa staffers. They have also withheld pertinent information which would allow readers to assess the credibility of those making the allegations.

Kisrwni, who is now dead, is simply described as a “once close friend [of Eddie Obeid]”. In fact, like Obeid, Kisrwni had a colourful business reputation and was also

prominent in the Lebanese Australian community, but on the Liberal side of politics. In 2003 he figured in a “cash for visas” controversy with claims in federal Parliament that he had used his close relationship with the then Liberal Immigration Minister, Philip Ruddock, to obtain visas for people in return for payment for himself and political donations.

Labor’s Julia Gillard also claimed in Parliament that a controversial Filipino businessman, Dante Tan, paid Kisrwni \$220,000 to help persuade Ruddock to overturn a departmental decision to refuse Tan a visa. Gillard, who said Tan was “responsible for the single biggest corporate fraud that there has ever been in the Philippines”, claimed Kisrwni raised the issue with Ruddock’s office only a month after Kisrwni contributed \$10,000 to Ruddock’s re-election. The minister reversed the decision but denied any connection between his decision and the donation.

The controversy led to a Senate Inquiry into Ministerial Discretion in Migration Matters. The report lists several allegations about Kisrwni who,

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*Since the police took no further action the proper conclusion should be that the police found no evidence that either Labbozzetta or Bedford had been involved in criminal activities.*

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despite not being a registered migration agent, had a very high success rate in supporting candidates for ministerial intervention. The committee reported that “of the cases where a decision had actually been made by the minister before 29 August 2003 close to half had received ministerial intervention”. According to the committee, this success rate was much higher than other individuals and community groups, including Amnesty International. The committee further noted that its attempts to investigate whether there was any connection between Kisrwni’s success and his political donations had been hampered by a denial of access to relevant files and by Kisrwni’s refusal to appear.

Solomon does not make a specific allegation against Landa but is quoted as saying “the whole issue was full of corruption”. While the authors note Solomon was preselected as the Liberal candidate for the federal seat of North Sydney, they strangely fail to record he was subsequently forced to resign his preselection.

The somewhat farcical circumstances of the North Sydney preselection are detailed in Ian Hancock’s *The Liberals: A History of the NSW Division of the Liberal Party of Australia 1945–2000* (2007). Hancock notes that “in choosing Solomon, the preselectors did not know that he had included inaccurate particulars in the dossier which accompanied his candidature”. The inaccuracies related to Solomon’s service in the Army Reserve, including claiming to have been an officer. Far more serious were allegations of Solomon’s strange behaviour and associations in defending himself. The then Liberal State President, David Patten, a political ally of Solomon, concluded after an investigation that “it caused him ‘great distress’ that Solomon had so compromised himself that he had to stand down as a candidate”.

In fairness to Landa, a person unable to defend himself, readers should have been provided with information about those making the allegation. The fact that the character and veracity of both men had been publicly questioned is very relevant, particularly since there is no corroboration of the allegation.

The authors have also failed to apply proper journalistic scepticism in evaluating the allegations.

First, and most critically, why would Landa have taken the risky path of setting up an inquiry if he wanted to pocket \$50,000? Despite the authors claiming the inquiry “would allow the mine to proceed”, a favourable finding by Coffey would not necessarily have led to approval. The final authority was not the State Pollution Control Commission but the New South Wales Planning and Environment

Commission (PEC), and the SPCC could not replace the PEC as the determining authority.

I sought the advice of the leading planning lawyer referred to earlier, remembering that these events occurred before the passage of the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979, one of Landa’s significant ministerial achievements. The lawyer’s advice is reproduced in full below:

In July 1977 the NSW Planning and Environment Commission issued a direction under section 342V(3) of the then Local Government Act 1919. The direction required a Council to forward development applications for extractive industries to the PEC for determination.

The direction was issued following an environmental investigation conducted by the State Pollution Control Commission into extractive industries in the Hawkesbury Region. The report was released and published under the authority of Minister Landa on 18 March 1977 (State Pollution Control Commission, “Extractive industries in the Hawkesbury Region”, SPCC, Sydney, March 1977).

Under the provisions of the Local Government Act 1919 applying to a development application which was the subject of a PEC direction, the PEC was required to offer both the Council and the Applicant a right for a hearing before dealing with any development application under s.342V(3). If the Applicant was dissatisfied with the decision of the PEC, it had the right of appeal to the Minister under s.243V(5). If either the Council or the Applicant requested, there was a right of a hearing under s.243V(5A) before the matter was reported to the Minister. The Minister had the final role to determine the application under s.342V(5B).

In the case of Diamond Hill, the Minister referred the matter to the SPCC for a public inquiry under s.23 of the State Pollution Control Commission Act 1970. A SPCC inquiry could not lead to an approval, nor could it substitute for the right of a hearing under s.342V(3) before the PEC determined an application, or before the Minister decided an application under s.342V(5A). The rationale for an SPCC inquiry was that the SPCC had just published a major review of extractive industries in the Hawkesbury region, and that report made no reference to any significant gravel resource at Diamond Hill, as was claimed by the applicant. But an SPCC inquiry could not lead to any approval.

If Landa wished to approve the Diamond

Hill development application all he needed to do was let the statutory provisions of s.342V(3) occur and approve it at the conclusion of those processes.

Following the SPCC inquiry into Diamond Hill, it is noted that neither the Applicant or the Council sought a hearing before the PEC refused the development application, and the Applicant did not appeal to the Minister against the PEC's decision, as they could have.

In summary, the key allegation against Landa—that he set up the SPCC inquiry to approve the proposal—does not stand up. If Landa had been bribed, he had no need to establish an SPCC inquiry and he would have known that holding such an inquiry would not “allow the mine to proceed”. Indeed, setting up the SPCC inquiry was counterproductive if the objective was to approve the application. The likely public and political reaction of a ministerial approval, following an adverse finding by Coffey, would have been immense. If Landa had been bribed, a ministerial approval under section 342V(5B), without the risk and glare of a public inquiry and finding, would have been a far more sensible approach.

Second, what about the size of the bribe? For most people \$50,000 is still a lot of money but in 1978 it was a very large amount, the equivalent of \$277,000 in today's dollars. The median Sydney house price in 1978 was only \$37,000. Kurrajong Aggregates had nominal share capital of \$40,000 and paid-up capital of only \$1000 but we are meant to believe that KISRwani was prepared to hand over more than the value of the company in a bribe. This smells like someone in 2014 inventing a story, and an amount, about events which are supposed to have occurred in 1978, and forgetting to discount the figure for nearly forty years of inflation.

Third, KISRwani claims he handed over the cash, in a bag, in May 1978 and that Landa returned it to him after Coffey reported in February 1979. He claimed he went to his local Westpac branch in Parramatta and withdrew the cash. If the authors had been conveying this allegation about a person with access to the defamation law, they would have demanded from KISRwani the record of the transaction, something KISRwani could have obtained without trouble. There is no evidence they bothered to do so. Incidentally, Westpac wasn't formed until October 1982, nearly four years later, but let's give the benefit of the doubt and assume it was the Bank of New South Wales.

Finally, the authors don't appear to have asked: Why would KISRwani hand over such a substantial bribe simply to hold an inquiry, the outcome of which

he could not have predicted? He would have known from his legal advisers that the inquiry would not necessarily have led to an approval. Why not hold on to the money and wait until after the inquiry had reported? If he is to be believed, KISRwani is not only corrupt but displays a naivety and level of trust not usually associated with Sydney businessmen.

The allegation against Landa is obviously nonsense, but McClymont's story does not end there. A sequel allegedly took place around five years later when KISRwani, now linked in business with Obeid, claimed he sought to resurrect the mining proposal.

According to the Obeid book, KISRwani alleges he handed over \$100,000 to Obeid, supposedly for the purpose of bribing Bob Carr, who was now the Minister for Planning and Environment, and Labor Senator Graham Richardson. KISRwani claims he was told by Obeid that Carr was to get \$35,000 and Richardson was to get \$65,000. Both Carr and Richardson have denied receiving any money from Obeid and their denials are reported by the authors. The obvious inference in the book is that the \$100,000, if it was paid, was pocketed by Obeid.

In considering the credibility of these further allegations, it is necessary to examine the findings of the Eric Coffey inquiry by the State Pollution Control Commission in February 1979. The environmental impact statement by Kurrajong Aggregates estimated a quantity of 14 million tonnes of basalt and possibly as much as 20 million tonnes. The company later revised this down to 10.6 million tonnes of extractable rock, of which 7.1 million tonnes would be sold as road sealing aggregate and the remainder as road fill. Coffey found this far exceeded other assessments, including those by Farley and Lewers and Pioneer Concrete, both of which had expertise in quarrying, unlike Kurrajong Aggregates. Farley and Lewers estimated there were only 2.3 million tonnes of basalt and concluded, according to Coffey, “the viability of extracting the reserves was marginal and therefore did not proceed”. Pioneer Concrete estimated the deposit totalled 5.4 million tonnes but, according to Coffey, the reserves “were definitely not great enough to permit economic exploitation”.

Coffey found that far from being a substantial deposit of basalt, Diamond Hill would probably yield relatively little and extraction would most likely be uneconomic:

If the Commission had regard only to the firm data brought before the inquiry, it would assess the deposit as unproven beyond a total quantity of basalt and brecciated material of 5,100,000

tonnes, of which 4,670,000 tonnes would be capable of extraction. The likely maximum yield of first quality rock in these circumstances would be 3,100,000 tonnes. In either event, the deposit is so small in relation to total reserves elsewhere as to be inconsequential and, probably, uneconomic.

This conclusion corroborates the earlier judgements of major companies such as Farley and Lewers and Pioneer Concrete, who, after detailed investigations, did not regard Diamond Hill to be a viable source of hard rock aggregate.

Coffey instead recommended that Diamond Hill be rezoned for residential subdivision “to ensure prohibition of all activities and developments that would be incompatible with such preservation, including the extraction of hard rock and other minerals or material”.

Coffey’s thorough critique of the economic viability of the proposal undermines KISRWANI’s claim that he sought to revive the project and paid OBEID \$100,000 in bribes. Why would KISRWANI, with no expertise in hard rock quarrying and no potential marketing contracts, want to revive a mining proposal after Coffey had found there was “no evidence to show there is other than a minor deposit of hard rock”?

Under Coffey’s recommendation the land was to be rezoned residential. With the prospect of a profitable residential subdivision on offer, it makes no sense that KISRWANI would seek to pursue an uneconomic and unpopular mining proposal. Indeed, the authors report that “the company’s land at Diamond

Hill was later subdivided and sold off for \$2 million” and that KISRWANI was a beneficiary.

KISRWANI’s claim that he sought to revive an uneconomic mining project, and had forked out another \$100,000 in bribes, is not credible. A more logical conclusion, based on the facts, is that KISRWANI’s claims about OBEID (and Carr and Richardson), like his claims about Landa, are fanciful. It is astonishing that this conclusion was not reached by the authors.

The legal truism that it is not possible to defame the dead is grounded in the common-law fiction that the dead do not have a reputation to protect. ERIC BEDFORD, FRANCO LABBOZZETTA and PAUL LANDA, however, have children who must live with McClymont’s published accusations of corruption against their fathers, a destruction of reputation which hopefully this article will mitigate.

Legal privileges should come with moral responsibilities. Those who write about the dead should feel the same “sheer, unadulterated terror” of getting things wrong, which Kate McClymont says she experiences when she is writing about the living.

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*Milton Cockburn is a former Sydney Morning Herald journalist.*

*Note: The planning lawyer referred to in this article does not wish to be named. His name, and the advice he provided, has been shown to the editor.*

*Full disclosure: Eric Bedford and Paul Landa were friends of the author. These friendships, and the assessment of character which friendship enables, prompted the investigations which formed the basis of this article.*

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## observing a girl eating in the library

no eating, it says;  
but there she is, plainly

munching a watercracker  
like a parrot, her handclaw  
poised over the page and fisting  
scribbles like spaghetti as her mandibles circulate  
mouthfuls of the edible biscuit;

her toey feet slipped out of her shoes  
legs tied up, midair

and i, bemused,  
beam across the room’s expanse

*Marcus Ten Low*

# Manning Clark and the Webbs

Founded in London in January 1884, with the aim of establishing a socialist society by peaceful means, the Fabian Society speedily evolved into the first modern-style think-tank. It did much to craft the policies advocated by the British Labour Party, which was founded in London in February 1900.

The Fabian Society's early success had its echoes in Australia. Fabian societies sprang into life in several of our capital cities after the Labor Party first emerged as a force to be reckoned with at the state and federal level. In fact, in Queensland, for a few days in December 1899 Anderson Dawson from Charters Towers led the first labour party government in the world. In subsequent decades, organised Fabian activity also helped to germinate policies that characterised the government of reformist ALP prime minister, Gough Whitlam from 1972 to 1975.

The first two decades of the twentieth century and then the early 1970s were two key eras in organised Fabian activity in Australia. They were separated by a long lull. In the middle decades of the twentieth century, periods of war and depression created what many radical commentators regarded as a drab political culture that deadened hope.

We must take this dispiriting backdrop into account if we are to understand an exchange of letters that took place in 1943, when organised Fabian activity was virtually non-existent in Australia. The two letter writers in question were the well-known British socialist Sidney Webb and Manning Clark.

In 1943 Charles Manning Hope Clark, aged twenty-eight, was a schoolmaster at Geelong Grammar School. He was a would-be author with left-wing political leanings. On returning from Oxford a few years earlier, Clark's enthusiasm had been aroused by the emergence of a left-wing break-away group in the ALP's New South Wales state branch. Reading its newspaper, *Progress*, alerted him to the notion that the study of Australian history could be an intensely progressive activity, breathing new life into the spirit of Eureka.

Clark's wartime radicalised position was expressed clearly in a letter that has recently been located in the library of the London School of Economics and Political Science by my friend, the indefatigable Canberra-based researcher Stephen Holt.

Clark signed the letter on May 2, 1943. It was addressed to the octogenarian Sidney Webb, an early member of the Fabian Society in London. In 1929 the Labour Party, in recognition of Webb's services, had put him into the House of Lords. Henceforth he was, if only officially, Lord Passfield.

Clark's letter was prompted by the death, on April 30, 1943, of Beatrice Webb, the collaborator and wife of Sidney Webb. Born in 1858, Beatrice Webb had attained renown as a thinker and activist. Her areas of expertise covered sociology, economics, history, political science, trade unionism and social reform. She played a crucial role in the formation of the London School of Economics in 1895 and was active in the Fabian Society.

The Webbs were prolific, often polemical authors. In 1935 they had published *Soviet Communism: A New Civilisation?*, a work of over 1200 pages, which lauded the Russian revolution and the policies of Joseph Stalin. In later editions, the question mark in the title was omitted.

Manning Clark learnt of Beatrice Webb's death when the news was announced in the Australian press on May 1, 1943, a Saturday morning. He immediately swung into action. Over the course of that autumn weekend he drafted and sent a letter of condolence to the widower in England.

In his letter, Clark addressed Lord Passfield as "Mr Webb". This was because, even though Webb had accepted the title, no true Fabian was supposed to believe in the British peerage system and its trappings.

Clark had, he told Webb, never met Beatrice. What drove him to write was his reverence for "her devotion and inspiration". The letter was private

and so Clark could unbend. Wartime Australia, he informed Webb, was at least fifty years behind England in matters of the mind: “The intellectual climate here is similar to England’s in [the] ’80s of the last century”, which was when the Fabians got going. There was, Clark continued, “a latent sense of social injustice” in Australia and “a general awareness of the necessity for a radical change in the distribution of wealth”. But, he added, no Australian had yet drawn up “the blueprint of a new society” in the way that Sidney and Beatrice Webb and the other Fabians had done in England. Beatrice’s support for a better, more progressive world, Clark noted, had borne fruit in England and it was his fervent hope “that the seeds she has sown in us will not fall on hard soil”.

The letter of condolence to Sidney Webb in the London School of Economics and Political Science bears an annotation which indicates that Webb responded to his Australian correspondent on July 22, 1943. There is a single page from Webb bearing this date in the Manning Clark Papers in the National Library of Australia.

Webb, the reply indicates, was eager to express his gratitude for Clark’s “very appreciative words” about his wife. The political sentiments had likewise struck a chord: “I very much concur with your feeling that the Australian Colonies [*sic*] are so backward.”

The letter to Webb bore the signature “C M H Clark”. Webb was happy to reply, but he did not know the exact identity of his antipodean correspondent. In 1943, Webb did know of a person in Australia with sympathetic leanings named Clark. But it was not the Geelong schoolmaster. It was Colin Clark, a British-born economist who in May 1938 became the principal economic adviser to Queensland’s long-serving ALP premier William Forgan Smith. Colin Clark was also director of the Brisbane-based Bureau of Industry. In 1940 he had published an important book, *The Conditions of Economic Progress*.

This awareness of the economist named Clark meant that Sidney Webb’s reply of July 22, 1943, although sent to Geelong, was addressed to “Dear Mr Colin Clark”. Colin Clark was one of the younger generation of Fabians who were attracted to new ideas but who belonged to the same extended ideological family as the Webbs. On three successive occasions he had stood unsuccessfully as a Labour Party candidate in British general elections. Maynard Keynes had been very impressed with his work as a statistician. So it was understandable for Webb to assume that the letter of condolence had come from Colin Clark.

Webb’s mix-up demonstrated that, in 1943, outside of Melbourne and Geelong very few people had a clue as to who C.M.H. Clark was. Although Manning Clark may well have been peeved when he received the letter dated July 22, 1943, he nevertheless hung onto it.

In the decades ahead, Clark never deviated far or for long from the political credo that he enunciated to Lord Passfield in May 1943. His default position was faith in a fairer society achieved through a state and federal Labor Party electoral program permeated by progressive Fabian analysis.

In Manning Clark’s world, politics and history marched together. The return to office of R.G. Menzies in 1949 ushered in two decades of federal conservative rule. A resulting sense of disappointment and fallibility darkened Clark’s vision of events when he began writing his vast history of Australia in 1956. Increasingly, in his later years, commentary on Clark and his *A History of Australia* tended to reflect attitudes to its author’s strong engagement with the rise and fall of Gough Whitlam and the associated Fabianesque program of extensive domestic reform and social improvement.

A key Fabian principle enunciated by the Webbs was the notion of “permeation”. The aim for political and social reform was to be slow but steady. The idea was for Fabian notions of programmatic reform to seep through the political and intellectual strata in society and, in the process, gather even the unlikeliest of recruits. In the case of Manning Clark this strategy worked a treat. His wartime outburst of reformist zeal remained forever embedded in his complex intellectual makeup.

The wartime letter of condolence sent to Beatrice Webb’s widower was a genuine if perhaps slightly disconcerting act of homage. It was proof indeed that the idea of permeation as defined and practised by the Fabian Society did work effectively. An unlikely recruit in distant Australia had pledged his strong support for its politics and its policies.

A desire to be involved in something historic and heroic is the key message embedded in Manning (not Colin) Clark’s exotic 1943 letter to Sidney Webb. This desire was never stilled.

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## The Clock in Aunt Anna's Lounge

It suited the Victorian dark wood décor.  
You called it tasteful. You said it was welded  
into the wall, and if you wanted to remove it  
  
you would have to take out the entire wall  
and it was a structural wall in your mother's  
mother's house so no-one was taking out that wall,  
  
plus it divided the kitchen and lounge which  
needed to be separated. Its modest tick  
could slip into the background but it also spoke  
  
the unsaid things briefly and plainly when  
least expected, things we barely dared to think.  
Once when my mother was sipping tea,  
  
it blurted out exactly what happened in that house  
thirty-three years ago, then struck a clanging  
twelve o'clock while you both sat stunned.  
  
My mother didn't visit again for months.  
That caterwauling clock woke you in the night.  
It got to you like a wounded child, a jilted lover,  
  
a smart aleck, a confidant. I saw you hold  
its filigree frame and whisper "centuries of wood  
are breathing", its blue steel hands, rigid.  
  
You abandoned yourself to openness,  
listened more than anyone could, though  
its constant tick left you thin and bereft.  
  
It knew your private ghosts by name, told you  
the creak on the back steps was what you thought  
and time and space were thinner than suspected.  
  
The horologist who serviced it would eye you,  
saying "You'd better look after this gem." It purred  
with smugness when he turned his back.  
  
I may have heard that clock murmur once or twice  
but it never spoke directly to me. I was twelve  
when you were gone. Standing in front of that clock,  
  
sun squeezing through the blinds, sparks of gold  
flickering from its pendulum, I started to cry  
with the one o'clock metal on metal chime,  
  
the fading ring of springs. I didn't want it to see me  
like this but I wish I could tell you that we're  
more adrift, we miss you and I believe you, all of it.

*Cath Drake*

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# BOOKS, ARTS & LIFE

## With the Famous and the Notorious

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MARK MCGINNESS

*Private Encounters in the Public World*

by Philip Ayres

Connor Court, 2019, 212 pages, \$49.95

Philip Ayres enjoys the superlative reputation from no less than a former High Court judge as “one of the best biographers this country has ever produced”. A quote that any publisher, publicist or writer dreams of. His admirer, the Honourable Dyson Heydon, added, in his review of Dr Ayres’s biography of Sir Ninian Stephen, “He is also one of the ablest contemporary Australian non-fiction writers.”

With five full biographies to his credit, among other scholarly works, Ayres has now produced a series of profiles of encounters with public figures over half a century. The range of character and geography is most impressive—from meeting the Deputy Chairman of Soviet Latvia in Adelaide in 1967 to driving Justice Antonin Scalia along the Great Ocean Road in 2011. Ayres’s publisher, Connor Court, sees the collection as “the products of friendship, research, happenstance, curiosity or calculated risk”. In fact, his first wife, Maruta

Sudrabs, facilitated his encounter with the Latvian leader, Aleksandrs Drizulis; while his second wife, Patricia San Martin, was a catalyst for his friendship with the Chilean academic and historian Claudio Veliz. Most of the rest were met in the course of research for his biographies of Malcolm Fraser and those eminent benighted jurists, Owen Dixon and Ninian Stephen.

Ayres’s approach to his subjects here is as it has been with his biographies—open-minded yet sceptical, with an absence of moral judgment. The facts and the subject speak for themselves; “The point of view is as judgmental as a tape recorder.”

In his first encounter, “Hosting the Soviet Enemy”, Ayres probably owes more to his favourite uncle and aunt, Fred and Jean Ayres, than to his Latvian wife, for the chance to take Deputy Chairman Drizulis for a day out in Adelaide. Fred Ayres, a retired grazier from Mount Pleasant, had moved into inner suburban Adelaide and was President of South Australia’s Australia-Soviet Friendship Society. Drizulis’s father, Arvids, a Party worker, had been arrested and shot as “an enemy of the people” in early 1939 yet his son overcame this

and rose through the ranks. It may have helped that, in 1955, Arvids was posthumously rehabilitated.

So many of Ayres's profiles involve a journey, reflecting his narrative approach, and he enjoys testing his subjects. He took the abiding communist into Australia's oldest Lutheran church, St John's, where baby Ayres was christened. "And why not assume he had a Lutheran family background and maybe half-way a believer. I wanted him to think about that." The leader's reaction is not recorded. He wanted to ask questions and say "how much he loved Australian beers". In 1985, Drizulis became Chairman (Premier) of Latvia until 1989. He retired "early" (he was seventy-one) when Latvia regained its independence in 1991. Post-independent Latvia was not vindictive and this academic (he "was not a typical politician") lived quietly in retirement until his death in 2006. The verdict: "I can't say I knew him but it was pleasant being with him."

The second encounter, in January 1986, was with Gerald Ford, a friend of Fraser's. Ayres observes that he must have been one of few Australians who had a one-to-one meeting with a US president or former president in his home. Ford's modest 1970s ranch-style house at Rancho Mirage, east of Los Angeles between Palm Springs and Palm Desert, had been home since his defeat in 1976. A relaxed conversation with the thirty-eighth president in open-necked shirt and feet on his desk (resting them for golf, and saving them from surgery); this did not resemble the man his unpolished adversary, Lyndon Johnson, described as "so dumb he can't fart and chew gum at the same time".

Interestingly but not unexpectedly, he mentioned—at least three times—what progress might have been made on a number of international issues "if I had been elected". He is posthumously quoted as saying, "And I just don't think we should go hellfire damnation around the globe 'freeing people' unless it is directly related to our national security." Ayres ends his Ford chapter with, "Ford, with two or three others, *created* the concept and slogan America first."

The next chapter, "Manley, Kaunda, Mugabe" is a fascinating one, featuring three key players in Margaret Thatcher's attempt in 1979 to secure Commonwealth recognition of the Abel Muzorewa-Ian Smith government in Zimbabwe. "In 1986 I set out to explore the background to her defeat at Lusaka and Mugabe's ascension to power,

and to build that into the Fraser biography then in train." He had already interviewed the UK Foreign Secretary, Lord Carrington, and Commonwealth Secretary-General, Shridath Ramphal. A profile of both these men would have been welcome. But as to the key figure, Margaret Thatcher, her private secretary told Ayres, "No way she'll see you." She intensely disliked Fraser.

Again, the journey—Ayres began in Jamaica with Michael Manley, of whom he said he "could understand why people might follow him to Hell while guessing they'd never get back". Manley had revealed the role of Tanzania's Julius Nyerere in convincing President Jimmy Carter of the proper path. Carter had expected Nyerere to come to Washington wanting money but all he sought was a solution for Zimbabwe and the vital importance of "one-man-one-vote". This charismatic Tanzanian was, alas, not in Dar es Salaam when Ayres arrived and so another fascinating profile is lost to us.

He did meet Kenneth Kaunda, Zambia's president from 1964 to 1991. After Ayres put his first question to him, a long one, Kaunda paused, then responded, "You have such a wonderful composure. May I call you Philip?" His reaction? "Never paid that compliment before, I acceded. How could I dis-

like such a man? He won me in six words. One word." Despite his surprise, the author's courtesy, affability and tolerance must have impressed all his interviewees—if not so disarmingly expressed.

Finally, on this journey, Robert Mugabe in Harare. What is remarkable here is that the man still vividly remembered as a monstrous dictator had once been so mild:

He was dressed in a navy-blue suit, white shirt and maroon tie, showed courtesy, answered questions frankly, with intellectual respect, thoughtfully and at length, drawing subtle distinctions, putting qualifications.

Ayres returned to Harare in 1992, *en route* to Mogadishu, again in connection with Malcolm Fraser. In fact, he accompanied Fraser in his capacity as President of CARE International. This was a chance to see at close quarters the former prime minister as humanitarian and advocate. The meeting with Somalia's General Mohamed Farrah Aidid is the focus here and it reveals much of the complexity and conflict that stymies that continent and its states. It also exposes Fraser's fearless forthrightness

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*What is remarkable here is that the man still vividly remembered as a monstrous dictator had once been so mild.*

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and acuity.

Another chapter, “Jihadists in Afghanistan”, sees Ayres in Peshawar as a member of the Afghan-Australia Council at the invitation of its president, Richard Alston. The starkest description in this collection is the sight of the body of a Soviet officer (months dead) on the steep slopes of a hill at Khost:

I found myself thinking ... how much more I had in common with him than my companions, hospitable though they certainly were. Here were the mortal remains of a European sent to back up a secularist government that he believed, or his government believed, was on the side of progress. Someone at home was mourning him unaware that he lay unburied, an infidel and intruder. It reminded me of Aeneas and his lost and unburied friend Palinurus. As an infidel I qualified to bury him myself, but it was a foreign country and besides the ground was hard.

The longest profile in the book is given to Claudio Veliz. Like the others, it is an accumulation of well-chosen facts and adroit observation bolstered by comprehensive research, but as its title states, this profile is born of friendship. And, alone among the subjects of this collection, Professor Veliz, ninety in July, is still with us. His transformation from Chilean Marxist, who knew Castro, Allende and Guevara, to Emeritus Professor of History at Boston University, via a seventeen-year stint as Professor of Sociology at La Trobe University, is well told here. I love the anecdote, another of Ayres’s strengths, which opens this chapter, taking us to the Soviet Embassy in London in 1956. Twenty-five-year-old Veliz, a student at the LSE, is greeted by his host, Nikita Khrushchev, “My Chilean friend! How good to see you again! Let me introduce you to Sir Antony Eden and Lady Eden—and Charlie Chaplin!”

Veliz’s ability to engage, befriend, impress and attract great minds (even Nobel laureates) to his *Conversaciones* at La Trobe reflects his own eminence and did much credit to that institution and to Australia. They continued in Boston and continue, to this day, in Melbourne. Ayres cites two seminal essays (both published, like some of these profiles, in the pages of this distinguished journal). The first, in 1982, was a “devastating article” titled “Bad History”, which apparently broke the reputation of Manning Clark. The other, “A World Made in England”, appeared in 1983. Ayres concludes:

From the outset, for Claudio Veliz, history was something lived, with affective affinities running left-to-right, and he’s disinclined to repudiate any part of his past. Opinions shift

with experience, but one’s varying directions in politics and life are choices on a continuum, each valid and perhaps inevitable in context. The one person signs off on it all.

One of his subjects whose affinities never ran and was certainly never inclined to repudiate any part of her past was Diana Mosley. The most beautiful and obdurate of those Mitford sisters, Lady Mosley became an eloquent and lucid correspondent with Ayres, defending the views of the man for whom she surrendered her reputation in 1932, Sir Oswald Mosley. It is unfortunate that of all his subjects, Ayres never met Diana. It was often said that journalists who met her would fall completely under her spell; then go back and write something horrible about her.

“They will go on persecuting me until I say Hitler was ghastly,” she acknowledged:

Well, what’s the point in saying that? We all know he was a monster, that he was very cruel and did terrible things. But that doesn’t alter the fact that he was obviously an interesting figure. It was fascinating for me, at 24, to sit and talk with him, to ask him questions and get answers, even if they weren’t true ones. No torture on earth would get me to say anything different.

But writing to Dr Ayres in the early 1990s, she said, “I still regard the war as a terrible crime against Europe and I blame him [Hitler] for setting it in motion.” She would continue to campaign against it during the phoney war.

Just as interesting was how she and Ayres originally made contact. Ayres had been working in early spring of 1990 on the eighteenth-century library of Lord Burlington, which had been transferred to Chatsworth, the seat of his successors, the Dukes of Devonshire. There, on the Palace of the Peaks, he met its legendary chatelaine, Deborah, Duchess of Devonshire, the youngest of the Mitfords. During his time there he came upon Diana’s memoirs, *A Life of Contrasts*, for sale in the house bookshop. Again, as he put it, it was not so much the information he gained, but the path to it. The journey.

Another figure infamous for his unfaltering stance was the Reverend Ian Paisley, the firebrand voice of Protestant Ulster, leader of the Ulster Unionist Party. By the time Ayres met him at home in suburban Belfast in 2011, researching Ninian Stephen’s role on the Northern Irish peace talks, the fire had been quenched. He had been First Minister of Northern Ireland with Sinn Fein’s Martin McGuinness as his Deputy. At eighty-five, still six foot five and a peer—Lord Bannside—he

praised Stephen as a very *straight* man “who couldn’t be controlled by the British”.

“There’s been a generational change up here,” he said, “and also in the South. Here the younger generation know nothing of the Troubles, down there they know nothing of the old Catholicism.”

Ayres admitted some disappointment. “I’d looked forward to hearing the firebrand in full and violent rant but it was a time to put aside ranting and a time when his time was shortening.” Paisley died less than three years later.

Antonin Scalia is the public figure whose stocky frame appears genially on the cover of the book (beside the taller, jaunty yet half-smiling author. Perhaps Ayres was still recovering from the judge’s first reaction when he got into his old Toyota: “I haven’t seen crank windows in forty years”). Behind the genial image lay a formidable intellect and abiding defender of what he called a “*dead* Constitution”. Ayres had met Scalia and fellow Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer in 2005 (through the supremely well-connected Claudio) and observed of Scalia:

he at once struck me as the more interesting of the two, partly because his ideas were so forthright, sharply defined and challenging, but also because the paper he presented to us in 2005 was immensely entertaining in its merciless demolition of judicial activism.

They met again in Melbourne in 2011. As they drove (well, Ayres drove as his passenger occasionally slept) towards Geelong, to Lorne, and then on to Port Campbell, the Twelve Apostles, Apollo Bay, and back to Lorne, they struck up an easy acquaintance. Scalia thought the Supreme Court’s affirmation of *an individual right to self-defence* was one of his proudest achievements on the court. As it happened, both men were gun enthusiasts. While Ayres did not hunt game, Scalia liked to hunt black bear, telling him that there were “almost certainly more of them in North America now than when Europeans first settled”. As a guest of the Velizes, he was later to teach his hostess how to cook a soft-boiled egg.

Ayres says that, having frequently glanced at his passenger between the Twelve Apostles and Lorne, “semi-reclined in a profound sleep, I can imagine what he looked like five years later when he was found dead, flat on his back with his head propped up by pillows.” It was the night of February 12/13, 2016, in a hunting resort in West Texas (rather suitably, the setting for the 1956 film *Giant*). “He’d gone to bed early following an afternoon’s quail shoot and didn’t appear for his breakfast of boiled eggs.” As

Ayres adds: “the best exit”.

Dyson Heydon is right to claim that Philip Ayres “is also one of the ablest contemporary Australian non-fiction writers”. And one looks forward to more profiles from him. What about the Fraser women—Una, Tammie, Phoebe? Lady Stephen and her five daughters? Lord Carrington? Geoffrey Dutton? Geoffrey Blainey? But we should let him rest for a while on his laurels.

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*Mark McGinness, an Australian living in the United Arab Emirates, wrote on Charles Dickens in the June issue.*

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## IVAN HEAD

### Shimmering in the Sun

*David Campbell: A Life of the Poet*

by Jonathan Persse

Australian Scholarly, 2020, 251 pages, \$44

This is a comprehensive, informative and reflective account of the life of the poet David Campbell. Campbell lived from 1915 to 1979 and the more than forty years since his death have not diminished the power and vision of his poems nor the value in continuing to read works of superlative craftsmanship; his eye for the natural world in its polarities; and the intellectual inquiry expressed in his verse. Persse’s book encouraged me to re-assemble my copies of Campbell’s poems and explore something more of their scope and what others have said about him. That kind of response may be the aim of the *Life*—to encourage reading and re-reading of the poems as the primary point of interest and encounter with the man who wrote them.

With regard to the school and university curriculum: the study of Campbell’s verse would be a wise matter for educators to pursue, as jewels amidst the more monetised disciplines. When R.F. Brissenden wrote “A Second Life through his Work” for the *Australian* in December 1989, ten years after Campbell’s death, at the time of the launch of Leonie Kramer’s edition of Campbell’s *Collected Poems*, he referred to poetry readings where a tiny audience “made up of other poets, reluctant friends, stray dogs and a handful of devoted followers” attend. But for Campbell’s poetry “the auditorium was packed out ... attentive, responsive and enthusiastic”. Campbell’s poetry should be curriculum material today and Persse’s book encourages the reading of him afresh.

Persse includes primary documents: Leonie Kramer's appreciation of Campbell from the *Sydney Morning Herald* of July 1979, just before Campbell's funeral, and Manning Clark's eulogy from it.

Campbell's immersion in poetry began at The King's School, Parramatta, and was intensified at Jesus College, Cambridge, under the deeply learned influence of Professor E.M.W. Tillyard, his tutor in English. Tillyard knew that Campbell was a poet of ability and potential by the time he left Cambridge in 1937, having achieved formal competency in the discipline of English over several centuries. Campbell also became a competent pilot in his Jesus College days, as well as being capped to play rugby for England. He remained in contact with Tillyard and Persse outlines Tillyard's role in the 1949 publication of Campbell's first book, *Speak with the Sun*: a coup to get this London publication.

Campbell's distinctive war service in the RAAF is detailed in Chapter Six and includes documents (including the citation) relating to the operational near-catastrophe for which he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. This chapter opens vistas onto a vital time in Australia's modern history and the realities of war service. The young English poet and tank commander Keith Douglas, who did not survive the war, comes to mind as a companion poet with the Campbell of those years. Campbell's wartime Papua New Guinea poem "Men in Green" is included by Persse. Published in the *Bulletin* in 1943, it comes from that wartime period that Campbell's contact with Douglas Stewart and the *Bulletin* began. Stewart was literary editor of the magazine from 1940 to 1961.

Persse began his publication of core Campbell material in *Letters Lifted into Poetry: Selected Correspondence between David Campbell and Douglas Stewart 1946-1979* (2006). This and the biography can be read as companion volumes.

Persse's new book is organised in twenty-six chapters. I think the book would have had greater organisational strength had one or more of the chapters focused on Campbell's first and second marriages and given greater voice to the perspective of the principal women in his life. Bonnie Lawrance and Judy Jones do not come alive to any real extent in the text. That may be deliberate, or by necessity. As the novelist Susan Howatch once intimated, there are always stories that cannot be told. It does raise questions about the kind of biography one can write. David and Bonnie divorced in 1973 and he married again in 1974. Perhaps, in this context, I can note lines from Campbell's "Orpheus in Hell", which was included by Max Harris in *Australian Poetry* 1967:

But when he turned and looked at her, the doubt  
And longing in his sharp inquiry came  
To her like chiller water. She sang out  
To think that her deliverer shared the same  
Needs as herself; and as she turned about,  
The shadow that she walked upon was lame.

Campbell is lauded as a lyric poet, a writer of intense observation of the natural world in its sensory and other impact on the human participant and observer. Some of this is captured definitively in *Song for a Wren: Country Poems and Images* (2009), which combines Campbell's poems with the landscape photography of John Peel. He was also a balladist, with popular and accessible poems put before readers, sometimes in the daily press. But his greatness lay in what went beyond these forms in intellectual reflection and inquiry.

In the appreciation by Leonie Kramer, with which Persse closes his book, she notes that James McAuley had said of Campbell's poems: "Implicit is a metaphysical sense of the way of things, and if they said 'it is good', they do so with knowledge of fragility and disaster and pain." Reading Persse has awakened an awareness of things that Campbell and McAuley had in common. Both poets were influenced by Papua New Guinea. Both died relatively young and within three years of each other. Both took poetry and prose pursuits into what can be called metaphysical concerns. Some of these links even appear in specific poems.

Campbell's final book, *The Man in the Honeysuckle*, published just after his death, includes a sequence called "Songs of Chance" which includes "The Greatest Show on Earth" in which chance as "a spangled magician ... shuffles cards at the speed of light ... [and] ... pulls dead rabbits from his hat" while lovers stay preoccupied with the immediacy and luminosity of their naked embrace. In "The Cloak", McAuley's earlier poem from 1967, "Death the Magician", in his crimson-lined cloak, always plays to a packed house and, on throwing his cloak over this or that "volunteer", makes them disappear—to an afterlife somewhere we know not and can only imagine in exotic or even febrile ways. There is no *reason* why Campbell did not die on the mission over Rabaul when he lost a finger to fire from a Zero. Is it all the work of a "spangled magician"?

Campbell stays with embedded metaphysics from his earliest to his last poems. Persse notes this by drawing attention to the title poem of *Speak with the Sun* (1949). Here, the bird that sings in the glade, sings across ten thousand years of light. Heartbeats are "of the light" and whether it is the bird and its song, or the delight of the poet

as listener and writer, “of such stuff the stars were made”. There is a sense for Campbell in which this is not just rhetoric but literally, though mysteriously, true. The metaphysics are only deepened in his final volume where, in the “Songs of Chance” sequence, “Green Hands” ponders what appears as the accident of existence and survival; or radical personal contingency, as one might put it more abstractly:

I have lain on my back in caves  
 Studying the hands of dead people  
 Stencilled in coloured ochres ...  
 This morning under  
 An overhanging scanner  
 There were two hands on the screen ...  
 One had a little finger missing.

This poem carries the trauma residue of the chance by which the military encounter in the air above Rabaul did not take the poet’s life, but by “a shuffling of the cards” took only his little finger. As a companion poem, one could read Gwen Harwood’s “Bone Scan” (1988).

Campbell and McAuley each wrote compelling poems about their parents, about their fathers in particular: another fruitful path radiating from re-engaging with Campbell via *A Life of the Poet*. But to note a metaphysical concern is not simply to note profound themes.

Brissenden explored this subject in “The Poetry of David Campbell: ‘Speak with the Sun’: Energy, Light and Love”, in *Quadrant* in October 1983. He described a connective layering between Campbell’s increasing insights into the subtle exchange or complementarity between light, energy and matter in modern physics and linked this to the insights of the seventeenth-century poet Henry Vaughan. Persse notes the role of Capra’s *The Tao of Physics*. In what the poet sees, there is always more than what can be seen. Persse draws attention to lines from “Hear the Bird of Day” which ends, “In every grain of sand stands a singer in white. / What’s matter but a hardening of the light.” This is Blake-like.

A lyrical and descriptive poem becomes a participatory symbol by which poet and reader find a harmony and resolution of vastness in both the nano and macro that surround a human middle ground. While not the place to explore the classical Greek notion of *symbolon* and its rejoining of two separated halves that belong together, Persse alerts us to the need to acknowledge and respond to those depths and heights. It is clearly there in “Lizard and Stone”, the first poem of Campbell’s final collection:

Within the stone  
 A dance of atoms  
 Warms the basking lizard  
 The warmth of the lizard quickens the atoms  
 About the stone and the lizard  
 Where they lie like lovers  
 The cosmos dances.

There is a holistic vision of this universe in which the human, in its sensory and soul and fleshly dimension, is of the same ultimate stuff as the tiniest particle or energies and the vastness of the galaxy. Poems and *poesis* hold some of this together though the restless mind quests and wonders whether soul really is of the same quiddity as the constituent elements of the cosmos. Kevin Hart (one of the significant younger poets Campbell encouraged—a pantheon of excellence listed by Persse) included several of Campbell’s poems in his *Oxford Book of Australian Religious Verse* (1994).

Campbell belonged to a generation of great poets for whom the classical world was a familiar matrix. W.H. Auden exemplified this with his “Shield of Achilles”. Campbell does the same in *The Branch of Dodona and Other Poems*. Thus, in 1949: “Have been reading *The Odyssey* to the children & they love it. In fact they say it is almost as good as *The Magic Pudding*.”

In *The Branch of Dodona* he uses the terrifying stories of Jason and Medea as a matrix for contemporary events, acquiring a new colloquial power for them, and for deeply relational and personal matters. “Incineration of a Bride” reworks the death of Glauce, King Creon’s daughter and Jason’s fiancée. It reworks the myth by introducing napalm, a twentieth-century invention. It opens another path for fruitful study in poetry and in wider fields. But it is reworked in a new poesis and not reduced to a cause or agenda pleasing to the zeitgeist.

In writing this review, I have tried to abridge comments to meet the apt constraint. Persse’s book is excellent and prompted me to rediscover and further explore this exceptional poet. It is fitting to close with lines from “The Dream”, a poem by Douglas Stewart, and based on a dream that his wife, Margaret, had after Campbell’s death. Persse uses this poem to end his earlier book *Letters Lifted into Poetry*. It plays to the metaphysical dimension in the domain of metamorphosis and transfiguration. It addresses death and is not overcome. Here is part of it:

She dreamed that summer he had become a cicada  
 And would not let the red earth hold him under  
 But shrugged it off, man-insect in her dream,  
 And climbed the bole of that white, scribbly gum

And tentatively, then clear and high and strong,  
Sang the first stanzas of cicada song ...  
All green and gold and shimmering in the sun  
He sprang into the air and he was gone.  
Far off in ringing tress and noon's blue height  
She heard him singing with the tribes of light.

I permit myself a personal comment. Over the years, I had bought two second-hand copies of *The Man in the Honeysuckle* (1979). Reopening one of them for this review, I found that it had become the

repository for a large number of folded and dated newspaper cuttings containing poems by Campbell and reviews and articles about him: a gift from the anonymous former owner who clearly knew and loved the poems and the poet.

I highly commend Persse's book and the reading of Campbell's poems.

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*Ivan Head spent twenty-seven years as the head of Anglican colleges in the University of Tasmania and the University of Sydney.*

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## Henry V suddenly sees the error of his ways, advocates Brexit, and offers Falstaff a job

I know thee well, old man. You're in my prayers.  
How well white hairs become you fools and jesters!  
Come: join my think-tank. Everyone who scares  
The pants off normal people—child-molesters,

Lager-louts, geocentrists, *Protocols*  
Adherents, those who've never read a book  
Save *Atlas Shrugged*, or think the Dead Sea Scrolls  
Are NASA fakes; each psychopathic crook

You can imagine—I want on my team.  
The Brexit team. Don't talk to me of France!  
France is for frogs. Though it was once my dream,  
I've now awoken from my Gallic trance.

Take (please!) my wife. She makes me want to hurl.  
Why would I stay with any Valois tart  
When every day I meet an English girl  
Who speaks my language and who steals my heart?

My son's a dope. And not a useful one.  
Convinced since boyhood of the power of prayer,  
He actually *believes* that tripe. He'll shun  
My observations that it's just not fair

For God to fill the world with Lesser Breeds  
Who, he thinks (and they're *Catholics!*), still have souls.  
I'll make God concentrate upon the needs  
Of Brits! Especially if they're online trolls!

Come, Falstaff, come. Europe can go to hell.  
We'll use French au-pairs as our human shields.  
We'll prop up every merchant bank cartel ...  
And then, of course, we'll babble of green fields.

*R.J. Stove*

# Willem de Kooning and the Meaning of His Ugly Woman

The *Woman* paintings of Willem de Kooning are unpleasant. They always have been. It was already apparent when painters who dropped by the artist's studio between 1949 and 1952 saw the pieces in progress. That was on New York's 10th Street, and those canvases gave off the down-town vulgarity of a lean neighbourhood. De Kooning's friends were jolted. The energised brushwork, his muscular handling of oil paint like a sportsman making wholly original moves during play, was outrageous enough. But these paintings of a ham-thighed, hulking blonde with leering barracuda eyes and pianola teeth—as images, they repelled.

On that intersection of opinion there continues to be little disagreement between those who disparage, and those who esteem, Abstract Expressionist art. This short run of modestly sized canvases instantly embody that Modernist “shock of the new”.

If the *Woman* paintings are now held up as canonical works of modern art, scholars have been coy about discussing their meanings. Take the Royal Academy's commanding survey of Abstract Expressionism in 2016. Three *Woman* pictures hung in that immense London exhibition; they were given one careful sentence in the catalogue, assuring viewers there was an “overriding humanism” to these “controversial” images of a female form. Then there was the authoritative de Kooning retrospective in New York's Museum of Modern Art in 2011, which included all the key works. Its hefty 506-page catalogue did not dwell on the meanings of the *Woman* series, steering discussion into matters of style and technique.

Even as mainstream art history has pulled back, a controversial interpretation of de Kooning's *Woman* pictures has taken hold in the academy. Driven by feminism, it aspires to explain the in-your-face nastiness they exude. These unsettling figures in thickly applied oil paint, the argument runs, express male urges to assault women most violently.

The case against de Kooning's abstractions has been developed and initially advanced by Dr Fionna Barber, reader in art history at the Manchester School of Art. Instead of using customary methods of scholarship, Barber has offered a psychological appraisal of what she suggests is the implicitly sexual nature of post-war American art. Her essay “Abstract Expressionism and Masculinity” (2004) appeared in *Varieties of Modernism*, an instalment of the multi-volume series on the history of art published by Britain's Open University.

Focusing on the works of Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still and Mark Rothko, “Abstract Expressionism and Masculinity” is not structured as a progressive argument. Rather, in a meandering, circuitous discussion Barber probes three issues which, for her, broadly affect creative works: (i) there is the subject matter used by the artists collectively, as well as an individual painter's specific choice of image; (ii) there are the techniques employed, and how paint has been applied physically to canvas by an artist; and (iii) there are the work clothes worn by painters in their studios. Taken together, these aspects are said to reveal an emphatic sexual undertone to Abstract Expressionist pictures. No sources or material from psychology are given in support of this diagnostic approach.

Much of Barber's discussion of imagery is sound. Among the insights feminism has contributed to art history is to reveal thematic patterns in how women are represented. Sets of gender stereotypes have been identified, like the nurturing mother, the chaste maiden, the eroticised vamp, or—in the *Woman* images—the repulsive shrew. De Kooning's use of the latter theme was not a case of unthinking chauvinism. The Abstract Expressionists were fascinated by C.G. Jung's theory of archetypes. To this end, de Kooning invoked an ancient fierce-female archetype considered part of our mental furniture. This led the critic Robert Hughes to wonder if de Kooning was recycling the medieval *giftmädchen* of

North European folk art, those lusty poison maids reeking of brimstone. However, quoting the artist's remark, "Maybe I was painting the woman in me," Barber shows him looking to the Venus of Willendorf and pre-historic mythic imagery when thinking out the *Woman* motif. She adds that the Marxist art historian Carol Duncan has observed how, like archaic sculpture, de Kooning's pictures can perform as "ritual artefacts" in museum displays.

Barber makes strong points here, although de Kooning's loose intentions become grounds for censure. Feminists reject this Jungian model, seeing it as typecasting women negatively: so de Kooning is portraying the feminine in an improper way.

It is when discussing technique that Barber presents a new interpretive approach. She is convinced that brushwork is inherently sexual, with individual paint strokes amounting to "signifiers of masculinity". As evidence she points to the black-on-white gestural abstractions of Franz Kline—de Kooning's close friend—where a "draining of colour focuses attention on the brushstroke; in the context of sexual difference, the exaggerated gesture seems almost hyper-masculine". Barber contrasts this deliberate brushwork with the techniques of Jackson Pollock (dribbled and poured paint), Clyfford Still (waxy pigment trowelled on with a painting knife) and Mark Rothko (thinned paint applied as vaporous veils of colour). It is implied the artists leaned towards gender fluidity by

not using brushes. Female Abstract Expressionists are also swept into this argument. Barber claims sexual role-play underpins how women members of the movement painted, writing that Joan Mitchell's quite brushy abstractions "become legible, I would suggest, as a kind of 'drag-act'".

Once started, there is little stopping efforts to psychologise technique. Some aspects of de Kooning's paintwork are declared "masculine", others "feminine". So for Barber the *Woman* compositions are sexual struggles where the feminine confronts masculinity: "The classic grid structure that surrounds the figure is recognisably encoded as masculine, in contrast to the grotesque, uncontrolled female body that erupts within it," she writes. From here it's a short step to treating the roughened surfaces of de Kooning's pictures as a means of sexual abuse. To Barber's eye, his painting process amounts to a simulated violent assault: the artist substitutes pigment for a woman's flesh, then uses

brushes and painting knives as if he were thrashing the paint surface. In distorting female figures, she explains, De Kooning "conflates the deconstruction of the represented body with the enactment of violence on the bodies of actual women", thereby making manifest male yearnings to beat up women.

Circumstantial evidence is introduced to support this interpretation. Barber conjectures that "the construction of gender roles in abstract expressionism" is evident if we scrutinise the clothing artists wore. So she attempts to reveal psychological subtexts to Willem de Kooning's attire and posture in a well-known studio photograph.

Taken in 1953, the shot shows the artist seemingly paused in a painting session, accompanied by his wife, Elaine. The couple are positioned either side of an unfinished *Woman* composition nailed flat to the wall. He is to the right; she, the left. Dressed in a T-shirt, paint-spattered work trousers and sandals, de Kooning stands facing the camera with arms crossed. Wearing pedal-pushers and a loose cotton man's shirt, Elaine de Kooning smokes a cigarette. She is seated in an awkward sideways pose on a rush-seated chair, her legs drawn up as she looks out to the left.

For Barber, the artist's attire and pose ooze masculine potency. De Kooning is said to strike an "aggressive, macho pose", using a form-fitting shirt to flaunt his "muscularity". Barber adds that in wearing the T-shirt ("a versatile garment enabling the performance of masculinity in a range of social spaces") he is identifying with tradesmen and labourers, thereby signalling an "anti-bourgeois" bohemianism. She points to publicity posters for the 1951 movie *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Barber feels it no accident they depicted the actor Marlon Brando wearing a pale T-shirt for his role as the uncouth Stanley Kowalski, and claims de Kooning projects the same post-war "eroticised masculinity" as Brando.

Tying off potential loose ends on her psychology of clothing, Barber points to how Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline likewise wear T-shirts in photographs. She then contrasts this to Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, who she says were snapped when dressed in suits or shirt-and-tie. For Barber this indicates that suits and ties "may be regarded as continuous with profound intellectual engagement". In other words, hypermasculine artists signalled their interests with T-shirts, whereas the

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*Barber is convinced that brushwork is inherently sexual, with individual paint strokes amounting to "signifiers of masculinity". Some aspects of de Kooning's paintwork are declared "masculine", others "feminine".*

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bookish ones broadcast their more erudite leanings via lounge suits.

The interpretive approach Barber applies to de Kooning's *Woman* paintings evolved from 1970s feminist cultural criticism. Taking the lead from popular psychology, especially Freudian-inspired dream interpretation, at that time some aspiring feminist critics analysed creative work much as they would dreams. Literary and artistic works were treated as symbolic versions of sexual autobiography. Amateur psychologising was commonplace, as well-meaning if misguided critics tried to show how novels or paintings implicitly portrayed a collision of female-victim with male-abuser, then would read this back into the artist's or author's personal life.

These lines for literary criticism had already been discredited after the Sinyavsky–Daniel trial of 1966, the only formal trial of dissident writers conducted in Russia during the Cold War. The defendants, who had illegally published novels and poetry in the West, were accused of “anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda” under Article 70 of the criminal code. The prosecutor used as evidence selected passages from their fiction. He also claimed characters critical of the USSR were self-portraits. In his defence, Andrei Sinyavsky likened the prosecutor's actions to sifting *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* looking for an insidious meaning. He contended that lines in his historical novels were being taken out of context; besides the characters were imaginary—as in Gogol's and Pushkin's fiction—not portraits of real people, least of all himself. The court found the two authors guilty, sentencing them to hard labour in a gulag.

There was an instant international outcry. A rollcall of distinguished writers, including Hannah Arendt, Lillian Hellman, Simone de Beauvoir and Mary McCarthy, petitioned the Soviet government for the authors' release. Their protests intensified when a smuggled transcript of the closed trial was published in the *New York Times*. Cultural journals picked apart the Moscow prosecutor's case, arguing poems and stories ought not be read this way; because if writers do borrow observations from life when assembling a fictional work, these are raw materials enabling invention to occur. Any seeming factual value is illusory, pressure of creativity shaping the text.

Nevertheless, within a decade younger feminists were moving down the same path. Sylvia Plath, an American poet, was the main focus of early interpretive activity. She was a tragic case. Afflicted with periodic depression in a short, intensely creative life, Plath committed suicide at thirty years of age in

1963, gassing herself as her infant children slept in the next room. She left behind a remarkable series of poems crafted since her baby son's birth. Her poet husband, Ted Hughes, devotedly published this legacy as *Ariel* (1965). It was an instant sensation in literary circles. Plath had shaped an abrasively confessional poetry, steeped in archaic symbolism (Robert Graves's *The White Goddess* and C.G. Jung's writings were among her source materials), while grappling with present-day moral themes. Several poems confronted the evils of totalitarianism and the Holocaust.

Plath's poetry was taken up by a percolating women's movement. Many feminists felt her verse arose from domestic anxieties. For them *Ariel* was a song of liberation, with the fraught poems “Lady Lazarus” and “Daddy” venting a rage against controlling men and their stifling world. Plath's writing was said to cryptically represent her own marriage in an embittered way. For feminists, Holocaust imagery referred to emotional oppression suffered by the poet, and supposedly exposed her husband as a manipulative abuser.

An orthodoxy was in the making. Jumping to conclusions, sometimes ignoring contrary evidence, feminists insisted Plath's verse was cloaked autobiography. Literary scholars who wrote otherwise were accused of a cover-up. Early reviews of her poetry were selectively quoted to suggest chauvinist critics wanted to distort meanings. Even medical explanations for Plath's depression were dismissed: she was an embattled woman, a martyr, end of story. When her mother published Plath's letters in an effort to correct misinterpretation, feminists went through the correspondence line-by-line, twisting cheerful words to say otherwise.

Activity didn't halt at speculation over Plath's poetic imagery. Protests were staged when her widower husband attended literary festivals. Feminists would harass Ted Hughes during readings or panel discussions, waving banners and shouting he had “killed” Sylvia Plath. Across universities, campus women's groups demanded his verse be removed from studies. Poison-pen letters arrived in his mail, and Hughes feared the children might hear vile things about their mother. Most hurtful was the vandalism of Plath's grave. For over a decade feminist graffiti kept being daubed across the headstone, with her married surname chiselled out on four occasions. Blamed in the *Guardian* for her damaged grave, Hughes sent a short corrective letter to the editor, which finished by asking if “the fantasia about Sylvia Plath is more needed than the facts”, and “where that leaves respect for the truth of her life (and my life)?”

The feminist view of Plath's life was about to be

shaken as he wrote this. The catalyst was *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*, an investigative report by the literary critic Janet Malcolm. It appeared in the *New Yorker* over summer 1993, then was published in book form. In it Malcolm describes reading a new biography of Plath—in her estimation “by far the most intelligent and aesthetically satisfying” of the five biographies to date—then being astonished at the brutal reviews it received: “the book became known and continues to be known in the Plath world as a ‘bad’ book”. Planning to write on the vexed nature of biography generally, Malcolm began asking around; then, her curiosity aroused, she sought scholars and Plath’s friends. She soon found deep fault-lines criss-crossing historical and literary interpretation. Academics had to toe a political line or risk reprisals. Even conscientious women scholars were fair game for feminist bullying if they did not conform.

It was now apparent how pressure was broadly being applied to interpretation across the creative arts. Certain artists have taken their sexual and emotional life as a subject, Pablo Picasso being a prime case; but most have not. Nevertheless, boundaries of fictional invention were disregarded, with creative works treated as disguised records of real experiences and behaviour. Like lawyers in an acrimonious divorce, feminists sifted historical poems, novels and works of art for potential proof of manipulation and ill-treatment in the writer’s or artist’s life. Trivialities were inflated out of proportion to suggest a female writer was abused, or a male painter harboured violent impulses.

Barber’s discussion of de Kooning’s art is symptomatic of this approach. Starting with legitimate unease over how a woman is portrayed, it then claims a sexual subtext to artistic technique as well as how artists appear in old photographs. While the article does not suggest de Kooning was actually abusive or violent to women, it does claim both his paintings and manner of dress exude such “hyper-masculine” values. Conclusive evidence is lacking; but Barber rushes to interpret mental drives where professional psychologists fear to tread.

Fionna Barber is on solid ground when covering a debt to Jung’s ideas, and she offers firm references. But her psychologising of technique recalls criticisms of Dmitri Shostakovich’s music by Stalin’s apparatchiks. They had declared certain of his orchestral phrases and melodic passages contrary to

Soviet Socialism. This was nonsense. The composer had fallen out of favour, so reasons were concocted to justify official censure. Likewise with Barber’s claims about sexual identity and paint application.

Take the comments on Jackson Pollock’s dripped compositions, which Barber says “raise questions of gender”. She holds that gender fluidity is associated with his palette. For example, the title of Pollock’s *Lavender Mist*:

is suggestive of a gender ambiguity in the association of lavender with male homosexuality, while the delicate pastel surface of the painting itself is shot through with skeins of pink, a colour more closely associated with femininity, especially in the polarised gender roles of the post-war period.

This was not the known intention of the artist and his friend Clement Greenberg, when together they coined *Lavender Mist* and titles for several related works. Pollock’s preferred titles dealt in mythic symbolism (*Autumn Rhythm*, *Night Ceremony*, *Totem Lesson*). The titles Greenberg urged on him were baldly descriptive, the critic shunning what he considered outdated suggestions of content. Take an abstraction which features elongated blue motifs consciously echoing the feathered staffs used by Navajo Indians for magic rituals—Greenberg pressed for the blunt title *Blue Poles*. Similarly, *Lavender Mist* referred to how coloured threads of pigment merged visually into a lavender hue.

Neither is Barber’s claim about sexual nuances to the Pollock work supported by that cornerstone of analytical art history: Colour Theory. This is a broad field of scholarship extending from symbolism, through how artists used colour to compose, across to the psychology of visual perception, and even paint chemistry. Colour Theory is a first stop when investigating colours in pictures; ignoring it, Barber talks at the level of blue-for-boys and pink-for-girls customary in gift shops.

Equally unstable is her declaration that painting is “an activity encoded as masculine”. This goes against the very enterprise of feminist art history. Successive waves of scholars have disproved a chauvinist view that painting is an inherently male skill, showing there always have been women painters. Still, Barber’s remark enables her to quote the postmodern theorist Ann Gibson, who opines that Pollock’s “poured lines of paint suggest both

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*Like lawyers in an acrimonious divorce, feminists sifted historical poems, novels and works of art for potential proof of manipulation and ill-treatment in the writer’s or artist’s life.*

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an ejaculatory (stereotypically masculine) method of applying paint and a decorative (stereotypically feminine) pattern of threadlike lines". Again Pollock's work is said to express gender fluidity.

This is not the cautious path of objective analysis, indeed, no recognised analytical method is used here. Instead, it resembles a free-association session where, as with Hermann Rorschach's test cards, a patient will project their fixations upon random blots. Take when Barber calls a loop of dripped white paint in Pollock's *Number 1A, 1948* "skull-like". But no image was intended, or is evident. It is a shapeless drip. Likewise when Barber describes de Kooning's *Woman* works, she says the figure "erupts" from a "grid structure" that is "masculine". Sustained scrutiny reveals no organising grid—masculine or otherwise—in the paintings.

In the absence of any statement by de Kooning of a violent intent, Barber supports her claims about his paintwork, and process of visual distortion, with quotations by prominent art writers. One is the New York critic Clement Greenberg in 1955:

When [de Kooning] left outright abstraction several years ago to attack the female form with a fury greater than Picasso's, the results baffled and shocked collectors, yet the methods by which these savage dissections were carried out were patently Cubist.

Readers are told this remark "contains a sense of violence done to the figure". A second colourful passage is excerpted from an article in 1985 by the art historian Robert Rosenblum:

Confronted with the hurricane force of de Kooning's *Women* series of 1950–53, we feel that the spirit of the Stone Age Venuses of Willendorf or Lespugue lies at the root of this art, as do many of the Mesopotamian figures, which, with their bug-eyed stare and threatening frontality, de Kooning has acknowledged as influences. And as for painterly mutilation, there is always the example of Chaim Soutine, whose 1950 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art would have supported de Kooning's audacity in handling pink and red paint as if he were a wrestler or a rapist attacking resistant flesh.

After this quotation Barber writes of the *Woman* paintings as amounting to assaults on "the bodies of actual women", because they "conflate" artistic depiction with an act of violence. She adds that similar references to "key themes of violence and

horror" appear in early reviews of the *Woman* paintings, thereby supporting her point.

There is a simple explanation for violence being mentioned in early criticism. The poet Frank O'Hara, a friend of de Kooning and Pollock, pointed out how "the impression was of inexplicable violence and savagery" when Abstract Expressionist work was first exhibited. Upon inquiry, he found this the reaction of viewers unsettled by a "violation of ingrained assumptions", which is a well-known response to new art. The Impressionists were likewise accused of violence, as were the Post-Impressionists, Expressionists and others. Viewer agitation is even implicit in the term *Fauvism*: indignant Parisian critics had jeered at a group show, calling Matisse and his circle *fauves* (savage beasts). Actually, in that quoted passage by Clement Greenberg, the critic writes of the "baffled and shocked" responses of collectors to new art: it was *they* who reacted to de Kooning's pictures as "savage dissections".

Barber's use of the two passages is also seriously flawed. Both employ figurative language: Greenberg drops into metaphor, and Rosenblum employs simile (notice his qualifying phrase "as if he were"), the passages using physical activity to account for imaginative effort. Of course, we often say artists, poets and composers "struggle" or "wrestle" with a composition in progress. These figures of speech are rhetorical devices to indicate intellectual toil, the words *struggle* or *wrestle* being commonly used for intense mental effort, as they might be for physicists and scientists as they cogitate on a difficult conceptual problem. But neither of these rhetorical modes trades in literal description. If one writes that Albert Einstein and Stephen Hawking wrestled with the universe, the reader knows this was not a physical event. Metaphors and similes are not to be confused with the real thing. Barber ignores this.

There is a more fundamental error in her argument here. Neither passage was written or uttered by Willem de Kooning. They are not his words, and he is in no way responsible for them. So they are not to be taken as his statements of intention. But Barber holds the artist accountable for what others write about his work.

On this broad issue, the New York curator John Elderfield points out that "far more has been written about the *response* to the *Woman* paintings than *on* the *Woman* paintings". And with claims of their sexual aggression, he found this flows from how viewers respond to works as "composed of muscled masculine strokes—angry strokes that reflect an inner turmoil. It was as such they have invited the charge of misogyny." Elderfield also notes that over time "the analogy [with sexual violence] grew

more extreme, even respected art historians losing all sense of proportion". Elderfield concludes that much as some will find any great religious painting blasphemous, challenging portrayals of women always attract protest.

Jackson Pollock was cranky when de Kooning exhibited those *Woman* compositions in March 1953. This was at Sidney Janis Gallery, on the fourth floor of a building at 15 East 57th Street, the heart of New York's gallery scene. Six *Woman* paintings hung around the main room, with another thirteen pastels and a pencil drawing on the same theme, as well as two small oils, displayed in a side gallery. Pollock spent quite a time absorbing those works.

At the studio party afterwards the critic Thomas Hess passed around the latest issue of *ARTnews*. To tie in with the exhibition it included "De Kooning Paints a Picture", an illustrated article Hess had written showing the evolution of *Woman I* in the studio. Angered at what was occurring, Pollock yelled at de Kooning across the room: "Bill, you betrayed it. You're doing the figure, you're still doing the same goddamn thing. You know you never got out of being a figure painter." Pollock was impulsive, although other painters there were also unsettled. De Kooning wouldn't pull away from the human form—like those leaders of the modern movement, Picasso and Matisse—and this time he appeared to flaunt his bravura technique.

Artists were always aware of Willem de Kooning's rigorous training. Apprenticed to a Rotterdam decorator when barely adolescent, he initially studied industrial decoration and commercial art. He acquired a broad tradecraft in a busy workshop by day and attended design classes at technical school in the evening. The teenager excelled at sign- and ticket-writing, a steady career being assured: "I was a good letterer, and I could paint signs. I never expected to be an artist, just to make a living."

Three years into the apprenticeship de Kooning adjusted his studies, wanting to perfect his graphic illustration. The fifteen-year-old enrolled in drawing classes held six nights a week at the Rotterdam Academy, a traditionalist art school. He was drilled there by copying plaster casts of Greco-Roman statuary, progressing from acanthus leaf to sandalled foot, to bust, to stele, to standing figure, before entering the life-class. His instructors saw promise, so at seventeen years of age he was offered a state scholarship. He then undertook full training at the academy, along with formative visits to study Old Master works at Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum.

That background stood Willem de Kooning in good stead. When needed he could always execute a disciplined drawing from life, while trade school

then the academy gave him an enviable grasp of techniques and paint chemistry. After he settled in Greenwich Village during the mid-1930s he gained a reputation for his know-how. When Arshile Gorky was once having difficulty painting graceful lines, de Kooning showed him how to use a liner brush.

Besides equipping the painter with professional skills, the academy instilled an awareness of artistic tradition. "De Kooning felt very much part of the tradition of Western European painting going back to the Renaissance," the critic Calvin Tomkins recalled. If de Kooning embraced a modern outlook, his paintings confirmed T.S. Eliot's rule that truly original talent extracts from tradition even as it shakes and reconfigures that tradition. This was why de Kooning worked slowly—"incredibly slowly," Tomkins continues, "scraping out and starting over again time after time, searching for the essential combination of color and form that would have the rightness, the lastingness of a Tintoretto or an Ingres. He spent nearly two years working on *Woman I*..." Elaine de Kooning confirmed that the *Woman* compositions were deliberated over:

Bill worked on these just all day, every day. Even the small ones. Even if it took a year. I should make the point here that on any given canvas, I saw hundreds of images go by ... I would come in at night and find they had been painted away.

That goes against popular perceptions of Abstract Expressionists working in a wild rush; for any impression of creative haste is illusory. The principal artists were carefully paced, labouring for months, sometimes longer, to bring a piece to completion.

This is apparent when scrutinising paintings in a museum, and attending to brushstrokes. The American artist David Salle likens brushwork in painting to drumming in music, because a brush enables the painter's hand to communicate so directly. And as jazz enthusiasts appreciate skilled drumming, experienced viewers will value skilled brushstrokes. Think of Rembrandt's later portraits, of Monet's waterlilies, of van Gogh's landscapes. Machines cannot offer a comparable experience, too much being carried by human touch. Likewise brushstrokes in hurried pictures, or from an unskilled hand, will be repetitive. They look, and are, much the same; which can prompt complaints they appear bland and mechanical.

Such views underpinned the outlook of the New York painters who spoke of "gesture" as the elementary unit for pictorial communication. Each honed

his or her own abstract gestures. Mark Tobey's brush was informed by Oriental calligraphy, Adolph Gottlieb's strokes were fragments of ancient pictograms, Bradley Walker Tomlin used mark-making as a means of lyrical decoration, and Franz Kline worked up psychologically loaded brushwork. Then there was Harold Rosenberg, the critic who coined the term "Action Painting" for what his friends were doing. Tapping Existentialist ideas, Rosenberg declared their paintings were records of an existential "event", with the canvas acting as an "arena" and individual brushstrokes amounting to units of creative action. "The big moment came when it was decided to paint, just TO PAINT," he wrote in *ARTnews*. "The gesture on the canvas was a gesture of liberation ..."

Rosenberg was a frequent visitor to Willem de Kooning's studio, watching the *Woman* series being painted, and using the artist as a sounding board to test Existentialist ideas of how experience could be fixed in paint, that transitoriness of life. De Kooning went along with Rosenberg up to a point; but he said there was more to his method. Scanning the surfaces of those paintings, it is evident his brush doesn't repeat itself or employ a rhythm. This is why each of his energised brushstrokes has its unique weight. And when you see the real work, this physical object, you also notice this craftsman sometimes mixes painting and drawing in the *Woman* compositions, the adroit black lines that give definition to form being drawn into his pliable wet pigment with a stick of willow charcoal.

The result, in purely technical terms, is paintwork rich and handsome, and with de Kooning you are always aware of talent original and strange. He has a rare gift for releasing energy—not of the impulsive, tightly strung sort but an energy of steady application, formed and sustained by commitment to value. Like Miles Davis's jazz album *Kind of Blue* (1959), to fetch an obvious comparison in 1950s New York, he offers a solitary transport. And like that stirring modernist music, this is food for the soul; although an audience must set stylistic prejudice aside in order to savour the creative depths de Kooning sets in play.

Discussion of the *Woman* series reinforces how "Period eye" must be considered. Values change, so themes will have been construed differently in the past. Take how de Kooning's women share the blonde, blue-eyed complexion favoured in

American popular culture. This has led later writers to draw Hollywood actresses into the frame. Barber invokes Barbara Stanwyck's performance in the 1947 thriller *Double Indemnity*. Some writers have cited Marilyn Monroe as if de Kooning is a precursor for the Pop Art of Warhol, Lichtenstein and Wesselmann. But de Kooning was of an early pre-war generation of cinema audiences for whom "screen blonde" meant the saucy Brooklyn actress who triggered movie censorship—Mae West.

West had embodied sexuality in a manner unmatched by anyone else. De Kooning's biographers, Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan, found that his arrival in America corresponded exactly with West going to prison in 1926. This was when the platinum blonde built her stage reputation by writing, and starring in, a sequence of sexual comedies—*Sex*, *The Drag*, *The Wicked Age*, *The Pleasure Man*, *The Constant Sinner* and *Diamond Lil*. Her first effort, *Sex*, led to her being hauled into court. Found guilty of corrupting the morals of minors, she was given the option of either ten days jail time or paying a fine. West chose the clink. There was a media storm, which she milked for publicity. Her next show, *The Drag*, a spoof on homosexuality, was banned in New York

due to efforts by the Society for the Suppression of Vice. Again the actress used scandal to her benefit; "I believe in censorship," she later quipped, "I've made a fortune out of it." De Kooning and his chums during these years were enthralled by West's provocative sexuality.

Mae West crossed to cinema with the emergence of sound films. Theda Bara, the silent screen's dusky *femme fatale*, had retired when talkies arrived. The void left by this mesmerising icon was felt by Hollywood when a German film, *The Blue Angel*, swept the world. Introducing Marlene Dietrich as the scantily-clad, garter-snapping blonde showgirl "Naughty Lola", *The Blue Angel* revelled in the corrupting allure of Weimar-era Germany. Outraged American audiences crammed into cinemas. Even the songs the sultry Dietrich sang became US hits, beginning with "Blonde Women", an English translation of "Nimm Dich in Acht vor blonden Frau'n".

Needing a scandalous blonde vamp, Paramount went knocking on Mae West's stage door. The thirty-nine-year-old was no longer lithe, and young roles were not viable, so she adapted her "Diamond Lil" persona from the stage—a glamorous, husky voiced, sexually active and utterly guiltless adult

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*If de Kooning embraced a modern outlook, his paintings confirmed T.S. Eliot's rule that truly original talent extracts from tradition even as it shakes and reconfigures that tradition.*

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woman. Allocated a bit part in a jejune romantic comedy, *Night after Night*, West clashed with its director, who didn't want a newcomer in his film. George Raft, the male lead, talked him into letting the actress rewrite her few lines. She proceeded to add three risqué one-liners and an attention-catching double-entendre: when a character exclaims "Goodness, what beautiful diamonds", West replies, "Goodness had nothing to do with it." That self-mocking candour shot her to instant screen stardom.

Mae West dominated movies in the 1930s—de Kooning and his friends, all virile young men, were entranced by the Hollywood siren. Condemned by religious leaders, West's racy dialogue in new scripts was relentlessly cut from 1934.

What was unaffected was how she looked. Mae West never appeared nude, or even semi-clad, yet she exuded sensuality. She had form-fitting gowns designed, using pale shades in luxurious and sensual fabrics, which heightened her pale physicality. She also carried herself before the camera in a distinct manner. For her walk, she moved in the style of stage female impersonators to display her generously proportioned body. Then there was her signature dance, featured in each movie, *The Shimmy*, a graceful writhing which emphasised breasts and hips as she faces the camera. Once seen, it is *never* forgotten.

There is a pronounced echo of *The Shimmy* about that very animated blonde figure in several of de Kooning's *Woman* paintings. He titled a large major canvas *Mae West* when he later developed the blonde woman theme.

Common sense unravels Barber's claims about artists' clothing. Using publicity stills for a Hollywood movie to claim that de Kooning's T-shirt was associated with violent abusive men is far-fetched. No link is given to connect cinema posters of Marlon Brando posing in *A Streetcar Named Desire* with the photograph of Willem de Kooning in his studio. So the poster is not even circumstantial evidence.

Why does de Kooning wear a T-shirt? People dress according to activity. This was why the New York School artists wore suits and ties in photographs taken at gallery openings, but T-shirts in snaps in their studios. T-shirts were labourers' attire, worn when painting. Contrary to Barber's assertions, there are numerous snapshots of de Kooning, Pollock and Kline dressed in suits at social events, and of Rothko and Newman in their studios wearing work clothes.

We should also consider staged photographs. In *The Machine in the Studio*, a study of corporate

culture and post-war New York art, the scholar Caroline Jones traces how photographs of artists were styled. Advertising savvy was in the air, with Madison Avenue devising formulas for photographs which promoted the new art. In the case of Abstract Expressionism, artists were shown alone in their studios. "The men hold or smoke stubby cigarettes, brows furrowed and gaze averted," Jones notes.

Post-war staged photographs famously began in 1949 when Arnold Newman was sent to cover Jackson Pollock for *Life* magazine. Existentialism was in vogue, and the researcher supervising the assignment wanted shots which made the artist appear an insolent modern rebel. So Newman made Pollock put on paint-spattered denim jacket and jeans. Some images were also modelled on a press photo of Albert Camus with a cigarette hanging from the side of his mouth. The results were arresting, that *Life* photospread placing Pollock in the public eye. But those historic shots were staged.

Pollock himself was ragged by other artists over the most contrived images of the 1950s. Mocking comments were made about Existentialism, because the image-conscious Pollock would don black jeans and matching black T-shirt when a photographer was expected. Painters were amused by one shot of Pollock smoking in anguished solitude as he sat on the running board of a Model-A jalopy. The wise-cracking critic Harold Rosenberg dubbed it the "L'il Abner" photo.

This is the context for the photograph of Willem and Elaine de Kooning used by Barber and feminist academics. It was taken by Hans Namuth, a young commercial photographer trying to establish himself. He had already spent days shooting Jackson Pollock working in the studio-barn beside his house at Springs, Long Island, later selling shots to the large format advertising journal *Portfolio*. Those craftily posed images of Pollock dripping and pouring paint on canvases are still reproduced as art book illustrations.

Namuth had induced Pollock's wife Lee to appear in some shots seated on a stool, watching her husband paint. Friends were amused when they saw the obviously staged photographs. Some teased the forthright Lee for posing as a dutiful and passive wife.

On August 23, 1953, three months after de Kooning's *Woman* exhibition, Hans Namuth visited a big house on Jericho Lane at patrician East Hampton. It was leased by the collectors Leo and Eleana Castelli, and the de Koonings were their summer guests. Namuth hoped to take shots of the artist he could sell to a magazine, so the couple posed for him on the back porch which de Kooning was using as a studio. By her own account, Elaine

wanted to be photographed with a *Woman* painting: “I said, ‘Take me in front of the painting to demonstrate, once and for all, that it has nothing to do with me.’” She was irritated by jokes on the art scene about the series portraying her, and she would point out there was no trace of her own Irish complexion in them, of her chestnut hair and warm hazel eyes.

Namuth proposed portraying de Kooning working on an abstraction as his wife sat watching, like the much earlier Pollock shots. The couple had other ideas. Willem struck a pose standing beside a *Woman* canvas, loosely crossing his arms, but Elaine had no intention of acting the submissive wife. So when Namuth got her to sit, she took the expression used for male artists: holding cigarette, furrowed brow, gaze averted. That shot was not published for thirty-one years. Yet it is the photograph Barber reproduces, and uses for her analysis.

Namuth took more photographs in that session. Some show Elaine as she requested, standing as an equal with her husband, his unfinished abstraction positioned between them. This was how the couple wished to be seen. Barber does not mention those other shots.

Willem de Kooning was puzzled at the ugliness of the *Woman* paintings. “I didn’t mean to make them such monsters,” he said. “I always started with the idea of a young person, a beautiful woman. I noticed them change. Somebody would step out ...” He often referred to his visual sources when discussing the works, like the *Venus of Willendorf*, which he knew from books. Wanting to see other ancient images, he visited the Metropolitan Museum to contemplate the Cycladic and Sumerian figurines: “I look at them now and they seem vociferous and ferocious,” he explained in 1960. “I think it had to do with the idea of the idol, the oracle ...”

Another mentioned source was the pervasive images of glamorised women in magazines, posters and advertising hoardings. As well, de Kooning sometimes scrutinised figures in the steady flow of New Yorkers shopping on nearby 14th Street.

Then there was art history. Given he was painting before the publication of Kenneth Clark’s watershed book *The Nude* (1956), de Kooning’s view of the female form was not influenced by the diagnostic categories popularised by that study (*Venus*, *Energy*, *Pathos*, *Ecstasy*, *Northern Gothic*). Instead he relied on his working knowledge of pictures, starting with what he had absorbed as a student in the Netherlands: as Robert Hughes found, “the ghosts of Dutch and Flemish baroque figure paintings kept jolting de Kooning’s elbow”.

And there were contemporary influences. Elaine de Kooning has spoken of Alberto Giacometti’s first New York exhibition in winter 1948. It was held in the respected Pierre Matisse Gallery, and her husband was profoundly moved by the tall skinny sculptures of standing women: they “knocked him out—it was crucial, it looked like the work of a civilisation, not one man”. Then in 1950, when he was painting the *Woman* paintings, de Kooning was moved by the carnal meatiness of Chaim Soutine’s painted figures, which he encountered in a 1950 survey of the artist at the Museum of Modern Art: “I’ve always been crazy about Soutine,” de Kooning admitted. “It’s the lushness of the paint ... a certain fleshiness in his work.” A few months later he also took solace from the ungainly, paint-encrusted *Corps des Dames* compositions of an emerging French artist named Jean Dubuffet, which were also exhibited at Pierre Matisse’s mid-town gallery.

Above all else there was a striking potential source for the frightening women, known to close friends, which de Kooning himself was ever reluctant to name.

Men who violently abuse women do not broadcast their inclinations. Expert psychologists must look to other behavioural clues because display is not part of the abuser’s pathology. Concealment is crucial to them. This is why Special Agent Dr John Douglas, one of the FBI psychologists who developed criminal profiling, warns against amateur analysis to find a violent abuser. These people are adept at avoiding detection, so amateur efforts to identify an abuser via works of art will be fruitless. Abusive men may savour violent pornography, but they do not paint their own pictures of what they do to women, let alone produce such work for public exhibition. Then again, sometimes an abuser’s victims will make pictures which allude to the ordeal they endured.

Willem de Kooning was an abuse survivor. Early life in a waterfront slum left him with more than a short stature and persistent dental problems: his biographers chart a deprived childhood shaped by cruel abuse and harsh beatings.

If his father, Leendert de Kooning, possessed a reserved personality, his mother, Cornelia, was a volatile attention-seeker who, zig-zagging between rancour and affection, bullied her family. After nearly a decade of this, Leendert divorced his wife, citing her ill-treatment and cruelty. But Cornelia was given custody of the children, so nine-year-old Marie and four-year-old Willem still endured their unpredictable mother’s rages. Besides beating the small boy with a clog, there were psychological punishments. Usually Cornelia concluded a

thrashing by locking him in a cupboard. He had a traumatic memory of one occasion when she hid in a closet then sprang out waving a kitchen knife and stood over him.

He escaped this daily ordeal four years after the parental divorce when he went to live with his father. Mind you, after she remarried and had another child, Cornelia inflicted her foul-mouthed, bruising treatment on Koos, her new son. Koos says every day he was “shown the four corners of the room”, a Dutch expression for a hard beating.

In adulthood, Willem de Kooning coped with this childhood abuse by driving it from his mind: “I tried to avoid thinking of this aspect of my life. In this way I protected myself from my own feelings.” However, friends noticed he was often unconsciously on guard for sudden attack; and he would try to lose himself in drink.

De Kooning was fairly successful in containing his troubled past until the summer of 1954, when he arranged for his septuagenarian mother to visit New York. The émigré son wished to show he had made good. Grey-haired Cornelia would have none of that; and needed her adult offspring, tried to provoke and wound. Speaking in Dutch, with a heavy Rotterdam accent, Cornelia maligned his American friends, his wife Elaine, his paintings. She probably assumed no one understood, although there were enough German speakers in the de Koonings’ circle and neighbourhood to catch her nastiness.

If Cornelia was ingratiating charm and smiles to others, her verbal aggression towards Willem was noticed, and how she tried to goad him into quarrels: “She loved a good screaming match,” recalled the painter Joan Ward. As the summer rolled on Willem struggled with his feelings about her, becoming agitated and jumpy. He also slid off the wagon after moderating his drinking for some months. Friends watched de Kooning use alcohol to get through his mother’s visit. He needed a couple of stiff ones before dealing with Cornelia, and then to unwind afterwards.

The feminist interpretation of Willem de Kooning’s *Woman* series avoids any mention of his troubled childhood, or the works’ potential reference to an abusive mother. But might it be that some aspect of those monstrous paintings allude to this background? When he said, “Maybe I was painting

the woman in me,” was this a cryptic allusion to memories that ever haunted him? Thomas Hess, the editor of *ARTnews* and one of de Kooning’s closest friends, always thought so. Hess would point to how those bulky figures have Cornelia’s pale Dutch complexion and her hard black eyes. Elaine was of a similar opinion, saying the eyes were a give-away.

Besides Cornelia’s eyes and ferocious mouth, de Kooning’s biographers Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan point to the hands. Cornelia disliked touching children, only doing so for display when in public. In the *Woman* paintings, hands are either claw-like or missing. Stevens and Swan suggest the viewpoint used in the paintings, how the figure is right against the viewer, “is that of a child looking up at an adult”. This ties in with Elaine de Kooning’s remark that the paintings are emphatically about a relationship, not just a figure. Even the Museum of Modern Art’s authoritative de Kooning catalogue, which is cautious in what it says of his youth, states that when making the *Woman* compositions the artist was thinking of “his own powerful mother, and his dislike of her”.

It is surely significant here, too, that de Kooning produced the *Woman* paintings during a phase of emotional upheaval and troubled self-searching. His marriage was unravelling at the time. It was not an angry, embittered break. There was no rancour. Willem and Elaine felt themselves drifting apart. Theirs had long been an “open marriage”, although several months earlier Elaine had left Willem for a spell, temporarily moving in with a boyfriend.

So those memorable photographs of the de Koonings posing before an unfinished *Woman* painting had been taken during the final months they were together. The couple were attempting a last go at their marriage when summering at the Hamptons. Come autumn, they agreed to live apart. And instead of completing the work-in-progress seen in the studio shots, Willem de Kooning just gave up on it and wiped the canvas clean.

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*Friends watched de Kooning use alcohol to get through his mother’s visit. He needed a couple of stiff ones before dealing with Cornelia, and then to unwind afterwards.*

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# The Continued Decline of the Suburban Church

Seven years ago I wrote an article in *Quadrant* on the slow but steady erosion of the suburban church as a centre of community activity and faith (“The Decline of the Suburban Church”, December 2013). Since then the decline has gathered speed. The local parish with its cluster of youth groups and tennis clubs has all but disappeared. Its influence in the lives of the people who live within its boundaries has been squeezed out by such disparate forces as school or other sport on Sundays, digital self-absorption, wedding ceremonies in gardens and on beaches, funerals at the golf club, the dismissal of Christianity, in the media and education, as an intellectually respectable philosophy of life, and the general indifference to non-material things that the complacency of prosperity seems invariably to generate. Further, the destruction of trust in the clergy as a consequence of abuse scandals—further fostered by the royal commission and still sedulously encouraged by the ABC and other media—though out of all proportion to the number of abusers, has been a body blow to Christianity throughout the Western world.

The suburban church is no longer a magnet attracting local support. Where it survives in recognisable form it has become a minority club for people who are interested in religion or perhaps simply the externals of religious and liturgical practice, on the level of a local philatelic society or kung-fu class.

This definition applies above all to the Anglican and Protestant denominations. It is obviously not true, as multiplication of adherents, sometimes in high places, continues to demonstrate, of the Pentecostalist and revivalist tradition with its specific brand of appeal to a specific type of religious sensibility. Nor is it strictly true of the Roman Catholic Church, where a visible parochial identity rests on the shoulders of the Catholic school system. Yet even here the prospects are far from rosy. Anecdotal examination of the anatomy of the Catholic parish reveals that beyond the

parish priest’s function as titular head of the school (though sometimes at loggerheads with principals and the huge taxpayer-subsidised Catholic educational bureaucracy, and now abolished in Victoria where he is lucky to be regarded as a kind of supernumerary chaplain) there is not much connection between the church as a place of worship and the classroom. Few parents attend Mass regularly; few or no children from the school sing in choirs or act as altar servers, a state of affairs self-evidently exacerbated, if not created, by child abuse and the consequent disinclination of parish priests (as one told me) even to speak to a child without adult supervision for fear of an accusation, vexatious or frivolous.

The decline of the parish will sooner or later lead to the closure of the parish church. This is where there is a huge and still under-recognised risk to what conservationists call the built heritage. Churches are some of the best buildings we have. As I wrote in the earlier article, architecturally and aesthetically church closures are a loss to the whole community. When a church is demolished a local landmark disappears—perhaps one that gave an architecturally undistinguished district its only notable building.

The generation that has come into control of public life since that was written—people now in their thirties and early forties—are what the English writer Damian Thompson has defined as the children of the first generation not to have had, in the main, any connection with the churches. Their parents gave them no Christian formation. They have probably never attended a Sunday service; they don’t go, as their grandparents might have, at Christmas and Easter, they do not get married in church or have their children christened. If they had Christian instruction and chapel services at a “church” school many couldn’t wait to put it behind them. “I had enough of that at school” is a comment I have heard repeatedly from alumni of renowned nominally Anglican schools to explain their refusal

to attend church in adulthood (one such remark was from a member of an “old” landed family that several generations ago had actually built a church near their property).

On the other hand, some people with intellectual pretensions can’t quite let the religion go. This explains the phenomenon of the “cultural Anglican” or “cultural Christian” occasionally encountered among agnostics in universities. It explains a former chancellor of Sydney University’s remark to an interviewer that although she no longer went to church on Christmas Day she “listened to some Christmas music” (Bach or “Jingle Bells”?).

What both these attitudes amount to is a declaration that the Christian Church is irrelevant to the lives of many people. Christianity is no longer even something to be rationally rejected after an examination of its claims. It has gone beyond that to become meaningless—though outright hostility remains pretty much the preserve of the secularising Left. Most people seem to take the view that religion is all right for those who like it as long as its functionaries are behaving themselves. We have not quite reached the stage where it is generally regarded as pernicious.

If the Church is meaningless it must follow that church buildings are meaningless too, at least to anyone not interested in architecture or history. This does not augur well for their survival once their congregations have disappeared. Churches are being pulled down all over Australia with scarcely a squeak of protest except occasionally from local residents for whom a spire is a visual asset lending tone to the neighbourhood. In Victoria alone the Anglican church has disposed of around one suburban church a year since 2013, some in populous suburbs; the Uniting Church perhaps twice as many.

In rural districts the sale of small local churches and the amalgamation of their congregations, which often means the alienation of those who attended the closed church, is a constant reality. Many of these churches are architecturally undistinguished but there are plenty of fine ones. An imposing if incomplete Gothic Revival church in the “historic precinct” of a Victorian goldfields town has been offloaded by the local Catholic diocese just as the town has begun to grow again. If these churches were secular buildings the National Trust would be

up in arms. Yet there is no society or organisation in this country dedicated to the protection of church buildings. In England there are several.

There was never a golden age of church-going in Australia, but up until the 1960s congregations were larger, and in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when most of the nation’s churches were built, vast edifices with seating for hundreds were filled every Sunday, and not just one church per suburb or town, but five at least—Anglican, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist, Congregationalist and perhaps Baptist and Church of Christ as well, together with some other denominations that have ceased to exist. Those churches were often not only of architectural merit but an object of local pride. People subscribed to the building fund in a way they now expect the government to do for swimming complexes and performing arts centres.

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*Occasionally fittings can be reused in the few new churches being built. Most are destined to be dismantled or to end up in antiques and “collectables” shops, whence they will find their way into cafés or arty homes as objects of whimsy.*

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The principal churches that survive from earlier eras are marginally less vulnerable now than they were in the 1950s, when quite a lot were pulled down, despite their architectural and aesthetic merits, because even the larger congregations or more affluent dioceses of those days found them too expensive to maintain (four Anglican churches alone went in now repopulated inner-city Melbourne in a decade before 1970). The churches most at risk now, in every Australian state, are those that were built in the two decades before the Second World

War and the two decades after. Those were times of great suburban expansion, when, as earlier, all denominations wanted a place of worship in each locality and the congregations were there to go to them, since most families still maintained some sort of church connection. Catholics went to Mass in large numbers and enrolled their children at the local Catholic school, and Anglicans and other Protestants, even if they didn’t go to church much or at all, usually sent their children to a Sunday school.

In those same suburbs, such customs and habits have all but vanished and it is there that churches, some no more than fifty years old, are most seriously threatened. The young parents who took their children to them when the churches were new are old now or dead. The new generations that buy their houses (and double them in size, a house that was once home to a family of six being considered

too cramped now for a family of three) don't go to church. Many of these post-war churches are buildings of architectural accomplishment, emblematic of the taste of their time.

Most churches, however modest, have at least several fittings such as pulpits, lecterns, organs and stained-glass windows of aesthetic and historical value. What to do with them when a church closes is invariably a headache. Cases are known where they have been installed in another church nearby and then that has been demolished or secularised too. Handing fittings back to the descendants of whoever donated them is seldom a practical option. Occasionally fittings can be reused in the few new churches being built. It is a matter of regret that most are destined to be dismantled or to end up in antiques and "collectables" shops, whence they will find their way into cafés or arty homes as objects of whimsy.

It is unrealistic to expect that all churches can somehow be preserved once they close for worship. But it would be nice if their merits were recognised before they go. To this end, although it is a tiny drop in a very vast ocean, I have begun a website to list vulnerable churches in and around my own city of Melbourne. Something similar in other states and cities would help in a small way to lift the profile of our national church architecture and to illustrate what we are already losing as a society as church-going declines.

You sometimes hear it argued by "heritage" enthusiasts that it is better for a church to be converted to another use instead of pulled down, but unless the church is adapted for worship by another denomination, usually one of a different tradition and ethnicity, as many inner-city and a growing number of suburban ones have been, this is seldom true. I do not contradict myself. I think as many churches as possible should be kept, but kept sympathetically. Part of the function of a building's design is to express its purpose, and to see a church—and churches are almost always instantly recognisable as such—that turns out on closer inspection to be apartments or a community "arts hub" is an offence against aesthetics and logic. (The same sometimes applies to public buildings such as town halls and post offices.) Besides, such conversions are impossible to achieve without radical internal alteration and usually all-too-visual external changes out of harmony with the original design.

If it can't be used for services or some function that respects its integrity, better that an unrequired church disappear, and that its existence be perpetuated through photographs, than that its shell linger on, a mutilated witness to our society's rejection of Christianity.

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*Christopher Akehurst's website of churches at risk is at <https://heretoday.blog>.*

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## Middle-aged Karma

I was shaky drunk and weepy in a mauve ball-gown that fell awkwardly on angular bones. He sat next to me and asked what was wrong as if he might get a comprehensible answer when everyone else had lost patience. With a square haircut, a 50-year-old in 17-year-old skin, he didn't seem to want anything. I wanted a ratbag with more attitude than I could muster, someone to take me away, someone as cracked as I was. Oh, I crashed and burned with the wrong ones for years and decades later wondered what he was really like. It seemed karmic that in our school reunion photo he was the middle-aged spunk, shining in grey hair.

*Cath Drake*

## Thursday, June 20, 2019

Rain frames the blackened  
pinions of a putrescent bird.

Fly blown,  
atrophied, and  
unaffected.

Whirring crepuscule  
enacting the orison.

Sans wings,  
it could pass for pemmican that has been  
left outside unattended for the past forty-eight hours

## Tuesday, June 25, 2019

Wayward branches sway as a chorus,  
wind song.

A strident crow  
ventures from one  
of the trees.

Abandoning one vista for another.  
The latent fire inside of her, devastating.

Projectile wing tearing a cringeworthy  
line in the sky.  
Talons protruding like tridents  
plucked from former autocrats.

Life and death  
are one in the same.  
Rebirth.

Blood taken.  
Blood measured.  
Blood in the crow's  
swordfish breakfast.

## Friday, July 12, 2019

metallic high beams  
illuminate the pages of a library book  
refracting streetcar shelter graffiti  
firework yellow coruscation

*COMING SOON!*  
*REQUIEM FOR CITY BIRDS*

*Samuel Strathman*

## The Mirror

Tell me, man—  
what is it you see in the mirror?  
Is it those you've never been?  
Both the one you wish you had  
and the one you dread?  
Or is it that you're going to be,  
whether you like it or not,  
inexorably,  
however hard you strive to run free?  
No, it's none of that—  
I think I know  
what the mirror's sending back.  
It's whom you're shedding behind,  
piece after piece, day by day.  
It's all you've been and done  
and is forever gone;  
all you've loved or hated,  
fought for or been indifferent to.  
It's your falls and rises,  
crawls on the ground and soars in the sky;  
your former neglect of the past,  
contempt for the present,  
defiance to the future.  
It's the pristine effrontery of youth;  
the mark you've made beginning to fade.  
Yes, I know it all—  
you linger there every chance you get,  
reabsorbing as many flashbacks  
as the glass allows you to.  
And I just do because I'm you.

*Alessio Zanelli*

JOE DOLCE

## *Unorthodox*: Judaism on Steroids

*A young wife is like a pretty bird—you have to keep her in a cage.*

—Hasidic saying

Once a year, in Brooklyn, New York, on Israeli Independence Day, members of the Satmar Hasidic Jewish sect protest and march in the streets, carrying signs that read, “Destroy Israel”. The Satmars are firmly opposed to Zionism and the State of Israel. They believe that Hitler, the Nazis and the Holocaust were sent by God as a punishment to the Jewish people for the sin of trying to assimilate into foreign cultures.

*Unorthodox* is a Netflix series, directed by Maria Schrader and adapted from the memoir *Unorthodox: The Scandalous Rejection of My Hasidic Roots*, by Deborah Feldman. The plot of the series, set in the present, is fictional, with only the flashbacks of Feldman’s secretive Satmar family life drawn from her memoir, but this seamless blend of fact and fiction has made Feldman a controversial figure in the Jewish world.

The series begins with recently married Esty leaving her husband, Yanky Shapiro, to board a plane to the source of her family’s trauma, Germany. She is looking to re-connect with her mother, Leah, who abandoned her as a child, but primarily wants to escape her ultra-religious family and community. While in Berlin, she meets Robert, a musician, who introduces her to friends at the conservatory where he studies. Esty believes she can gain admittance and prepares to audition.

In New York, Yanky seeks help from the rabbi, Yossele, and a family heavy, Moishe Lefkovitch, is contracted to find Esty. Lefkovitch and Yanky follow her trail to Berlin.

She has applied for a piano scholarship at the conservatory. There are flashbacks throughout of Esty’s life in the Williamsburg community and of her complex relationship with her grandmother, Bubby. At first the newlyweds are unable to con-

summation the marriage and, as one of the tenets of Satmar beliefs is to reproduce, in order “to replace the six million”, family pressure is considerable. Eventually, Esty manages to become pregnant.

In Berlin, Moishe has broken into Leah’s house and discovered papers leading him to the conservatory. Moishe and Yanky confront Esty on the day of her audition, but her mother is also present and offers support. The piano audition goes badly, but Esty sings an impromptu *a capella* song in Yiddish that persuades the judging panel to accept her into the conservatory. Her husband has also been moved by her singing and begs her to come back to Brooklyn, promising to change, but Esty, believing he will never be able to keep this promise, refuses and stays in Berlin.

Feldman has come under criticism for alleged half-truths. An uncle told the *New York Post*: “She was crazy about [her husband] ... she was dying to get married. He did everything and anything for her, but she never appreciated anything no matter what he did ... Nothing was good enough for her.” Her mother, Shoshana Berkovic, disagreed: “There’s no love in Hasidic marriages. You’re matched up with a stranger.”

A Brooklyn neighbour commented, “It paints the whole community in a bad light. We feel insulted. I think she’s a lost soul.” Feldman wrote: “I never chose to be married. He’s a stranger to me. I just happen to have a child with him.” She told Doreen Wachmann of the *Jewish Telegraph*, “I wrote the book because I knew it would help me get custody of my son.”

There are few similarities between Feldman’s book and the series. In the first episode, Esty escapes to Berlin to begin a new life. In the memoir, however, there is no trip to Berlin. Feldman remained in New York, raising her son. There was no conservatory of music, no Moishe trying to track her down and no moving Yiddish song at the end of the story.

The book delves into fascinating detail about

the Williamsburg enclave, which is only touched on in the series. Feldman's grandfather, Zeidy (all family names have been changed), insisted that only Yiddish be spoken, as he considered English *der tumeneh shprach*—an impure language. Feldman didn't move away with her eight-year-old son until she was twenty-four.

Esty's father is an alcoholic, but Feldman's own father was mentally retarded, with an IQ of sixty-six. An accurate diagnosis was never possible, as he refused to co-operate with psychiatrists, but she recalls him as "shabby and dirty, and his behaviour was childlike". Feldman's great-grandfather was a *Kohen*, with a lineage back to Temple priests (like the songwriter Leonard Cohen). The *Kohanim* were known for beautiful voices, but Feldman remarked that her grandfather Zeidy "couldn't carry a tune".

After her mother left, she was raised by her oldest aunt, Chaya, who she said "treated her mother like garbage", but admitted that her aunt taught her "to become iron-fisted ... not let anyone else force me to be unhappy".

The *Unorthodox* series was created largely by women. The director, Maria Schrader, started her career as an actress and had a leading role in the award-winning 1999 German film *Aimée & Jaguar*. The writer, Anna Winger, was a professional photographer before going into television. She created the 2015 German-American series *Deutschland 83*, about a Stasi undercover agent sent to West Berlin. Her co-writer, Alexa Karolinski, also produced *Unorthodox*. Her documentary, *Oma and Bella*, about her grandmother, won the Grimme Prize, at the Berlin Film Festival, and her accompanying cookbook, with the same title, was a best-seller.

The production design and costume design, by Silke Fischer and Justine Seymour respectively, lift the series to what Alfred Hitchcock referred to as "arousal by pure film". Wolfgang Thaler, the cinematographer, is a former beekeeper who is a professor at the Vienna Film Academy.

Diminutive actress Shira Haas (who plays Esty) travelled to Berlin for two months before the film shoot to study Yiddish. She was born in 1995 in Tel Aviv, the granddaughter of an Auschwitz survivor. When she was three years old she developed kidney cancer, resulting in a spinal cord injury requiring two years of radiation treatment, which affected her growth. She made her television debut in 2013 as

twelve-year-old Ruchama Weiss in the Israeli series *Shtisel*. She won Best Actress at the Jerusalem Film Festival in 2014 for *Princess*, and the Israeli Academy Award in 2018 for *Noble Savage*.

The Yiddish proverb, "*Tu on a khazer a shtrayml, vet er vern rov?*" means: "If you put a shtreimel on a pig, would it make him a rabbi?" A *shtreimel* is the round, distinctive furry hat worn by Hasidic men on Shabbat. It is unclear whether the *shtreimel's* origins are Tatar, Turkish or Russian but it is usually worn only after marriage and is custom-made for each owner from the tails of minks. Each hat costs over \$2000 and requires six minks.

The Satmar dynasty was founded in 1905 by Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum in Szatmárnémeti, Hungary, now known as Satu Mare, Romania. Some say Satu Mare, or Satmar in Yiddish, was named after St Mary; others, that it means either Big Village or Big Sea. When the Nazis occupied Hungary in 1944, the sect was almost destroyed, but Teitelbaum escaped to Brooklyn with a small group of followers, settling in Williamsburg.

Because of the Holocaust, one of the driving forces of Satmars has been procreation—replacing those lost—hence pressure on married couples to have children quickly and frequently.

Feldman's grandfather Zeidy said, "God sent Hitler to punish the Jews for enlightening themselves. He came to clean us up, eliminate all the assimilated Jews." Hasidic Satmars adhere to traditional dress,

religious and moral codes. As Zeidy said, "If we go to extreme lengths to make God proud of us, he'll never hurt us again, like he did in the war."

Zaidy served in the Hungarian army, and became a scholar and an accountant—the most respected kind of Hasid. The *Derech erez*—honour codes—dictate proper behaviour. He told his granddaughter, "If you have no roots, you have no legacy. All our worth is defined by the worth of our ancestors," echoing Herbert Spencer's insight in 1876 that at the root of every religion is ancestor worship.

He forbade reading of works by *apikoros*—"liberated Jews"—ones who negate the rabbinic tradition—but his granddaughter kept her stash of secret books, including works by Jane Austen and the banned English version of the Talmud in the Schottenstein translation, hidden in her underwear drawer, a place that was taboo for "modesty squads" to inspect. Feldman said:

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It's common knowledge ... that these squads exist. You hear about them from when you are very little. "You better be good or the *Va'ad HaTznius* will get you." What Modesty Squads are looking for are forbidden music, forbidden books, forbidden magazines, forbidden internet, revealing clothing ...

Zeidy discouraged higher secular education. Feldman said:

Education—and college—is the first step out of Williamsburg, the first step on the path to promiscuity that Zeidy always promised me was an endless loop of missteps that distanced a Jew so far from God as to put the soul into a spiritual coma.

Feldman was told that Hebrew books were only intended to be read by men and that girls are "forbidden to enter the library", echoing a passage of Virginia Woolf's from *A Room of One's Own*:

As she revels in the tranquillity and beauty of her surroundings, the narrator remembers an essay by Charles Lamb about revisiting Oxbridge. She is inspired to view the manuscript in the library, only to be told that "ladies are only admitted to the library if accompanied by a Fellow of the College or furnished with a letter of introduction".

Feldman's grandmother, Bubby, was a Holocaust survivor. All her relations, except a cousin, were murdered in Auschwitz, while she laboured in the factories of Bergen-Belsen. The cousin that survived helped her come to America. Bubby told her granddaughter: "Hitler had chicken feet, you know. That's why he never took off his shoes. So they wouldn't see he was a *sheid*—a ghost."

Feldman said Bubby made her feel safe, especially in the kitchen, where she would sing Chopin and Liszt. She once asked her about Anne Frank, whose diary she had secretly read, and about her grandmother's time in Bergen-Belsen, but she refused to answer her. She said: "In this family we do not hug and kiss. We do not compliment each other. Instead, we watch each other closely, ever ready to point out someone's spiritual or physical failing", which they regard as "compassion for someone's spiritual welfare".

I interviewed Deborah Feldman's mother, Shoshana Rachel Berkovic (née Levy). She teaches biology and chemistry in Brooklyn, with a keen interest in evolution, and is an activist for

the United Federation of Teachers, and for gay rights, including the Human Rights Campaign. Born and raised by a religious, but not Hasidic, Jewish-German family in Manchester, England, she attended Bnos Yisroel School and had an arranged marriage with a New York Satmar, Eugene Berkovic, who had undiagnosed mental problems. When they broke up, she said: "Seven years after I left my ex-husband I finally got the courage to go to a lawyer."

I asked her what she thought about the character of Leah Mandelbaum, representing her, in the series: "It was fine. Not reality, but a positive portrayal."

She and Feldman kept their ex-husbands' surnames, which is common, usually in the interest of simplicity for children in school years. But Berkovic and Feldman are not close:

She refuses to have anything to do with me. Mostly because of brainwashing by my ex's family. She's convinced I abused her as a kid and that's why they took her away from me. She has no interest in her little sister (Shira). We have not told her about her new nephew (my younger daughter had a boy three months ago) since we figured she wouldn't be interested.

I had a phone conversation with Berkovic's youngest daughter, Shira (aged twenty-five), who was marvellously open and forthcoming. She was watching *Unorthodox* when we spoke and felt everything she had seen was 85 per cent fictional. Hasidic, she had been married five years, and has a baby boy just born in January. Her family comes from different Hasidic branches—mostly Satmar and Skulen—and when I asked which one she identified with, she said, "None. I try to stay neutral. I'm a Jew and proud of it. Happy to follow the laws of the Torah. Not into politics. Just busy with my own responsibilities." Before the birth of her son, she was a *shaitel macher*—a wig stylist. She says:

I am today happily married. I did not undergo the same type of "arranged marriage". I experienced dating. Today's Hasidic world is different and has changed so much. I view my heritage as a wonder and beauty.

She believes her older sister wrote *Unorthodox* from a place of trauma, to free herself from the painful memories of that time and family separation. Shira would like to have a relationship with her again and has fond memories of when she was small:

When she took me shopping for my gown, for her wedding, I got to choose myself. She made my hair fancy one day when she took me out with her. After, when she was already married, she took me along to the beach, with her friends and her son. The last time she came to my grandparents was Purim, during her pregnancy, with her husband. I enjoyed her company, but she was already showing signs of disinterest in being religious.

Shira shared recollections of her father: “When he came to visit my grandparents, I use to run over to him and yell, *Tati* [father]!” She said:

I do not like to bad-mouth people as it is called *Lashon hara* [evil tongue] but I do not have a relationship with my father. I did once though [but] because I noticed it was becoming an unhealthy relationship, I had to end it. It was the right thing to do based on the guidance I received.

Her grandfather has passed away and her grandmother has dementia but she said that, growing up, she could always turn to them for help. She visited her father’s family on every Sabbath and holiday, but with the new baby and COVID-19, this is no longer possible.

She remarked, “I want to be there for my children and see them grow. I had a similar upbringing as my sister, but I never left my mother.”

She says her sister’s success with *Unorthodox* did not change her relationship with her father’s family much: “I am my own person. I was brought up with an open mind and to be respectful. It’s as if there was no book to begin with.”

Berkovic says the book and series have had no serious effect on her personally, but may have increased the alienation between her and her ex-husband’s family. Although Feldman alleged in the book that her mother left the Satmar community because she was a lesbian, Berkovic said:

I didn’t make plans to leave because I was gay, in fact I didn’t know about homosexuality until later on, during the process, when I was in grad school and took a diversity class and one of my classmates recommended I see [the film] “Trembling Before G-d” ... I saw two women together and thought “I’m not the only one? I’m not crazy?” I left because I was sick of getting abused by my ex and his family. It was affecting my ability to function. I’m also an atheist so definitely wasn’t happy in that community.

There is some wonderful writing in *Unorthodox*, as in this evocative passage:

I pinch quarters from the *pushka*, the box where Bubby puts the charity money, and buy rosy slabs of watermelon to eat on the porch, dumping juice and black seeds onto the flowerpots. Little seedlings push themselves out between the petunias weeks later and Bubby plucks them curiously, examining them before pronouncing them weeds. Biblical law prohibits cutting down fruit trees—even pruning is questionable.

She says:

In this day and age, rabbis are chauffeured in black Cadillacs and have private ritual baths built into their opulent homes. They are the celebrities of Hasidic culture. Children trade rabbi cards and boast of having rabbinical connections ... a public school, PS 16, was appropriated by the Satmars and turned into a private school for girls. A massive Gothic structure, the gargoyles were pronounced idols by the rabbi and chopped off.

She commented: “No doubt [Hasidic] girls all over Brooklyn are buying [my] book, hiding it under their mattresses, reading it after lights out—and contemplating, perhaps for the first time, their own escape.”

**A**ri Hershkowitz (aged twenty-one), the second of nine children, also left the Satmar community in Williamsburg, and now travels internationally, speaking out against the “skewed values”, which he believes have resulted high levels of poverty and ignorance and dependence on government funding for the average Satmar’s day-to-day existence. He appeared in the Netflix documentary *One of Us*, on former members of the community. He was interviewed by Ori Golan of the *Times of Israel*:

Pointing to where his side-locks used to be, he says, “I walked two blocks and told the barber, ‘Take them off.’ I then posted a photo of my new look on Facebook and wrote, ‘This is me now, deal with it.’ I went back home late at night. In the morning, my mother looked at me and said nothing.”

After he left home, he rang his mother to tell her that he was no longer religious. She said fine, and hung up—and they didn’t speak again for seven years.

I asked Alexander Gutman, popularly known as the Australian stand-up comedian Austen Tayshus, if he had any experience with Satmars. Gutman is the creator and performer of one of Australia's most successful songs, "Australiana". He said, "I am a strong supporter of Israel. I believe that Jews need to be able to defend themselves in Israel and around the world." Although he was raised orthodox, his father's family were not Satmars, but Ger, from Lodz, Poland.

Jews settled in Poland during the Crusades, becoming the most significant Jewish community in the world until the eighteenth century. Ger is the largest single Hasidic dynasty in Israel, with over 13,000 families, with the strictest views regarding sexual relations (for example, it is forbidden to say the words *bride*, *woman* and *girl*). The men, uniquely, lift their side-locks away from the sides of their faces and tuck them under their *yarmulke*.

Gutman said, "To the Hasidim, replenishing the Jewish people, after we were almost destroyed, is a very high priority, and maintaining *yiddishkeit* [Jewishness]." Hershkowitz described the Satmar Hasidim he grew up with as "Judaism on steroids". Gutman added:

I'm sure to the outsider, understanding the cult-like extremism of the Satmar Hasidim would be shocking. But as someone who was brought up in an orthodox Jewish home, I am capable of seeing both sides. You can lead a Jewish life and a secular life without going nuts about either. I am not sure whether *Unorthodox* showed that this is possible.

Some insist that the brilliant Israeli television series *Shtisel* is less showy than *Unorthodox*, with better delineated characters. *Shtisel* concerns itself with a family of orthodox Jews living in Geula, Jerusalem, a moderate Hasidic community, where many of the members practise a secular lifestyle. *Shtisel* develops its storylines and character arcs over twenty-four episodes, with a third season of another twelve instalments in the works.

*Unorthodox* is only four episodes long, but takes a courageous peek into the extremely secretive New York Satmar branch of the ultra-ultra-orthodox. Any member of the Brooklyn sect who even visits Israel is expelled from the community. Satmars consider that Jews and Zionists are practically two different species: "The only real Jews are Hasids ... even a drop of assimilation instantly disqualifies them from being a real Jew."

This blood-purity taboo is disturbingly suggestive of Nazi *rassenschande*, or racial-pollution crimes. Ironically, the Nazis took their legal

model from the race initiatives already existing in American law. Forty-five Nazi lawyers went to New York before the war, under the sponsorship of the Association of National Socialist German Jurists, and on their return, codified the Reich's race-based legal structure, based on the US model. The leader of the group was Ludwig Fischer, future governor of the Warsaw Ghetto. Ira Katznelson wrote in the *Guardian*:

Although the United States entered the 1930s as the globe's most established racialised order, the pathways from Nuremberg and Jim Crow unfolded very differently, one culminating in mass genocide, the other, after much struggle, in civil-rights achievements.

Despite the closed society of the Satmars, historians have suggested that without their strict practices and disciplines, the Yiddish language would have vanished long ago. Feldman says: "Yiddish is nothing but a hodgepodge of German, Polish, Russian, Hebrew and other random dialects."

Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum, the founder of the Satmar dynasty, had no sons and his three daughters died before him. On his death in 1979 he was succeeded by his nephew, Moshe Teitelbaum, who died in 2006. At that point, the line of succession was contested by his two sons, effectively splitting the group into factions, one led by his oldest, Aaron, and the other by his second son, Zalman. Followers of Aaron are known as *Aroinys* and the followers of Zalman are called *Zollies*.

There have been violent encounters between the two groups, and the brothers have been in prolonged legal disputes over who should lead the dynasty, which now numbers 75,000. There is a financial motivation as well, as the bulk of Satmar assets are concentrated in Williamsburg. Zalman is Grand Rabbi there, while Aaron holds sway in Kiryas Joel, New York.

Recently, Rebbetzin Soshe, Aaron Teitelbaum's wife, contracted COVID-19 and was placed on a respirator in a critical condition. Another of the Teitelbaum brothers, Lipa, also came down with the virus. Rabbi Zalman, of Williamsburg, phoned his estranged brother Aaron in sympathy and, after two decades of ignoring each other, the two brothers spoke on the phone. The call lasted only seventy-five seconds but members say it was unheard of and could be the start of reconciliation.

*Joe Dolce wishes to thank Shoshana Berkovic for proof-reading this article, twice, for inaccuracies. She is active on social media: Twitter: @Sci-nerd.*

## Wolf

Two-note glissando,  
rising and falling pitch,  
heard by every woman  
passing a building site.  
Whoot whoo,  
wheet whoo.  
Debate as to origins—  
the Navy, turn to,  
sounded with boatswain's pipe,  
or Albanian sheep-dog call,  
shepherds warning of predators.  
Eve-teasing, in Asia—  
with its own emoji.  
Soon to be extinct,  
France considering a 90 Euro fine,  
#MeToo might be the final nail.

First popularized by animator  
Tex Avery's 1943 Red Hot Riding Hood:  
the wolf hoots Red,  
tongue lolling, eyes popping out of head.  
Avery's work favoured  
by US military during WWII:  
increased libido, from sexy cartoons,  
created frustration, aggression,  
better soldiers.

Sheila Harrod, 74, world champion whistler,  
would like to hear a few more:  
you don't have it much now—  
people fear harassment.  
It's a shame—I always thought it cheeky.  
If someone did it to me,  
I'd do it back twice as loud—  
that'd always get a laugh.

## Escher's Hands

Escher drew a hand,  
drawing another hand,  
drawing itself,  
but was unable  
to show the third hand, his own,  
drawing the drawing,  
as this poem has just done.

Similarly, you, the reader  
and I, the writer,  
can hold hands together,  
as we move through this poem.  
*Escher* being the very first word, of course,  
but now we find ourselves suddenly  
in the middle, indicated  
by the parentheses  
around

*(middle)*

then, finishing decisively,  
let's continue  
down to the last line,  
which will end with the word period,  
followed by a period.

That really wasn't the end of the poem.  
*Are you still holding my hand?*  
You can let go now

**Joe Dolce**

MICHAEL CONNOR

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# The Great Escape

On the afternoon of Tuesday, June 6, 1989, I left the Left; I'm not sure of the exact time. Though it happened in the city square between St Andrew's Cathedral and the Sydney Town Hall, it actually began in the mid-1970s, when my life was going on normally. More or less by accident I was working in London when I bought a package holiday, breakfast included, to see one week of revolution in Lisbon, then Whitlam was sacked and I helped organise a demonstration in the Strand (the poster I had printed was too large for shop windows and none of us knew how to have it pasted up around the city), then, after a four-week course, I went to live and work teaching English in Algeria, and that's where it all began to go wrong.

From a distance Algeria in the mid-1970s still had revolutionary Left chic from memories of the war with France (1954 to 1962) and the more current association with Black Panthers in exile, Timothy Leary, hijacked planes and Third Worldism. Joan Baez (I prefer Om Kalsoum) popped up for a concert in Algiers—I think her father was living there, but I might be wrong—and later the airport would host the just-freed American hostages from Tehran. When I explored the Casbah I searched for landmarks familiar from Gillo Pontecorvo's film *The Battle of Algiers*, which I had recently seen again in Oran.

Borrowing from Isherwood, I was a small, unimportant, observing camera, afraid then and now that if I looked too closely I would see Australia's future in a land from where the established settler society had been driven from their homeland, their legitimacy to exist destroyed by France's Left intellectuals who worked to divide the communities of a French Department and to transform co-citizens into fascists and colonial exploiters. The war threw up intellectuals who rightly condemned the tortures carried out by the French Army but ignored the far worse crimes carried out by their side in the Algerian conflict, and they never condemned the dictatorial and terrorist state, still in power today, which they helped to create.

I shopped, I travelled by bus (if you understood the complexities of fighting your way into and out of these conveyances several times a day it might not seem such a simple boast), I sat in local cafes, I knew few people beyond my students, I went to the cinema—a lot. My baker disappeared, a friend was arrested, tortured and imprisoned for a civil crime. The difficulties and bastardries of a socialist regime were everyday experiences in a country where the dictatorship and secret police probably kept me safe.

It was always interesting. One winter night, as I was cloaked in a *djellaba* in a village on the edge of the desert, the quiet conversations about me stopped, there was just a glow of individual cigarettes in the dark, and we all turned to watch a rail-squealing train pass. In outline against the starry sky a line of flat cars passed by, many surmounted by plump black shapes and the unmistakable barrels of tanks as a consignment of weapons headed south towards the Polisario in Western Sahara for the killing of Moroccans, whose closed border with Algeria was at this point only a few kilometres to the west. At other times in this same place you might hear the explosion of a near or distant landmine—probably set off by an animal or smuggler, though one never knew—placed either by the French Army or more recently in the continuing conflict between the two Maghreb neighbours.

I lived safely in a country where some years earlier I would have been tortured and killed by Muslim terrorists or some years later tortured and killed by either the army and police of the terrorist state they had established or the Muslim extremists who wanted to usurp them. Chronology was kind to me.

I lived the malaise of socialism which afflicted the country. I tried talking of this in the context of the simple difficulties of everyday life to a friendly young couple I met when on holiday in London. I think the English pair ran some sort of small Left magazine. It was my first experience of being treated like a liar. Then and later I thought that as a witness to the daily life of socialism what I had to

say was interesting, but when I talked of these experiences there was either no interest or a passionately strong rejection of what I was saying. Thankfully there are still some people like Michael Galak with the patience to explain. The young couple did not believe me, and, pleasantly middle-class themselves, accused me of mixing with the complaining bourgeoisie. The intolerant Left never relents. Over thirty years later in our free country an academic journal of Aboriginal history calls me a “massacre denier” because I step outside their conformity and question a massacre historian.

Along the way, at an early stage of my long journey from the Left, I was corrupted by a book. In the library of the French Cultural Centre in Oran I found a copy of *Ombres chinoises (Chinese Shadows)* by Simon Leys. I read it, with an overworked dictionary close at hand, and though I surely missed the finer points of Leys’s analysis it was the reality and terror of the Maoist regime he described which cracked my own trusting stupidity. I lived well inside the Left community; even then and in that distant land I was a subscriber to the *New York Review of Books* and the *New Yorker*. My views on socialism and fashionable China—during the Cultural Revolution I was known to be eloquent on the subject of barefoot doctors—had come from blue-covered Penguins.

“Have you turned conservative?” It was the early 1980s, I was back in Australia, and the speaker was a friend I had made during the campaign for Whitlam in London. It was the last time I saw her.

At first you think that you can say what you want to say because those around you know you are a good-hearted person making valuable criticisms from the inside. Those on the Left are very aware that something is wrong with us even before we are. You imagine you still belong and people you know will listen to you, as they did before, when we all agreed. Surely people you have known for years are aware you are neither a liar nor a fascist but the same person you always were. It doesn’t work like that. And when you realise there is a problem, wisdom suggests you either shut up or change the subject. It doesn’t always work, as they instinctively know what you are up to—they are a sensitive lot, ever ready to scent dissent.

David Horowitz has well summed up what I was going through when he wrote, of one stage of his

own journey into the light, “I had abandoned most tenets of the leftist faith, although not yet departed its community.” Leftism isn’t a religion, it is closer to alcoholism. And having given up one addiction I wasn’t in the mood for another. Coming slowly out of the Left in the 1980s I was still part of the community when I began reading *Quadrant*. For anyone on the Left that is a major event, for the thought of even touching the magazine causes them physical pain, and of course they would never actually read it. I also bought the *Spectator* when it began appearing in newsagents. In books I think I wandered into military history and my usual scattered readings—little fiction. I was not aware, and could not find, a cultural life outside the Left to help me move forward or to evaluate the political life I had lived and I could not move forward until I had accepted that I had broken away from the Left community—which was the only one I knew.

When the break finally came it happened in Sydney on a Tuesday in 1989 because I had come into the city to be part of the crowd protesting against the murder of students in Tiananmen Square. Veteran Labor politician Tom Uren spoke loudly and railed against the “fascist” Chinese government—I think the response he proposed to the murders his political allies had carried out involved trade sanctions. I wasn’t the only one to notice his word choice and the following day’s report on the rally in the *Sydney Morning Herald* had the word *fascist* in the headline. For generations this old man had supported thugs in China, and elsewhere in the unfree world, and now when they acted in public instead of in secret he could not simply name the criminals as communist. For me, each time Uren said “fascist”, each time he exhibited his cowardice and dishonesty, was like receiving a hammer blow on the chains that still held me to the Left. I recognised too my guilt and cowardice, and that of my generation, for never examining our support of the Vietnamese communists during the war and our failure to criticise them when they imposed a bloody peace on the land they had conquered.

Uren was a liar too far, and that afternoon I was released, but as disoriented as any leftist would be if you turned off the ABC. I was a free man who had been dreaming of escape across a frontier without even knowing the name of the land on the other side.

There is no map to the nameless territory outside

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*For generations this old man had supported thugs in the unfree world, and now when they acted in public instead of in secret he could not simply name the criminals as communist.*

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the Left. There is no smiling welcome as you are handed a copy of the words of the Horst Wessel Song, as leftists try to make their slaves believe. The French historian François Furet, who also made the great escape, was describing romantic writers of the nineteenth century who were politically active but remained “generally beyond political classification”. I think this was where I had been headed for most of the 1980s and where, thanks to the unlikely help of Tom Uren, I had finally arrived.

In the compulsory Left–Right political division I have never been sure if the word *conservative* covers me, but it does annoy the Left. *Conservative* seems to exclude the rather enjoyable company of the bohemian anarchists one encounters enjoying their liberty to mock the Left. Unfortunately, only a couple of years later when the Soviet Union collapsed in December 1991, I realised beyond doubt that whatever was the name of the land I had entered, I was living with the losing mob who did not value their own freedoms.

When those communist dictatorships in Europe and the Soviet Union ended I expected the exhilaration I felt would be transformed all around me into a powerful desire to see a reappraisal of what had gone before and that those who had described and analysed communism and sometimes directly suffered for telling the truth would be recognised and acclaimed. Instead I heard the old corrupt voices warning of gloating and triumphalism on the part of those who history had shown to be correct.

I naively expected to see academic conferences and seminars devoted to exploring the errors made and the truths ignored. Nothing like this happened. François Furet’s book *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century*, first published in English in 1999, from which I quoted above, was the sort of intelligent debate I expected to immediately occur. Nothing did, and I don’t even think *Quadrant* examined its archives and drew attention to the brave voices it had published who had been abused by the Left and proven right by history.

Philosopher Michel Onfray has observed how the always guilt-free Left have awarded themselves “total intellectual impunity”—being *Good* people they can never do *Bad*. That they did not deal with their responsibility in supporting one of the most murderous political philosophies in history denies them any essential credibility. That the free did not make them do so is a mistake that allowed them

to regroup and prosper. I was disappointed also in my expectation that the opening of Soviet archives would have sent Australian scholars rushing to Moscow to examine the extent of the secret penetration of our society by Soviet intelligence agencies. Wishful thinking. Even as I am writing today there is an essay atop the homepage of a government over-funded literary review that begins with a quote from Lenin the mass murderer and ends with a quote by Marxist philosopher Karl Kautsky, with sandwiched in between a silly-beyond-satire argument that Australia needs a Corbyn–Sanders socialist party. The Left have never been held responsible for their history, and instead of teaching students the bloody story of communism in the last century we allow them to rewrite our own history to cover their crimes and promote their lethal fantasies. When it was published, *The Black Book of Communism* made it onto few Australian bookshelves.

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At some point in the next few years I came across another corrupting book which served as a map to the new territory I was exploring. Bill Muehlenberg’s *Modern Conservative Thought: An Annotated Bibliography* was published by the IPA in 1990. It listed writers and their books with a short and useful note on each entry. Going forward into the 1990s it introduced

me to thinkers I had never heard of and books I never saw in our bookshops. Muehlenberg’s little blue book included details of the Laissez Faire Book Club in the US and throughout the decade my life was enriched by their parcels until Amazon and AbeBooks appeared with their even richer offerings. In the last decade of the century I discovered Robert Conquest, Milovan Djilas, Paul Hollander, Victor Kravchenko, Richard Pipes, Jean-François Revel, Thomas Sowell, Gertrude Himmelfarb and Paul Johnson, with a special place of honour for Solzhenitsyn. *The Liberal Conspiracy* by the former *Quadrant* editor Peter Coleman looked interesting but I never saw a copy until Peter gave me one years later. Mark Steyn and P.J. O’Rourke, Melanie Phillips and Douglas Murray lay in the future.

From this new territory of thought I also discovered the secret history of our times in the voices of those who had made the journey away from the Left before me. Brave men who recognised evil when they were confronted with it, and changed their minds: Malcolm Muggeridge and Eugene Lyons in Soviet Russia, Whittaker Chambers and David Horowitz in the US. There were also those, like

some present-day *Quadrant* contributors, who discovered, when they looked more carefully, that the foundations of the Leftist orthodoxy they believed in were faulty and dishonest and then did something to shake them. The editor of this magazine referred, in his 1996 book *The Killing of History*, to “Henry Reynolds’s breakthrough in discovering and deploying previously untouched evidence”; then, of course, Keith Windschuttle checked that “evidence” and changed his mind, and has written books, derided or ignored today, which will lead to the future regeneration of Australian history studies and writing: just add some free minds.

Incidentally, there would be no present-day “history wars” if senior students in history departments were set the task of taking a complete chapter from any well known or influential history text and checking the footnotes. Gertrude Himmelfarb, who writes beautifully and wisely, wrote an excellent and inspiring essay, “Where Have All the Footnotes Gone?” which acknowledged that the footnote “would seem to be the smallest detail in a work of history. Yet it carries a large burden of responsibility, testifying to the validity of the work, to the integrity (and the humility) of the historian, and to the dignity of the discipline.”

Quite recently Jay Nordlinger in *National Review* wrote, “The Left in South Korea bitterly resents defectors [from North Korea], especially ones who squawk about human rights and what they suf-

fered back home.” Defectors and second-thoughters do squawk a lot, they are troublesome people. They never keep quiet about what they have quit. Traditional political Left and Right teams scrape along loathing and adjusting to each other; cultural defectors can’t shut up. Australian conservative governments bribe their enemies in the hope of a quiet life—these cultural vandals on the Right fund the ABC, they fund the (dark) arts, they support 2 per cent DNA Aborigines, they give prizes to histories and historians who seek to turn our history into a slasher movie (only the academic dreariness of their writing has saved us from this fate—so far), they fund the continuing corruption of an educational system designed to create gendered tots and unemployable university graduates, they fund family eradication, they order the feminisation of the armed forces and buy French submarines (French!!)—and they expect us to vote for them and fund their superannuation.

In the beginning my exit from the Left and search for freedom came from my rather ordinary experiences in Algeria and the personal experience that socialism is dictatorship *and* the Left loves its dictators. This simple and obvious observation took me years to accept. I exited the Left only because I banged into reality. If that is the only way our loved and very, very silly country is going to wake from the spell of deep cultural unreality and foolishness cast on it by the Left then we have entered a tragic century.

## The Taxi Driver Curriculum

In the Sikh’s taxi  
we discuss the Golden Temple  
of Amritsar.

Within the Polish Catholic’s cab  
it’s Pope St John Paul II,  
the history of Europe,  
and Prince Sobieski stopping the Ottomans at Vienna.

The Greek driver was Orthodox  
and he gave me advice  
on correct *koine* pronunciation  
for St Paul’s Letters, and on St Paul himself.

Between Tullamarine and the city block  
we traversed the Library of Early Fathers  
including St John Damascene.

*Ivan Head*

TED RULE

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# The Trials of a Junior Diplomat in 1970s Beijing

Can there be anything more exciting for a newly minted young diplomat than an invitation to a dinner at Beijing's Great Hall of the People? We knew from news reports that such an invitation was sheer glamour: Nixon, Kissinger, Zhou Enlai, ground zero of world international high politics. And the food! Everybody from Nixon down had told us it was pure ambrosia, the chosen diet of the gods.

It was January 1975. The Cultural Revolution was drawing to an end but you still saw columns of people marching in the streets with red armbands announcing them as Red Guards. At regular intervals along the empty boulevards between the shabby buildings with dusty broken windows were great red billboards announcing ten thousand years to the "Great, Glorious and Correct" Chinese Communist Party. It was winter, and bleaker than the bleakest winter you could imagine. The bareness of the branches of the street trees was matched only by the bareness of the shelves of the occasional shops. Icy Siberian winds blew dust through every crack and cranny. And an invitation, headed by the red and gold emblem of the People's Republic and marked as being from Zhou Enlai himself, had just landed on my desk. And being new and naive, I didn't take the time to ask myself why such an honoured and exciting invitation had made its way down to my lowly position.

Clutching our invitation, my wife and I made our way through Tiananmen Square to the Great Hall. The armed People's Liberation Army soldier at the top of the steps waved us through. Inside, the corps was a hum of chat in English, French and occasionally Russian. We fell into conversation with a German couple who, it appeared, were every bit as new as we were. Then a murmur ran through the crowd. Zhou Enlai would not be presiding—we later learned that he was under treatment for the cancer which a year later would cause his death. Instead the occasion would be presided over by the man of the moment, Deng Xiaoping,

the target of the current leftist campaign against "the Right Deviationist Wind to Reverse Correct Verdicts". The corps immediately formed itself into a reception line with nobody an inch out of plumb. Deng appeared at the end of it.

This was the first time we had seen Deng. We'd heard that he was a man of no great physical stature, but just how short he actually was came as something of a shock. He would have trouble surpassing five feet in height. But what a whirlwind!

Deng went along the reception line shaking each hand in turn. He was preceded by a Foreign Ministry official who briskly announced in Chinese the country of each attendee: "Bajisidan [Pakistan], Jiannada [Canada], Ruishi [Switzerland]", the official strode down the line without missing a beat. Our new German friend whispered that he wouldn't get his country because he'd only just arrived. But, the next instant, "Xi De [West Germany]" and then "Aodaliya [Australia]". I nearly fell over with surprise as I bent low to shake the great man's hand. I had been in the country less than a week, had never submitted any photo to any Chinese official and had only been given the nod to attend about three hours before. And yet in that time somebody in the Foreign Ministry had acquired a photo of me and committed my face to memory. Some of the mystery surrounding this was clarified several years later in less paranoid times when, while looking for a toilet at the old Hong Kong border station, I chanced upon the open door revealing the camera behind the one-way mirror as you entered the station.

We filed into the dining hall and soon I began to understand why the honour of a Great Hall invitation had trickled down to me. First, my table companions. This was done by the strictest of protocol; not a surprise, you might think, given the sensitivities of diplomacy. But protocol was applied by the Chinese Foreign Ministry in the most rigid way possible and no diversion from it was permitted, even to go and sit with a close

friend for a few minutes chat. These people were to be my table companions at the Great Hall for the next two years. There was a Greek who heroically tried to keep conversation going. This could be difficult. Two of our dining companions were from an unknown African country. We say unknown because they did not appear to speak any known language—we tried, trust me, we tried. We could only speculate as to which feats of valour had been recorded in the tribal cicatrices on their faces.

The Foreign Ministry officials deputed to oversee our behaviour were the conversationalist Greek's main *bêtes noires*. Their main function seemed to be to put a stop to any conversation which was getting interesting. Or was it just to sit there with blank faces? The range of approved conversations was very limited. "What country are you from?" (as if they didn't know in deep detail). The invariable response to "Australia" was "Ao mao", Australian wool. This was true the first time, the second time, and if there had been thirty occasions, the thirtieth time. They were also permitted to ask about the weather in our country. The answer that January was the hottest month was, on every occasion, greeted with a sucking of teeth and a gesture of the hands where the top became the bottom and vice versa, "Nan banqiu", southern hemisphere. Their other function was to pocket the apples that came at the end of the dinner. Fruit was as rare as diamonds. One of the most pleasant surprises of the later liberalisations in China was when these automata morphed into witty and intelligent human beings.

I won't dwell on the famous food of the Great Hall. Hadn't Kissinger, Nixon and their entourage raved about the world's best food? The problem is that they had cut their Chinese food teeth in the restaurants of San Francisco or New York's Lower East Side where the restaurateurs had generally avoided wasting the good stuff on the palates of foreign devils. We had been schooled in the restaurants of Taipei, which was then and is still one of the great foodie capitals of the world, and the Great Hall didn't rate. This was compounded by the fact that there was only one menu. If you found sea slugs slimy or didn't like West Lake Water Shield Soup, you had a real problem because that was what you were going to get whenever you went to the Great Hall. Sometimes we pined for those wonderful days of the 1930s when fear of poisoning at dinner meant

that it was quite acceptable to bring your own cook and meal to a banquet.

Now you could reasonably put all this down to the trivia of the job, things a professional just had to live with. However, as the real business of the evening commenced, we started to realise why nobody else had volunteered for this gig. The guest of honour was one Henri Lopes who, as his Wikipedia entry tells us, was, between 1973 and 1975, Prime Minister of the People's Republic of the Congo (Marxist Leninist). What his Wikipedia entry doesn't tell us was that Henri Lopes was possibly one of the most tedious speakers in the history of the world, who spoke entirely in platitudes. So we endured half an hour of the "Red Flag flying over Africa" and heaved sighs of relief as he put his papers down on the rostrum and smiled at his comatose audience.

But gradually the horrifying realisation dawned upon us that this had been only the French version of his speech. There was an English version to follow. And a Chinese version.

We shuddered and looked round for a fortifying Five Stars beer, the only beer of the Great Hall, but no! Chinese etiquette didn't mind at all if you made a complete pig of yourself by drinking yourself into a stupor. But it did worry about people who drank without first toasting somebody else on your table and that somebody just wasn't available, so we sank back into our chairs and tried to think of something which might block out Lopes's droning.

A positive thing about diplomatic life in Beijing in the 1970s was that everything started and finished early. It was a very heavy night when you got home later than 9 p.m., so by 9.30 we were safely tucked in our beds dreaming of the arrival of an omnipotent guardian angel who might have the key to turn down the tropical heating in our apartment. Yes, it was twenty below outside, yet we were lying under a single sheet sweating. Every attempt to bring a degree of sanity into the apartment heating policy was greeted with the response from the Diplomatic Service Bureau, "The Africans need the heat."

An interlude. Yes, it was a busy week. A delegation of shearers from the Australian Workers Union had flown into town, led by Mick Young. Once again everybody else seemed too busy and the new boy carried the can. I followed them around.

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*Most people in Beijing were stunted and unhealthy looking. The exceptions were athletes who, following rules established in Moscow for beating the capitalists at sport, got most of the protein produced in the country.*

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We went to the Temple of the Sun. The Temple of the Sun is a perfect circle with perfect acoustics. We were told that if you stood at one side of the circle, somebody directly opposite you could hear you if you whispered. One of the delegates stood on one side of the circle. Another stood directly opposite him and farted. The first delegate confirmed that he could hear him perfectly. We went to our next appointment.

Our next appointment was with the Chinese Association for Friendship with Foreign Peoples. We were greeted warmly by the deputy director and his interpreter. One of the anomalies of the time was that everybody in China had woken up to the fact that if they were to strike out an independent path in the world, they would have to know not Russian but English. But there was a “contradiction”. English was the language of the American imperialists. You clearly couldn’t sound like an American imperialist. So all English speakers in the 1970s spoke not like the American imperialists, but like the British imperialists. The translator for the head of the Chinese Association for Friendship with Foreign Peoples’ could have voiced Queen Victoria in a film about her life. So in tones perfectly mimicking those of her late Imperial Majesty he translated:

“So I imagine you are the representatives of the working classes.”

“My f\*\*\*in’ oath we are.”

The translator translated that badly back into Chinese. We moved on.

After the horrors of Henri Lopes’s address on African socialism, I came to the realisation that not only was I a fool and a stooge, but that I had committed myself to yet another diplomatic occasion two nights later and this time there was no escape.

You might remember that the trigger for China rejoining the world was “ping-pong diplomacy”. In 1971 the Chinese and American ping-pong teams participated in the World Table Tennis Championships. A member of the American team missed his bus to the stadium and was invited to use the Chinese team’s bus. Shortly after, an American ping-pong team visited China, which led to a visit by Kissinger and then Nixon’s historic visit. Suddenly sports diplomacy became the craze.

Australia was no exception. In 1975 an Australian women’s volleyball team was in town and we were invited. I arrived at the stadium and was astounded by all the tall people surrounding me. Traditionally northern Chinese were physically tall people but the ravages of the famines of the 1950s and early 1960s meant that most people in Beijing were stunted and unhealthy looking. The exceptions were athletes

who, following rules established in Moscow for beating the capitalists at sport, got most of the protein produced in the country.

We moved into the stadium and took our seats. Suddenly I realised that it had been a mistake for others to let this invitation trickle down to me because one away from me was Jiang Qing, Chairman Mao’s wife. We exchanged pleasantries and expressed the wish that, in conformance with the current slogan, friendship would be first and competition second.

Now I’m no specialist in women’s volleyball, but I’d have to say that in 1975 it wasn’t one of the leading sports of Australia, and this was how the game played out. The Chinese women, six Amazons, were making short work of the Australian women.

But then the slogan would blast in Chinese from the loudspeakers: “Youyi di yi, bisai di er!” Friendship first, competition second. Immediately the Chinese women, who had previously been wiping the floor with the poor Australians, started to play the way I imagine I would play volleyball if I was even slightly interested. The Wagga Wagga seconds would have beaten them. But don’t think they were prepared to play that way if it would mean they were actually going to be beaten. After brief interludes of looking like rank amateurs, the Chinese got back into their stride. In the end it was a solid victory for them.

Meanwhile I had got into an unusually pleasant conversation with the man between me and Jiang Qing. It turned out that he was not only the Minister for Sport, Zhuang Zedong, but that he had been China’s number one ping-pong player, and in this capacity, had been the person who invited the American team to visit China in those first heady days of ping-pong diplomacy. In his Wikipedia entry he is described as a “favourite” of Jiang Qing. Beijing gossip went further. According to Beijing scandalmongers, despite being twenty years her junior, he was her lover. Yes, I was sitting next to the man with the most dangerous job in China, Chairman Mao’s wife’s lover.

Many years later we made an investment in Shanghai and hired a manager. This was a very competent man, a Manchu who turned out to have been China’s number two ping-pong player in the days when Zhuang Zedong was China’s number one, and they had been firm friends.

“Was it true about Zhuang Zedong and Jiang Qing?”

“Yes.”

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*Ted Rule lives on the Central Coast of New South Wales. He contributed “The Soviet Union and the Chinese Civil War” to the June issue.*

DAVID BARNETT

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# My Pioneering Role in Sino-Australian Relations

I am a pioneer of Sino-Australian relations. I make that declaration to get your attention, to establish my credentials, and because that's what was said to me by a member of the Chinese department of foreign affairs during my last visit to China about fourteen years ago.

In 1971 I was assigned by the Australian Associated Press to cover the visit of an ALP delegation to China headed by Gough Whitlam. The Cultural Revolution was in full swing. The Chinese chairman, Mao Tse-Tung, was close to death and Gough got Chou En-Lai instead.

The visit was in Chinese terms a friendship visit, arranged with a division of the Chinese administration, the People's Congress, because Australia did not have formal relations with China. Australia "recognised" the Kuo Mintang government of Taiwan as the government of all China. It was manifest nonsense, and it was changing. Canada had recognised the Peking government for what it was, the Chinese government. We were a friendship group.

Some decades later, my wife Prue Goward attended the annual meeting of the Chinese national federation as a commissioner of the Human Rights Commission. She was entitled to take a spouse, which was a mistake. I sat in a corner, the only, and not welcome, male present, and stayed quiet until it got too much and I spoke up, mentioning Chou. I had their attention. You met him, said the federation president. Not only had I met him, but he had shaken my hand, which I held up. The president took the honoured hand between her own two hands, and held it reverently. The next morning at breakfast the observer from foreign affairs greeted me with, "You are pioneer of Sino-Australian relations." They keep an eye on you. I had looked back after we went through passport control and saw the officer lifting a telephone.

I had transcribed the conversation between Gough and Chou, word for word, and it ran in full in the Australian papers and around the world and on the Reuter wires. It did both men a lot of good.

Now it was time to go, and by then I was sick of being told the May 20 cadre schools, really no more than concentration camps, were a bracing experience, and about the iron rice bowl, which meant everybody had enough rice to eat. I was avoiding yet another briefing from the head of the People's Congress but he cornered me on the plane to Canton, taking the adjoining seat.

Britain, Australia and two or three other countries whose names I have forgotten were mistaken if they thought they were going to get the same terms for recognition as Canada, he said.

China is a land united by its script but divided by its many languages. Equipped with my portable typewriter and a scrap of paper on which was written for the benefit of a taxi-driver, "Take me to the central post office", I hit the ground running and in a few minutes had my last story out of China on the wires.

They might have known how to use me, but I could play the same game. After Gough had become prime minister, the Chinese were giving us a hard time in negotiations for a recognition agreement. I wrote a piece saying that Gough had been placed in an embarrassing position having stuck his neck out in Peking. In hardly any time at all the difficulties vanished.

A yacht had inadvertently sailed into Vietnamese waters and its crew, two men and a girl, had been seized and were confined. I thought it was wrong, as I still do, and wrote that. They were released shortly afterwards. I was enjoying the power of the printed word.

My last moment was when I wrote that Prime Minister Whitlam had arrived in Washington to what I described, accurately, as a low-key welcome. That was played back and appeared in the *Washington Post*. The next day, when Gough was received at the White House, he got the lot: red carpet, ruffles and flourishes and an honour guard.

One by one the reporters who had accompanied

Gough were invited to dinner at the Canberra embassy. My ostensible host was the bureau chief of the Chinese wire service, but the real host was the political counsellor. It was he who asked the questions. I forecast accurately the result of the next election and asked my own question: "Why do you care, Liberal or Labor?" Both were friends of China, I said.

The political counsellor became suddenly emphatic. I was wrong. The Liberals were friends of China and the Labor Party's friend was Russia. When I applied to work for Malcolm Fraser the relationship with China was about the only question he asked me.

I looked for the right words, and came up with: "If Ginger Meggs lives next door to Tiger Kelly, he doesn't lean over the fence and shout abuse." Fraser was amused by the illustration, and clearly was of the same view. He hired me on the spot, and I became his first staff member.

Once elected, Fraser visited China and got the full treatment. After the parade in Peking we went to Urumchi in the far west, drove up into the Tien Shan and were received in a huge yurt, a marquee made from felt, and were offered cheese. I may have been the only member of the party who ate it. It wasn't easy. The banquet was at the airport, where we were served a roasted sheep, which nodded its head as it was borne past the guests.

Then we visited Xian, where the buried warriors were still waiting to be found but where the Qin emperor Huang Ti had begun the unification of modern China.

When I returned to China some years later for the *Bulletin* I encountered officials we had met on Fraser's first visit. It was not, of course, coincidence. I learned that the agriculturists who Fraser had offered to help modernise Chinese sheep husbandry in Urumchi had arrived and their contribution had been welcome. Over the years we were at other times a useful friend.

The one I remember is Australia helping China become a member of the World Trade Organisation, but our help in the region is enormous, ranging from Interpol to aviation. Foreign affairs is not a press secretary's responsibility, but we seemed always to know what we were doing. We do not send civilian

airliners into conflict zones, and we spent a lot of money looking for a Malaysian airliner whose pilot flew it into unknown seas until it crashed.

Chou was succeeded by Deng Xiao-ping and a succession of presidents who got on with lifting Chinese living standards, and in the process turning China into the manufacturing centre of the world.

Xi Jinping is different. He should more properly be seen as Mao Tse-tung's successor, and perhaps in his mind, the successor of Huang-Di who 1000 years ago became the first emperor of Chu Goku, the Central Kingdom, as the Chinese style their country. *China* is a Western corruption of Huang-di's dynastic name, *Qin*.

It's an entirely new ballgame, and we do not seem to understand it. The recent foreign minister Julie Bishop, now mercifully departed, was the Ginger Meggs of her day. She thought we were still fighting the Cold War and every time she opened her mouth was sharply critical of either Russia and China. It was populism. It was not the way to address a proud people, a proud country and in Xi Jinping a proud leader.

We have crowned this by calling for an inquiry into China's role into the outbreak of the coronavirus epidemic. I do not know what Malcolm Fraser would have thought of this

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*We were received in a huge yurt, a marquee made from felt, and were offered cheese. I may have been the only member of the party who ate it. It wasn't easy.*

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further insult.

We both signed the condolence book at the Chinese embassy when Chou died. It makes a lot of sense to respond to the Belt and Road international assertiveness by gearing up our own activity in the Pacific. Heading them off at the post is the way our diplomats put it.

In the meantime, I can only hope, in Australia's interest, that the Sino-Australian relations, to which I would seem to have made my small contribution, still exist and that the Chinese do not proceed with their canvassed suggestions that they cease buying Australian barley (worth \$1.7 billion a year) and beef (worth \$2.4 billion), while we wait for Xi Jinping to be succeeded by another Chou or Deng.

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*David Barnett has been a beef producer for fifty years. He has a high regard for our two biggest purchasers of Australian beef, China and Japan, after two years as Reuter correspondent in Tokyo, while being aware that these two countries are not all that friendly with each other.*

# Learning to Be a Painter

At the time when I first tried to be a full-time professional painter—and make some kind of viable living from doing so—the whole matter seemed simpler and less unnecessarily complex than it does today. One major reason for this was that a substantial private market still existed for visual art, much as it did then, say, for high-class studio pottery. How precisely to survive as a painter seemed challenging but not impossible.

In Cornwall, where I lived, a coterie of semi-established and even entrenched artists existed locally, ranging from Barbara Hepworth, Patrick Heron and Peter Lanyon to Bryan Wynter, Roger Hilton, Terry Frost and Karl Weschke. Some had fought with distinction in the Second World War—in Weschke's case on the opposing side. Bernard Leach and other outstanding potters thronged the area, which also attracted a poet of the calibre of W.S. Graham.

Property and rentals were extraordinarily cheap and a raft of purpose-built studios existed from a previous generation of artists, notably from the so-called Newlyn School, which began life roughly eighty years earlier. The whole area in the extreme west of Cornwall briefly offered an almost unimaginable idyll, even attracting such a relentlessly urban artist in thought and deed as Francis Bacon.

I listened and observed without coming then to any ground-breaking conclusions, but early in 1962 I moved to the other side of the Penrith Peninsula where I managed to share the rent of a magnificent purpose-built studio on a pig farm. This had belonged once to Stanhope Forbes, arguably the finest painter of the Newlyn School. The studio lay at the top of a long, steep hill, at the bottom of which I then lived. Through great good fortune I managed to buy a powerful German motor scooter cheaply from an unfortunate local fisherman who had fallen off it on his first day of ownership and hurt himself. His wife compelled him to sell it.

By strapping a drawing-board behind me and fixing a folding music-stand to the handlebars I cre-

ated, in effect, a form of potential mobile art-school “donkey”. Generally in the late afternoons I took off and explored every remote lane I knew, however obscure, in search of little-known viewpoints. I was filled then with many of the same sensations I had experienced as a teenager when cycling to and from the studio of my original mentor. At times these moments seemed like the transmission of day-dreams. On one occasion I climbed a tree, sketch-pad in hand, and drew from above a small flock of sheep which had circled its base, as the foundation for what I hoped would be a very unusual painting.

By then I had a gallery to represent me in London and luckily sold quite a large batch of such work to an American collector. But the real satisfaction I gained from such art was always inherent. There is nothing more important than this for an artist. No one can take it away.

So much has gone horribly wrong with visual art since those distant-seeming days in almost every country that what I describe here probably sounds like some kind of dream. I went to see all the major exhibitions I could in London but did not truly identify with anything I then saw—least of all from my contemporaries. Looking at a small landscape from this era which I rediscovered the other day I instantly identified a feeling, rather than a way of painting, which still seems just as valid more than half a century on. At the very beginning of 1963, which saw terrible snow in Britain for months on end, I set off with a friend in a tough little car for a protracted spell in Spain. Our route once we had escaped from the icy grip of British roads by simply not giving up took in Paris, Arcachon, Burgos, Madrid, Granada and the Andalusian hill village of Mijas where many years later I played tennis at a ranch Lew Hoed had established. In those days a rented villa plus gardener cost about \$20 a month.

By 1963 the Spanish Civil War was twenty-five years distant and although Franco still ruled, Spain was psychologically so utterly unlike anywhere I then knew that I felt permanently like a stranger.

For years the arguments surrounding art had come to seem to me rhetorical and often pointless but Spain had a reality about it which was somehow beyond mere words. I have since visited probably thirty different countries but at that point I knew only Britain, Germany and France at all well. Spain seemed poverty-stricken by comparison with France and the condition even of main roads often verged on the terrifying. A visit to Ronda, scene of wonderful pre-war paintings by David Bomberg, was along a road so nightmarish that I well believed a friend who told me his sister had had to be heavily sedated and driven out from there in the hours of darkness.

In an anthology of mine published by Connor Court in 2016, *Culture at Crisis Point*, I explained a permanent change in outlook which happened to me in Madrid early in 1963.

Until then I had tended to accept the widespread view that contemporary artistic practice was somehow simply our present-day “equivalent” of that of the major historic eras which preceded it. Thus, however different it might be in appearance, this notion maintained that the art of Mark Rothko, say, or Jackson Pollock—two artists who were venerated especially back in 1963—was simply our contemporary “equivalent” of the art of masters of the past such as Velazquez and Goya. But a major stumbling block was that it resolutely refused to look or to seem “equivalent”. How, for example, could an artist with Rothko’s working methods even begin to comment on the horrors of human conflict in the way Goya had done so forcefully in his unforgettable series of etchings *The Disasters of War*?

It was extraordinarily cold in Madrid at the time of my visit and the welcoming warmth of the galleries of the Prado may well have been one of the factors which drew me back there late one afternoon as the light began to fade in the streets outside. The galleries themselves were deserted yet I felt a sense of strange presence as though the dead artists whose works graced the walls had summoned me back to some kind of posthumous parliament.

“If you listen attentively enough, you will learn something of great value,” a deep echoing voice seemed to say almost audibly. What I grasped in the next moment or moments remains hard to describe, but I understood that the 300 years which had passed since the death of Velazquez represented a mere blink of the cosmic eye. As a consequence I no longer felt myself to be part of the art history

of any particular age but of all ages, and realised simultaneously what a great privilege that was.

Most of us are far too obsessed with our own time and are inclined to dignify it with an excessive and undeserved importance. Modernism in art had attempted to make a clean break with the past and to impose a new and radical set of values on the rest of us. Yet the great oversight it made was essentially this: truly great art of all kinds and all eras is essentially timeless. What it tells us about the human condition never becomes any less relevant or true.

In ceasing to regard myself any longer as a modernist or as someone landlocked by the twentieth century or by any of its obsessions I felt utterly liberated, free to make art in future in any way I chose. All artists who live outside totalitarian regimes are similarly free. Unfortunate circumstances such as the latter aside, any compulsion to work in this manner or that is for all artists of all kinds and at all times completely illusory. The demon of supposed artistic progress and evolution is, in fact, merely a particularly cunning disguise for the even less reputable demon of artistic fashion.

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Off and on I painted for about twenty years in Cornwall but by the middle 1970s postmodernism had largely taken over from the dying excesses of late modernism. Political content had often replaced the visual but it still required a mental somersault or two to grasp the basic precepts of “conceptual” art. One of the aims was to deprive commercial dealers of tangible objects with

which to trade, thus hastening the desired death of capitalism. Desired by whom?

The proliferation of utter nonsense in art eventually irritated me so much that from the end of 1974 onwards I began making notes after work each day in the studio I had built into the roof of a house in Penzance, looking out over the wonders of Mount’s Bay. A book had come out some years earlier in the USSR called *The Humanism of Art* by the country’s leading critic, Vladislav Zimenko. I read it in translation. Artists in the USSR generally received a much better training in technical terms than was available then in Western art schools, where subjects such as anatomy had been abandoned. My written musings eventually appeared in 1977 under the title of *The Art of Self Deception*. At much the same time Tom Wolfe’s *The Painted Word* and Helene Parmelin’s *Art Anti-Art: Anartism Explored* were published, indicating that the sorry pass reached by our visual arts had become at last

noticed internationally. In 1980 I left Cornwall and taught painting and art history for four years at Epsom School of Art. Not long afterwards I was appointed by the *Spectator* in London as their art critic—a role I filled for the next eleven years, covering exhibitions in a host of countries as well as at home.

I wrote some 500 articles in all, a selection of which appear in *Culture at Crisis Point*. Throughout my time at the *Spectator* I opposed everything which so-called postmodernism threw at the traditions of art as part of “The Long March Through the Institutions”, the political inspiration for which was the thinking of Antonio Gramsci and the exiled communist philosophers of the Frankfurt School who relocated to the US before the Second World War. Postmodernism has always simply been neo-Marxism in disguise, the basic aim of which is the destruction of Western democracy *in toto* and above all every manifestation of Christianity. To say that royalty and nobility were historically far more discerning patrons than the wielders of the public purse is an understatement but no more of one than to say the education I underwent at an Anglican boarding school seventy years ago was superior to that of almost anything available anywhere today. In the midst of the gross current global disrespect for the elderly we might recall what Titian achieved in his final twenty years before he died aged nearly ninety.

I believe that the greatest harm wrought to art in my lifetime has been the steady intrusion of public funding into the realm of all of the arts in Western countries. This is not just because I have never been a beneficiary nor because I cannot see a worthy role for such funding in the case of multiple performers—say a youth orchestra—but because the shape taken by all organisations of public servants almost inevitably becomes distorted. Not only did Lorenzo di Medici have infinitely better taste than arts councils everywhere but his subsequent influence on art was preferable to the highest degree. From the Turner Prize downwards in Britain—if any lower rung truly exists—public funding has often been ruinous for art and is almost always a denial of the wishes of original donors.

In its latter years, modernism—or “Late Modernism” as it was then called—became a caricature of itself not least because the mysterious phenomenon called postmodernism was already very much alive and kicking. Every university in Western countries was shortly in thrall to its endlessly negative theories on human behaviour. Political correctness, feminism, multiculturalism, racism, gender issues, post-colonialism, environmentalism, deconstructionism ... the list was endless because more and more movements arose to tell our world the

next thing we were all doing absolutely wrong. Only those in our universities and schools, in fact, could do anything right.

When I was a child we were principally at war with the Axis powers and fascism but by the time my own military service came up I was part of an inadequate army holding Russian communism at bay in northern Germany. I read widely on the subject of communism but no explanatory book even began to compare with *The Black Book of Communism*, which appeared in English in 1999 thanks to Harvard University Press. Within this massive tome you can learn the detailed histories of all the horrors under communism around the world. Want to know where all the gulags were in Bulgaria? You owe it to yourself and to our fragile world to find out.

My years with the *Spectator* brought some amazing experiences, at least one of which looked back to the Second World War. An amiable Swiss artist, Peter Schermuly, was seeking a catalogue essay from an English critic for a huge exhibition later that year in Wiesbaden. Nobody in Germany wanted to know about a figurative painter based in Munich.

The night before his show I was invited to a black-tie dinner at the dining hall of the artist’s principal patron in the grounds of a villa beside the Rhine. We were twelve for a dinner of unimaginable luxury. All the women had titles and I was probably the only man present without a duelling scar. Name the most famous wine you can think of. We probably sampled it.

At the top of the gable end of one wall hung a curtain to which all eyes turned at the conclusion of dinner. Slowly the curtains parted and a superb bronze bust of our host appeared, fixed to a mechanical arm. But who on earth was it by?

I listened in awe. The sculptor, who was still alive, had been responsible for the massive neo-classical figures at the Berlin Olympics—no less a figure than Arno Breker, Hitler’s favourite sculptor, who to his credit saved several French artists from the attentions of the Gestapo during the war. I think he was ninety when he made this superb bronze.

On a lecture tour of Australia I was offered a job at the country’s principal national paper, the *Australian*. The best part of my early experience in Australia was teaching at a series of bush camps in obscure places for societies of painters—generally in Far North Queensland.

Much of the rest has shown up my folly. On top of everything we are now all locked down. Will my wife, who is half Dutch, and I ever escape? Where we should really be is Laren in Holland. Any helpful suggestions, anyone?

# The Oil Painter

SEAN WAYMAN

Christopher stood on the hotel terrace, looking over the oasis town of Bam. It was the middle of December, the last month of the twentieth century. On the previous evening, he'd come in from Kerman: a four-hour bus ride across the Iranian desert. After finding a room, he'd gone out looking for somewhere to eat. Though he'd got his first look at Bam, it had probably been deceptive. While the buildings on the main roads were made of solid brick, they were to prove exceptional. Head down any alleyway and you'd find the mudbrick old town. As revealed from the terrace, it resembled the inside of a termite mound—all compact earth and winding passageways. Apart from the architecture, the main thing to see was date palms; they lent the town its distinctive look of spikiness.

Christopher liked the place. He liked the *idea* of the place. Though he was still some distance from the Pakistan border, this was the easternmost stop on the Iranian backpackers' trail, and he enjoyed its rugged, end-of-the-road allure. Yet as he stood there, his hands at rest on the parapet, he was also pierced by loneliness. The last time he'd spoken with another traveller was at the ruins of Persepolis—that must have been two weeks ago now. Much as he'd enjoyed the sights since then—the sumptuous gardens and turquoise mosques—they hadn't obviated the need for companionship. As the days had gone by, he'd been struck by a growing sense of isolation. It was somehow amplified by the view out over the old town.

Hoping to shake his sadness with a fresh burst of activity, he decided to head out to the Arg-e-Bam. This vast citadel, the largest adobe building on Earth, was famed as a highlight of Iran and of Bam's whole treasury of wonder. He checked his watch. It was almost ten. He'd have a drink, grab his daypack and head out to the Arg.

On arriving at the citadel, he paid the taxi driver and walked up towards its monumental portal. Before him were massive earthen walls, topped with intricate crenellations. Imagining the imminent launching of arrows, he tensed involuntarily. But, of course, there was no one around. The entire place was now a ruin, with only the ticket office holding the promise of human habitation.

After buying his ticket, he was alone for the best part of an hour. Though the broken archways and teetering walls held a peculiar interest, he was also struck by the forlornness of the place, its lack of human personality. It was only at the far end of the Arg, where the battlements offered their finest silhouette, that he was restored to the society of others. In a clearing among the ruins were a huddle of white-robed men. They were watching the figure at the centre of the tableau—an oil painter seated at her easel.

As Christopher drew closer, he decided that she wasn't Iranian. Though she was covered up, it wasn't in the manner of local women. Instead of the black *chador*, the artist

wore layers of brightly coloured fabrics. It was hard to distinguish scarf from headwrap or shawl from dress. He thought of an interior by Matisse—of draped fabrics, partly drawn curtains and hangings of exotic cloth. Though some of the colours were sombre, what stood out were the yellows and reds. They evoked a sunroom in an atelier.

Though his first impression was of colour, mundane details followed. Judging from her face, she was much older than he was—possibly in early middle age. Yet it was the artist's mystique which prevailed. She seemed like a visitant from a far realm, and he was excited by her presence.

"Hello," Christopher shyly offered.

"Welcome," she said. "You're the first foreigner I've met in days. What brings you to Bam?"

"I'm a backpacker. I'd heard that the citadel was stunning."

"It certainly is! It's the first place in Iran that's inspired me to paint." Her accent was hard to place. Though she spoke with crisp, English vowels, he also detected a Middle Eastern huskiness.

"It's remarkable," he said. "And it seems you've attracted an audience."

"Ugh, I wish they'd leave me alone. Sadly, we've struggled to communicate. I usually get by just fine in Iran. I'm an Arabic speaker, and there's a fair bit of overlap with Farsi. But these men are Baluchi. They've barely understood a word I've said."

"But you've got a bit of work done," noted Christopher, gesturing at the canvas. In the background were the battlements of the Arg, painted in a butterscotch hue. Up front, she'd pencilled in a group of figures, all dressed in traditional garb.

"It's a start. Anyway, I'm Marta. Marta Massoud. I won't shake your hand, because mine's wet with paint."

"That's okay. I'm Chris."

"You're Australian. I can tell from your accent. I spent a few months in the outback, living with the Pitjantjatjara."

For most people, the name would have seemed an impenetrable thicket of affricates, but she passed through it with four graceful steps. Christopher smiled, pleased to have made such a cultivated acquaintance.

"Were you painting there too?"

"Yes indeed. I did some of my best work there. My family weren't too pleased though. I was off the radar for weeks! I should've brought my portfolio and shown you my Australian series."

"Yes, what a shame." He had a sudden vision of a butterscotch desert where figures crouched to inscrutable rites.

"How long are staying here?" asked Marta, her eyes narrowed to a squint. It seemed she was excluding the desert light, the better to perceive some emergent possibility.

"I'm leaving tomorrow. I'm heading to Yazd."

"That *could* still work. You see, I'm having dinner with some local girls—English students from Bam University. Why don't you come along?"

"Oh," he said, his feelings a melee of excitement and apprehension. He was attracted by the prospect of company—especially a group of young women—but was conscious of the dangers. Wasn't this precisely the sort of thing the authorities frowned upon?

"I can tell what you're thinking," said Marta. "You're afraid of offending *local sensitivities*."

"I guess so," Christopher guiltily acknowledged.

"Well, they *do* believe a lot of antiquated nonsense in this country, but that's why we've got to challenge them. Anyway, I know this region. If they're uncomfortable, they'll go and get a chaperone."

“But are you sure it’s safe?”

“What do you think might happen?” she asked, regarding Christopher with wry amusement.

“Well, what if someone reported us?”

“To whom?”

“The religious police.” He’d seen them on the streets of Tehran, confronting the immodestly dressed. The scene had clutched him like the cold hand of dread, bringing his excursion to a sudden halt.

“Surely not.” She frowned. “We won’t be meeting publicly. If anyone should be worried, it’s me. Look at all these bright clothes!”

She drew herself erect, making a show of her drapery.

“Will they have enough food?” he asked. Though he might have appeared hesitant and uninterested, he was trying to clear away obstacles. He was strongly enticed by the prospect of this dinner.

“In this part of the world, they cultivate the art of hospitality—especially during Ramadan. Believe me, there’ll be more than enough.” She conveyed this point with an air of authority. It was somehow enhanced by her husky consonants.

With Christopher’s agreement to come along, the discussion turned to practicalities. The student house was close to his hotel, so Marta proposed that she meet him there. He nodded and said he’d be waiting at four thirty.

“Would you like a bottle of water?” asked Christopher.

Marta had turned up early, so he’d asked her up to the terrace to watch the sunset. There was a fridge up there which was stocked with bottled drinks. It worked on an honesty system.

“No thanks. I had one at my guesthouse.”

“I wasn’t sure if you were fasting.” Ramadan had started a few days before, and Christopher was still adapting to its interminable austerities.

“Me? No! I mean, I *am* an Arab, but I’m not a Muslim. My family’s Egyptian Coptic, but I gave up religion a long time ago. It’s been nothing but a curse to this region.”

“I guessed you were breaking the fast with the students.”

“That’s understandable. I mean, look at my surname. But, honestly, thank goodness I was born into a Coptic family. If I were Muslim, could I ever have become a painter or a ‘lady traveller?’”

Presuming that these were rhetorical questions, Christopher merely looked at his shoes. But when the silence grew uncomfortably long, he asked what it was like to travel in Iran as a woman.

“As much as possible, I try to socialise with local women. With the men in this region, things will often go pear-shaped. Some of them are absolutely *beastly*.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well—the ogling, the comments, the roaming hands. I mean, I’m *very* well-travelled. I do know how to handle myself. But you can never relax your guard.”

“It must be difficult,” he said, feeling increasingly out of his depth.

“Let me tell you a story,” she said, with a clear sense of relish. “On the bus trip here from Yazd, I didn’t use the bathroom before getting on the bus. Well, what a mistake! I was busting within the first half-hour, so I ended up asking the driver to stop. He really didn’t want to, but he finally gave in. Anyway, I got off the bus and squatted behind a bush. Some of the men started leaning out the window to watch. A few were even *bissing* at me. I suppose they thought I was ‘unladylike’. That’s the mentality here.”

Finding an attentive audience, she offered further stories in a similar vein. Disturbed

by the strangeness of the scenes she described, and also by her unnerving intensity, Christopher tried changing the topic. He asked where else she'd travelled, presuming she'd be keen to share her experiences. The ploy worked: she talked on and on. She saved her highest praise for the adobe towns of Yemen, lauding them as "little mudbrick Manhattans". It seemed she was something of a specialist in mud. She'd also spent time in the Dogon country, enraptured by their earthen granaries.

"Where did you stay when you were painting in Mali?"

"With families, of course! Where did you think?"

"I wasn't sure. I thought there might have been a rest-house or something."

"Perhaps there was—but isn't it always better to stay with a family?"

"But how do you arrange something like that? Do you just go up and ask people?"

"This is where people get travel wrong," sniffed Marta. "They think they're travellers because they're staying in hotels, but really that's just entry level. Real travel is never about comfort. It's about adventure. Spontaneity."

"I just can't imagine how you'd start the conversation."

"It develops naturally. You ask if you can paint a house or an out-building. Conversations follow. Connections are made. It isn't something cold and calculating."

"How about payment? I wouldn't know how much to offer."

Marta laughed at the slowness of her pupil. "The *real* traveller needn't pay for anything! They've made a connection with the community. They're a guest there."

"But don't you feel, well, bad? I mean, Yemen, Mali, these are poor countries."

"Absolutely not! How often will a family in Yemen have a chance to meet a well-known painter? How can you put a price on that?"

"But how about food? Aren't these people who can barely feed themselves?"

"In traditional communities, food's always communal. If you've cooked a stew for five people, how much difference will a sixth mouth make?"

While Christopher remained unconvinced, he'd begun to sense that the painter's views were untouchable—a mighty citadel ringed with crenellations. As he sat there struggling for something to say, he watched the final stages of the sunset. Its fiery reds and yellows were easily the rival of Marta's brilliant drapery.

"Let's head off," urged the painter. "It's almost time we were there. And I think we should stop at a cake shop first. Iranians have a sweet tooth."

As luck would have it, there was one just across the road. Once inside, Christopher loitered ineffectually. Marta took charge. She ordered a selection of biscuits and cakes, told the shopkeeper that Christopher would be paying and then went outside to wait for him. Though it would have seemed awkward in lesser hands, Marta managed the whole thing seamlessly. She even implied that she had done him a favour: hers was the more onerous task of choosing; paying was the lesser contribution.

The student house looked well-lit and inviting. Marta knocked assertively on the door and a young woman promptly answered. Though too well-mannered to say anything, she was clearly astonished by Christopher's presence. After Marta had introduced them (the woman's name was Niloufar), the student hurried off to announce a male visitor. By the time they'd gathered in the kitchen, the students were all properly covered up. Though her exact source remained obscure, an elderly chaperone had also been located.

As the dinner preparations were finalised, the guests were invited to sit on the floor. To Marta, a veteran of smoky villages, this arrangement seemed completely unexceptional. To Christopher it came as a surprise, but he took it in the spirit of adventure. He was more worried about the chaperone, but she soon proved her harmlessness by entering a light doze.

They were joined by half a dozen students. Soraya, the most proficient speaker of English, was the first to attempt small talk, but after these preliminary niceties, Marta took control of the conversation, speaking mostly in English but switching to Farsi when comprehension faltered. Though speaking mostly of her own adventures, she did explain Christopher's presence: he was a backpacker who was touring Iran. When the word "backpacker" proved unfamiliar, Marta offered *almasafir*—a traveller. She added that she herself was a "world traveller", one who'd visited seventy countries. She circled the globe, she said, in search of artistic inspiration. She then unpacked her portfolio and handed it to Christopher.

At first, he was attracted by the bright colours, but soon detected a certain sameishness: a group of figures (typically in folk costume) was placed before an exotic backdrop. Though uncertain of his appraisal, Christopher suspected that these were mediocre works.

"What a wonderful palette," he offered, before passing the portfolio to Soraya.

As the paintings worked their way around the circle, Niloufar and Safie served dinner. It was a pilaf—a great mound of steamed rice, with colourful additions of peas, onions and chunks of tuna. From the limited ingredients, it was obvious that these weren't wealthy students; tinned fish counted as an extravagance.

The students gestured to begin. Needing no further encouragement, Marta took up the serving spoon and heaped rice onto her plate. She then picked out all the visible chunks of tuna and deposited them on her own plate. Christopher was so shocked by this impertinence that he couldn't conceal his reaction. Some of the students, observing his expression, struggled to suppress their knowing smiles. Though Marta had seemed unaware at first, she eventually turned to Christopher and explained.

"I'm the guest of honour," she said. "It's *expected* that I take the bulk of the fish." Sensing that he was unconvinced, she casually added, "Just dig around a little. There's probably more inside."

He restricted himself to a single chunk of fish. Even so, that was more than some of the students got. But they took it cheerfully enough; some of them even seemed amused.

When they had all finished the rice dish, the cakes and biscuits were served. Though Marta monopolised the *baghlava*, she gave the students free rein with the biscuits. Perhaps they were not to her taste.

After dinner, there was another attempt at conversation, this one more concerted. Christopher asked the women about their courses: they were all studying English literature. This was also his major, so he took a lively interest in their studies. In discussing student life they began to lose their awkwardness, and the room was soon filled with ripples of laughter. Feeling that he'd started to win their trust, Christopher began to relax as well. He was soon leaning forward with a sense of warm expectancy.

Changing her position on the floor and throwing her head back, Marta changed the subject. "But tell me," she demanded of the students, "what faith do you practise?"

The answer was so obvious that the students found it puzzling. Yet compelled by the dictates of courtesy, Niloufar offered a belated response.

"And how about you?" asked Soraya.

"I'm an atheist," the painter boldly declared.

Christopher lowered his head and wondered how he might extricate himself. He'd made it a policy to sidestep questions of faith in Iran. Why antagonise the locals? Yet clearly Marta thought otherwise.

"He's an atheist too," she declared, glaring at Christopher.

Looking for confirmation or denial, the students eyed him.

"Well, you are, aren't you?" pressed Marta.

Christopher nodded silently, his capitulation complete. In skimming the students' faces, he detected signs of discomfiture. His only consolation was in seeing that the chaperone was still asleep.

Marta then pressed her advantage by delivering a speech on the prevalence of atheism in the West. As if this were not controversial enough, she then asserted an equivalence between religion and superstition. Christopher wanted to return to the former conversation, to trade these arid controversies for another round of smiles and laughter.

Marta reserved her final remarks for him. "This is what we should be talking about. They don't need small talk about their English course."

Ignoring this unwelcome injunction, Christopher returned to more genial matters, asking the students about their home towns. While most of the women were natives of Bam, Niloufar was from Jiroft, a city an hour to the south. She spoke of it fondly as an oasis of watermelons, dates and figs. They asked him about Australia, and he happily described its people, its fauna and its geography. The mood of the gathering lightened again, and Christopher dared to hope that the evening had been saved. Yet it wasn't to be. To Marta, their cheerful conversation seemed too great an outrage to bear. She swept in to scuttle their pleasantries.

"Why don't you tell them about how you treat indigenous people in Australia?" she demanded. Her words hovered like a quivering finger of accusation. Christopher sat there, dumbstruck. Retrieving her portfolio, Marta turned to a painting of Pitjantjatjara women.

"These are the rightful owners of the land. The White Australians stole it from them," she explained, eyeing Christopher as if he had personally overseen the operation. Perceiving his look of abject humiliation, the painter swelled with satisfaction. She spoke at length of the generosity of her indigenous hosts and the tragic history of dispossession.

It was hard to tell what the Iranians made of her remarks, because none of them spoke. Having lost the delightful company of the students, Christopher could see that any further attempt at friendly conversation would surely be thwarted by the painter. He found himself longing to get away.

In this, at least, he was soon to get his wish. Grown tired of her unresponsive audience, Marta brought the evening to a sudden close.

"Well, it's getting late," she said. "I should be heading back."

This surprised the students and Christopher, as the whole gathering had barely lasted an hour, but no one resisted her. By then, her dominance was complete.

In no time, they were saying their farewells. Christopher found some solace in the resilient smiles of the students, yet a sense of mortification remained. He felt he had been portrayed as both a godless reprobate and a merciless oppressor of indigenous peoples.

Bristling with resentment, he yearned to make an escape from Marta. But when they reached the main street, she frustrated him in this aim too.

"Actually, I have something to ask you," she said, her expression assuming a feminine coyness. "It'd be dangerous for me to take a cab alone. I mentioned how the local men can be."

When he hesitated, she assured him that it wasn't far: he could walk home from there in fifteen minutes. Caught in an unwanted obligation, he unsmilingly agreed.

After a few minutes Marta hailed a cab, climbing inside without asking the price. Though Christopher found this strange, especially from a seasoned traveller, he decided

not to query her. He had arrived at an attitude of taciturn endurance.

The night sky and date palms loomed above them as they made their way to the guesthouse. Out on the edge of town, it turned out to be a great deal further than Marta had suggested. Christopher sat in the back seat, staring into the darkness.

When they finally arrived at Marta's place, she got out without paying. The driver angrily called her back, demanding a fare of twenty thousand *riel*—about two American dollars.

"I'm a guest in this country," the painter declared. "I thought you dropped me home as a *courtesy*."

When the driver continued to press his claim, she waved him off with a look of impatience and strode towards the guesthouse gate. Christopher peered out the window, expecting a farewell wave or some modest signal of appreciation. All he received was the sight of the gate closing behind her.

The driver turned on him, angrily demanding compensation. Ensnared in the painter's final trap, Christopher, astonished, began to bargain for his release.

On Boxing Day 2003, Bam was struck by a monstrous earthquake. Its vast termite mound collapsed, killing twenty-seven thousand people. On hearing the news, Christopher thought immediately of the students, pondering their likely fate. More than half the town's people had been killed in the earthquake, so some of the students had likely been among them. Yet without their contact details, he could never know for sure. But his response to the news—a sense of pervasive desolation—hinted at what he thought had happened.

Still, for several days, he followed the story, combing through the rubble of the news reports like a rescuer waiting for a miracle. For quite a while, he had barely thought of Marta. Their meeting had been four years ago; she must have escaped Bam with plenty of time to spare. But then it occurred to him that she was the only person from Bam that he *could* check up on. After all, hadn't she claimed a degree of fame?

He soon learned that she had exaggerated. None of her paintings were in the collections of any major galleries. Nor did she have a Wikipedia page. Yet her painting career was not a complete sham. She had held exhibitions in Cairo and Alexandria and had once earned a mention as an emerging Egyptian painter. Where she had been more successful was in gaining arts grants, especially those with a human rights focus. A number of these were mentioned in a write-up in the Egyptian press. The article had praised her social conscience, her "tireless devotion to the plight of the world's poor".

But what proved of greatest interest was an article from *Brushstroke*, an obscure online art journal. Dating from early 2003, it placed Marta in Togo. Flush with her latest arts grant, she'd headed to the land of the Batammariba. Unlike the other articles, this one featured photographs, and the painter's likeness was unmistakable. There she was, in her finest drapery, her gaze towards the mudbrick towers. And there she was again, sitting in a hut, helping herself to a bowl of someone's *fufu*. And in the final shot, she was seated at her easel, devoting herself to the plight of the poor. She had already filled in most of the background, lavishing the canvas with butterscotch hues.

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*Sean Wayman lives in New South Wales. Several of his poems have appeared in Quadrant recently.*

# SWEETNESS & LIGHT

TIM BLAIR

“A man’s manners,” according to German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, “are a mirror in which he shows his portrait.”

Goethe’s civilised outlook may have come in handy if one of two prominent fellow Germans had lived by it during the twentieth century. For that matter, recent events have shown a marked decline in manners throughout much of our world.

Very few mirrors throughout the US, for example, found use during recent riots as devices capable of revealing anybody’s flattering inner self. Instead, most were either smashed or looted, along with everything else deemed surplus to requirements in a post-civilised society.

As with most such cataclysmic events, all of us will recall moments of particular resonance. The MSNBC reporter who declared one riot to be mostly just “a protest”, as a building went up in flames behind him, will be difficult to forget.

So too will footage of white teens liberating surfboards from a store in Santa Monica, California, apparently to avenge the killing of black man George Floyd 2400 kilometres away in Minnesota.

A friend was especially taken by shots of a young woman calmly walking out of a looted cheesecake store with an entire cheesecake elegantly held before her, as though on its way to a diner’s table. At least she didn’t eat it in the street, which would have tipped civilised bystanders—were any available—into a complete etiquette-breach meltdown.

My own lasting moment involved a young white chap who not only forgot his manners but also how unwise it is to provoke an individual whose identity and abilities are unknown. At the height of general street mayhem in Los Angeles, the youngster thought it in the spirit of things to vandalise a nicely-presented pickup truck.

He did not count on the vehicle being both occupied and prized by J.R. Smith, a six-foot-six-inch NBA player with an admirable attitude towards the preservation and enforcement of property rights. Mr Smith later posted video taken by an observer of events that followed the attack upon his truck, along with his own explanatory comments.

*Quadrant* readers of an especially delicate nature may wish to skip over Mr Smith’s remarks, which

I personally find have a certain potent charm. A gentle translation for those readers will follow this verbatim transcript:

“I just want you all to know right now, before you all see this s\*\*\* somewhere else. One of these little motherf\*\*\*ing white boys didn’t know where he was going and broke my f\*\*\*ing window in my truck.

“Broke my s\*\*\*. This was a residential area. No stores over here. None of that s\*\*\*. Broke my window, I chased him down and whooped his ass ...

“This ain’t no hate crime. I ain’t got no problem with nobody and nobody got no problem with me. There’s a problem with the motherf\*\*\*ing system, that’s it.

“The motherf\*\*\*er broke my window and I whooped his ass. He didn’t know who window he broke and he got his ass whooped.”

Translation:

“Prior to witnessing this encounter on any other forum, please allow me to offer some context. A slightly-built young white male with possible Oedipal issues became disoriented and, in his confused state, caused visible damage to my personal means of transport.

“Specifically, he broke a window as I was driving through an area unburdened by retail outlets. I pursued the offender and administered a physical deterrent.

“There was no malice in my actions. I hold no grievances against any citizen, nor are grievances held against me. Any systemic or structural concerns are, of course, an entirely separate area of discussion.

“A window was broken and retribution exacted. My identity was unknown to the young man prior to his actions. Certain regions of his anatomy now bear evidence of ignorance’s folly.”

Australians are polite, well-mannered people, which is why we overwhelmingly complied with official directives that we close down our businesses, lose our jobs and our wages, and cease to enjoy any meaningful social lives. All of our sacrifices, we were told, were necessary steps towards containing the dread coronavirus.

To this end, a group of five youthful gentlemen in Melbourne were fined \$1652 each—a total

of \$8260—for playing a game of cricket in a vacant suburban lot. Their reckless disregard for everyone’s health had to be punished.

But in that same city in early June, a massive street march was held to mourn Minnesota’s Floyd and a number of Aboriginal people who had allegedly suffered at the hands of police. Similar marches were held in every Australian capital. A handful of organisers were fined, but not one single participant copped a suburban batsman’s punishment.

Remarkably, just about every state government thought they could get away with this. They seemed to believe their communities would accept such extreme double standards even after their own lives had been so comprehensively compromised by lockdowns.

As poor manners go, this takes the cheesecake, as they say in LA. Additional insults followed. A few days after Adelaide suspended social-distancing laws to allow its march, Police Commissioner Grant Stevens was asked if he would permit a second protest.

“To allow people to continue that sort of activity in an uncontrolled way creates risk that we are not really prepared to manage,” he replied. “I am confident it was the right decision for Saturday but I’m also confident that having provided that opportunity it is now appropriate that people abide by the restrictions that everybody else within the community is applying.”

Follow the commissioner’s logic, if you can. It was the right thing to allow unmanageable and uncontrolled activity creating risk on one particular day; but on any subsequent day, uncontrolled activity creating risk is still unmanageable and therefore must be disallowed.

This behaviour by our authorities is rude. It is offensive. To place the demands of one group above the rights of all, primarily due to timidity and weakness, reveals a profound lack of respect towards the majority of Australians.

As Goethe himself might say, these people need to take a good hard look at themselves.

Most Australians have more than a passing awareness of the United States. Even those who have never visited the US are aware, say, of the North–South divide, the coastal capitals of New York and Los Angeles, and at least a few of the most recent presidents.

But that awareness declines as an individual’s hostility towards the US increases. Former *Sydney Morning Herald* senior political correspondent Margo Kingston wildly claimed in 2003 that the US deployed “chemical, biological and nuclear weapons” against the Vietnamese: “The Yanks used them

in Vietnam, and have not ruled out using them in this [Iraq] war.”

Mainly through my delight in and exposure of her ridiculous outbursts, Margo became quite the international online celebrity back in the day. I was in LA once and received an email from a local reader, so drove over to his nearby antique shop. “We hold Margo parties!” he explained. He and his pals would read her columns until Margo’s accumulating absurdities overwhelmed them with laughter.

I think she’s studying for a PhD now. Anyway, Margo’s cause has since been taken up by the likes of ABC *Media Watch* presenter Paul Barry, who in early June announced: “The next election is now only five months away, and America’s never been more divided.”

Never? That’s quite a claim, considering the Civil War killed an estimated 750,000 Americans between 1861 and 1865. The nation was at that point divided as never before or since.

Imagine the media fury that might follow a claim from President Donald Trump that the US in 2020 had never been more united. Barry’s tax-funded assertion was just as indefensible, but largely avoided any criticism from the media he selectively watches.

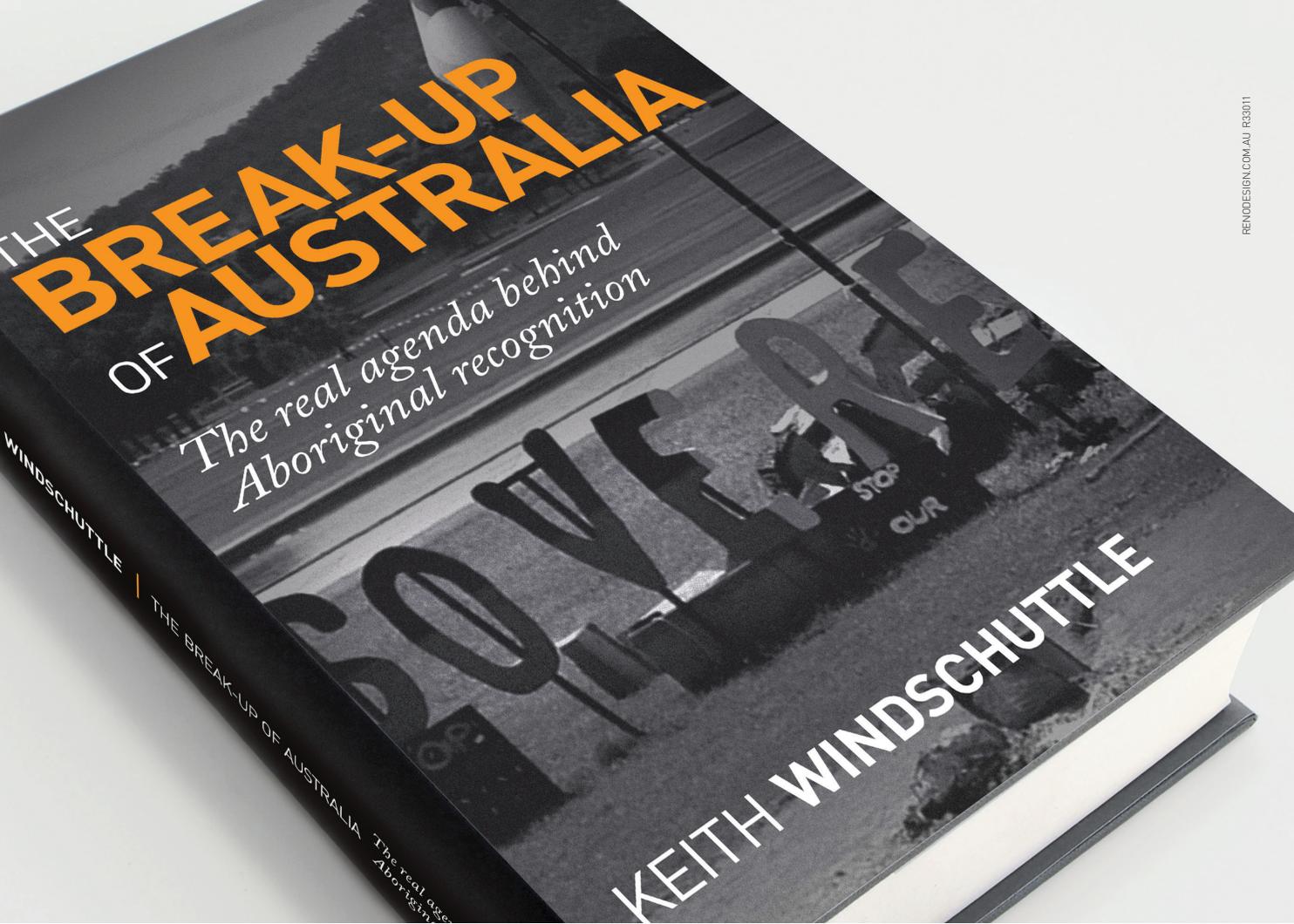
Perhaps even closer to Kingston’s anarchic, fact-free spirit is *Sydney Morning Herald* bandana poseur Peter FitzSimons, who the other day denounced “the Coca-Colonisation on Australian life, that pernicious influence of America on our language and culture that sees us sometimes look and sound like the 53rd state of the union”.

Which brings us back to those many among us who, even if they have never physically found themselves in the US, nevertheless know the US is comprised of fifty states. Were we to join that union, we would be the fifty-first.

A little knowledge, as the saying goes, is a dangerous thing. Peter presumably holds some background memory of the US having fifty states, and also that Alaska and Hawaii joined the US in 1959. Therefore, fifty-two states. For an alleged historian, FitzSimons isn’t great on chronology, even though the US has had the exact same number of states since two years before he was born.

It’s a surprisingly common error. Social researcher Hugh Mackay wondered in 2002 if Australia was “at risk of being treated like a de facto 52nd state”, which left many wondering more deeply about the state admitted prior to Australia.

Maybe it was nuked, Vietnam-style. One thing Margo Kingston never explained: if the US did detonate a nuclear device against their enemies during the Vietnam War, how on earth did the US not prevail?



# THE BREAK-UP OF AUSTRALIA

## THE REAL AGENDA BEHIND ABORIGINAL RECOGNITION

### KEITH WINDSCHUTTLE

#### THE HIDDEN AGENDA OF ABORIGINAL SOVEREIGNTY

Australian voters are not being told the truth about the proposal for constitutional recognition of indigenous people. The goal of Aboriginal political activists today is to gain 'sovereignty' and create a black state, equivalent to the existing states. Its territory, comprising all land defined as native title, will soon amount to more than 60 per cent of the whole Australian continent.

Constitutional recognition, if passed, would be its 'launching pad'. Recognition will not make our nation complete; it will divide us permanently.

#### THE ACADEMIC ASSAULT ON THE CONSTITUTION

University-based lawyers are misleading the Australian people by claiming our Constitution was drafted to exclude Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from the Australian nation. This is a myth. At Federation in 1901, our Constitution made Australia the most democratic country in the world.

The great majority of Aboriginal people have always had the same political rights as other Australians, including the right to vote. Claims that the Constitution denied them full citizenship are political fabrications.

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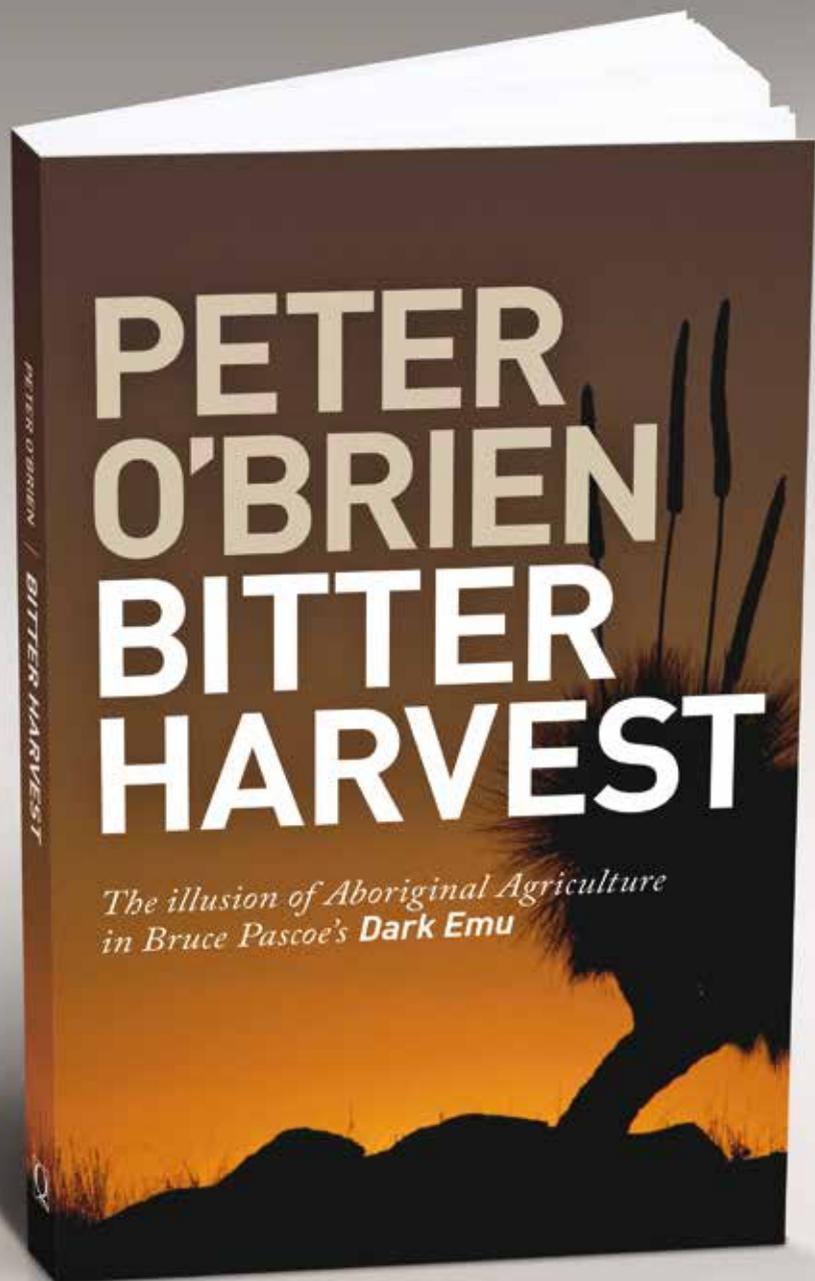
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**BITTER HARVEST** is a comprehensive appraisal of Bruce Pascoe's book *Dark Emu*. Pascoe postulates that, rather than being a nomadic hunter-gatherer society, Australian Aborigines were actually sedentary agriculturalists with 'skills superior to those of the white colonisers who took their land and despoiled it'.

*Dark Emu* has enjoyed extraordinary public and critical acclaim, winning Premier's literary awards in New South Wales and Victoria. Professor Marcia Langton

called it 'the most important book on Australia'. Its ideas have already been taken up in school texts. But nothing in *Dark Emu* justifies its success.

*Bitter Harvest* is a forensic but highly readable examination which reveals that Bruce Pascoe omits, distorts or mischaracterises important information to such an extent that, as purported history, *Dark Emu* is worthless. Even worse, it promotes a divisive, victim-based agenda that pits one Australian against another.

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