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Vincent Buckley: On the edges of Melbourne, London and Dublin

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I first met Vincent Buckley when he was a young tutor and I an indolent undergraduate. At this distance, I can recall little of him as a tutor, but I do remember him as lecturer. He had succeeded in having Robert Fitzgerald's *Moonlight Acre* included in the course as a token representation of Australian literature. He was a diminutive figure standing in front of the gloomy English lecture theatre, and his lecturing style lacked the rhetorical inflation of his colleagues like Ian Maxwell and Keith Macartney, but once he started talking we knew we were listening to someone who cared about his subject. I can recall nothing of what he actually said, but I can remember the care with which he revealed both the depths and the inflations of the poem before him. He made it evident that poetry mattered.

or Alec
 Hope

He may also have lectured on Henry Handel Richardson during these years, but I may be confused with his later writings on her work. He certainly took part in the weekly honours seminar, when the English staff vied with each other for more insightful readings and the students were torn between the desire to emulate these intellectual callisthenics and their fear of hearing themselves being down-graded from a first-class to a third-class mind as they spoke. I also worked with him for a short time on a projected MA on imagery in Australian poetry, and learned his disdain for verse that wore its heart on its sleeve, but neither the university's library resources nor my energy was sufficient to make any headway on this project before he departed for Leavis and Cambridge.

This is as far as I came to know him on a personal level at this time, but I certainly knew him as a public figure. He writes in *Cutting Green Hay* that when he was a boy a Presbyterian minister tried to recruit him as a friend for his son, but that this proved impossible.¹ Buckley's public activities similarly made it impossible for my acquaintance with him to go beyond the academic. His first book of poetry appeared during my honours year, but he was already well-known as a Catholic intellectual and leading member of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) Club. In the climate of bigotry that then prevailed between religions, and with the split already opening in the Labor Party, these allegiances inhibited even my appreciation of his poetry. Yet it now seems apparent that his poetry records not only a lifetime as a Catholic but also a lifetime attempt to reconcile his sense of alienation and his need for a community transcending religious, cultural and political divisions. In Melbourne, he was able to reconcile these divisions for a time through the lay apostolate and a sense of a world redeemed by the incarnation. In Cambridge, he seemed to find a secular counterpart of this incarnation in the great cultural tradition successively enunciated by Matthew Arnold, T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis. Back in Melbourne, he turned more directly to a politics that aimed at plurality and social democracy but was vitiated by a sterile anti-Communism. Eventually, he returned to Ireland, where he found in both idea and spirit the community he sought. The last time I saw him, not long before his death, he stormed out of a seminar on cultural traditions with the declaration that the traditions of the English language were completely irrelevant to him. Thus, his life can be seen as having three centres of attraction: Australia, Britain and Ireland.

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My colleague Dermot Clancy suggests that the key to understanding the Australian Catholicism of Buckley's youth is to recognise its source in the revival of the church in later nineteenth century Ireland. This revival accommodated the church to the secular state, but also purged it of its Gaelic elements. In early twentieth-century Australia, while a great part of the religious came from Ireland, almost all the laity were native-born of Irish descent. They saw themselves, with some reason, as an embattled minority, but Clancy contends that the hierarchy encouraged this sense of separation as they sought to build the church as a distinct community. This community had its own hospitals, insurance companies, friendly societies, sodalities and, above all, schools. Yet it lacked the kind of intellectual tradition that had been part of the church in Europe, or the cultural tradition that it had nurtured in Ireland.²

This accounts for the ambivalence towards both Ireland and Australia that we find in Buckley's earlier writing. This ambivalence persists even in his autobiography, *Cutting Green Hay*. It is not merely the contrast

of terror and hope that, he claims, dominated his childhood. It has more to do with the poignancy of lost memories, the fact that, 'in matters so near to hand, arranged in so recent a past, which affects me so personally, I know so little'. The cultural links had gone along with the historical ties/

The famous, fabled long memory of the Celt ... was lost, for the most part, at least in overt, utterable form. In some cases, there was not much of a personal or family past worth remembering; in others, there was little sense of connected history or of mythopoeic depths; in others, what *could* be remembered was too painful to contemplate. In any case, the aim was to become Australian ...
...ENDNOTE???

Buckley's own separation from any sense of the past was enhanced by the unwillingness of his parents' generation to talk about it, and by the fact that he knew only one of his grandparents, a grandfather.³

Australia offered no love of the land to compensate for the loss of connection with a past that leads back to Ireland.

The land is a breeding ground and a killing ground. The cows are lovely in their usefulness; cows do not walk in grass green to the udders, or not very often; and if they walk in grass of any other colour, you carry a stick for the snakes. ENDNOTE???

In this harsh new world, his father's people were, in the suggestive term, 'planted' in Kilmore, Springfield, and Darraweit, on the stony, scrubby plains some forty miles north of Melbourne. Here their Irishness made them instinctive Australian nationalists, but he tells us they lived religious lives that, while often intense and generous, were stripped of Irish imaginative experience and hence lacking in depth and psychological substance. His childhood was filled with song and poetry, and the precepts of mentors he found for himself, but its lack of mythology made it the mirror-image of W.B. Yeats's, and he wonders whether the apparent unity Yeats found in Irish myth was not in fact imposed by the force of his own narrative.⁴

The religious and national ambivalence of Buckley's formative years was shadowed by the Depression, which brought figures of misery into his daily life and intruded even on those families, like his own, who retained their homes but found their men denied work and their sense of worth and identity. They found some compensation through the labor movement, but this did nothing to relieve the terror Buckley felt at the prospect of war. Books offered him an escape into a world of imagination that he found continuous with the immediate reality of his home and town, but left him lonely.

Buckley's schooling at St Patrick's, East Melbourne, maintained the same ambivalence between Australia, Britain and Ireland that he found in his family. Its religious life was based on daily devotions, the sodalities and an annual retreat, and engendered an ethic of work, moral conduct and personal piety. Its teachers were Jesuits, mainly from Ireland, but with a universal rather than either an Irish or Australian orientation. Their universality, however, had a particular European flavour of the Church Militant. At Buckley's first speech-night the Rector praised the Spanish martyrs: 'Teachers, parents and children who have been massacred in cold blood; [and] the other thousands [who] under the leadership of General Franco have been fighting and continuing to fight for our common Christian civilisation.'⁵ Although Buckley never publicly evinced the least sympathy for Franco, his hatred for tyranny and sense of a struggle for the soul of civilisation are constants in his writing.

Melbourne University provided both the opportunity and the institution to integrate his faith and his politics. Although he claims that it did little for his intellectual development, he certainly found himself involved there in political debate and in a rich cultural Bohemia. He found companions who valued art, music and literature. During his time in the airforce, he had come to despise the 'self-satisfied dogmatism' of the Communists he had met. Now, in 1948, he again became a practising Catholic, rejected the overtures of B.A. Santamaria's movement, and became involved in the University Apostolate.⁶ This group sought to bring Catholics to the centre of the social and intellectual life of the secular university. They followed Cardinal Newman's line of thought in perceiving their spiritual function as the formation of 'men of the world to live like Our Lord and to have the mind of Our World towards the world'.⁷ As John Hanrahan has written, the strength of the Apostolate 'was getting to the heart of things and by-passing the trivia of piety and the clap-trappings of authority ... Its weakness was deciding who was worthy or capable of getting to the truth ...'⁸ For Buckley, it provided a validation for the life of the poet and intellectual as a religious vocation.

The idea of vocation was the key to its thinking. Its members had a vocation as Christian students, and therefore a commitment 'to so labour that the University and the content of ... studies become what God would wish them to be'. Behind this commitment lay an understanding of the Incarnation as making it possible not only for Christians to be at one with God but also to share God's purpose in the whole of creation. As the Apostolate chaplain, Father Jerry Golden, explained, 'In coming into the world Christ not only redeemed man, but in a sense redeemed all things'.⁹ This required of the student as his Christian vocation that he should in all things serve his fellows, not in order to convert them, but in order to serve God's purpose. In the order of work,

for example, the test of production was whether it helped men to live as human beings, rather than enslaving them and serving only profit. This is respectable Catholic thought, deriving from the teaching in *Rerum Novarum*, but it is closer than the encyclicals to the Marxist concept of elevating use value over exchange value.

The University Apostolate was a transformational movement, that sought to change its members as they changed the world. It emphasised faith rather than doctrine, and was explicitly Christian Humanist in its outlook. It saw itself as working to realise the full potential of the university, not to subject it to external control. Its members worked to build a community within the wider institution ~~with the wider institution~~ in which their spiritual engagement was also intellectual and political. This put them at odds both with those who believed that the Irish settlement had withdrawn the church from secular society, and with the followers of B.A. Santamaria's Movement, who believed that the church must organise Catholics to gain control of the institutions of the secular state and to combat Communism. The Apostolate was also of course at odds with those Communists who were using their outside organisation to gain control of the university, trade unions and even the Labor Party.¹⁰ For the Apostolate, politics was part of the religious life, not religious action directed and organised to gain control of the institutions of secular society. Buckley himself publicly denounced Communism and the persecution of the church in Eastern Europe, but he also opposed the 1951 Referendum that sought to outlaw the Communist party and allied organisations, and argued against Santamaria in the Newman Society.

The Apostolate gave Buckley the unity of faith and work, religion and nationalism, that he had failed to find in his upbringing. It integrated his politics with his poetry by making both part of the vocation of building community. He did not join the University Labor Club, as he objected to the dogmatism of the Communist Party members who manipulated it. In 1949 he joined the democratic socialists who walked out of the Labor Club in protest against the insistence of the Victorian State Executive of the Communist Party in forcing the Club to affiliate with the Eureka League. Buckley became Vice-President and then president of the new ALP Club they founded.¹¹ With his faith and his politics reconciled for the time, Buckley's first collection of poetry, *The World's Flesh*, seeks to realise his vision of a sanctified world.¹² His concern for Ireland seems to have faded, and the collection contains only three explicit references to it, one merely stylistic. The others occur in the book's closing sequence, whose title, 'Land of No Fathers', refers to Australia rather than Ireland. Yet this sequence also conveys a sense of alienation, not now of the present from the past, but rather of the present from the hopes on which it was built. God's kingdom remains unrealised.

The voice of the poem is that of the poet, who identifies his forefathers with their religion rather than their nationality, and their children with Australia. The dominant figure in the poem is the navigator Pedro Fernandez de Quiros, although Buckley is less explicit about his search for a new *Tierra del Espiritu Santo* than is James McAuley in his later sequence, *Captain Quiros*. Buckley's Quiros is a man moved by visions who sails in answer to a call from the unknown, which may be 'Ocean, or sea-wind, or the will of God'. ~~ENDNOTE???~~ The poem makes it clear that Quiros's voyage is compromised from the start by legends, lies and excuses; Quiros is unable to purify his image of God to mate it with a true conquest. Similarly, the poet's forebears may move in a history destined to move towards the love of Christ, but their own part is exile and absurdity, and the 'drawn-out venom of a country town'. These forebears have woven the poet into their tapestry, but it is a tapestry of fear, hate, labour and shame before death has brought them 'the ultimate mercy of the earth'. Through their lives, the poet has been put in possession of the land, but it still evades dreams of salvation or human fulfilment. It is only in the facts of exile and death that he is able to find beauty, but this beauty itself estranges him from the land of his fathers:

This beauty's part of all who have founded here,
Mingling their names with hers in marriage, giving
Houses and cool deep wells for dowry. Yet
Something in her impedes
This mingling, some strange will,
A shadow on all our substance, moves upon
The heritage that's lightened in our blood;
A shadow on all our substance, moves upon
The heritage that's lightened in our blood;
Rootless, eroded by time, a land that pays
Incessant tribute to the sea, whose ages
Feed the fires of a dullard race ...

It is in this context of alienation from the land and the present that he talks of Ireland, whence came 'the sad captains' who gave him

/ Labour
/ Labour

Pride, and shame, and talk of God
 Who died, it seems, upon an Irish hill—
 Confession of tongues like the slow fall of water
 Wearing away her image in my mind ...

The image of tongues like water should bring peace, but instead it distances him further from the land, translating his religion to a different hemisphere. The closing sections of the sequence meditate further on the failure of both human and divine hopes, a failure shared by both his fathers and Quiros. They have vivid images of home and garden, yet they close somewhere near despair, as the speaker, returning home, finds, not the 'expected place', but destruction, and, in his father's well, 'a deep, unanswering place'. The land, it seems, has unfathered its children.¹³

After the publication of this book of poems, Buckley departed Australia for England—not, indeed, London, but Cambridge, which is both its outer suburb and its antithesis. Buckley rejected the official Cambridge, finding his place in what he terms the other Cambridge: the outsiders, the Catholic chaplain who provided him with something of what he had found in Melbourne in the Lay Apostolate, and in the person of Leavis. He accepted Leavis's view of London as the enemy of proper values, but he also accepted his view of the function of literature as the shaper and guarantor of value in society. In many ways Leavis represented a secular and non-conformist counterpart of the Apostolate. Through literature, students would transform themselves even as they transformed and redeemed the sterility of the modern world.

The first fruit of Buckley's stay in England was, paradoxically, *Essays in Poetry: Mainly Australian*, followed in 1959 by a book of essays on literary and cultural criticism, *Poetry and Morality*. The subjects of the latter are Arnold, Eliot and Leavis. Both books assert the universal values of a metropolitan or London view of culture and criticism.

The first essay in *Essays in Poetry* is a study of 'The Image of Man in Australian Poetry'. It starts from the proposition that

Poetry deals with man at a metaphysical level—but man's metaphysical status reflected in his actual physical surroundings, embodied in his sensuous and spiritual reactions to his world. ~~ENDNOTE???~~

Buckley argues that poetry strikes to the meaning and not the detail of man's life. The interest in the spiritual shows where he goes beyond Leavis—but not beyond Eliot. His statement does however imply Leavis's method of close textual reading as necessary to establish the sensuous reactions to actual physical surroundings, and thus provide the key to the spiritual significance. The remainder of the essay also follows Leavis in finding in the language of the poetry a guide to the health of Australian culture and society. Buckley traces the progress of Australian society from the Anglicisers, the unassimilable like 'those remarkably infelicitous men, Barron Field and Michael Massey Robinson', through those nineteenth century writers whose aspirations made them incapable of seeing Australia as a home. He observed that the note of exile tainted even the work of democratic nationalists like Victor Daley and Henry Lawson, who saw Australia as both a land of opportunity and a land where legitimate and noble aspirations were thwarted by social forces, and that even their humanist aspirations were 'simple, crude and narrow', providing temporary excitement rather than real vision. He examines the failures of both nationalism and vitalism to provide an adequate image of humanity on a continent that remained alien. Only such poets as Kenneth Slessor and Judith Wright were in his opinion able to embark on the struggle to unify their subjective and objective worlds, and to 'find out themselves and their deepest values in relation to a land of which, factually, they are already sufficiently aware'. ~~ENDNOTE???~~ Until this struggle is completed, he suggested, Australia will continue to lack tragic awareness or an understanding of the 'spiritual convulsions which are at the moment agonizing every society and burning beneath the surface of our own'. ~~ENDNOTE???~~ This perception of a lack of an essential dimension of awareness comes from Arnold and Leavis: the sense of unrecognised tragedy from Eliot.¹⁴

On his return to Melbourne, Buckley had found himself directly involved in the tragedy of his time. By temperament, upbringing and faith he had always been resolutely opposed to tyranny. Now he was deeply moved by events of the 1956 Hungarian uprising and its suppression by the Soviet Union. He endeavoured to raise support for persecuted Hungarian writers, and worked to ensure that their plight was recognised by the Melbourne Peace Congress in December 1959.¹⁵ This led him into association with Dr Frank ~~DID HE~~ ~~CHANGE HIS NAME???~~ Knopfmacher, with whom he embarked on a continuing campaign against Communist influence in the Peace Movement and wherever it might be discerned in the university. This association led him away from his former colleagues in the University Apostolate, who suspected this kind of organisational politics.¹⁶ He was, however, one of the group who in 1958 founded the quarterly *Prospect*, which in certain respects continued the work of the Apostolate by breaking out of formal constraints to engage

in an open and pluralist debate on literature, ethics and politics. 'We wanted an open church, an open university, an open Australia ...' The magazine ceased publication in 1963, at the same time as the Apostolate collapsed, partly over hopes of reform raised by Vatican Two and their later frustration, and before the debate on the Vietnam War reached its height.¹⁷ Buckley considered Australia's involvement in this war was a 'ghastly mistake', and hoped for a 'just peace', but he also refused to become involved in formal protests that he believed would lead only to American humiliation and withdrawal and the drenching of the whole of South Vietnam in blood.¹⁸ Eventually, with other dissidents, he established the Independent Labor Alliance, which contested the 1969 federal elections on this basis. Like the DLP, it gave its preferences to the Liberal Party.¹⁹

During these years, Buckley's religious and political engagements seem to have displaced his interests in Ireland and his Irish identity. He had visited Dublin from Cambridge, but in 1966 was content to spend a sabbatical in Cambridge. *Masters in Israel*, his 1961 collection of poetry, contains only one explicitly Irish poem, 'Sinn Fein: 1957'.²⁰ Although in this the speaker acknowledges both his kinship with the rebels and his foreignness among them, its stance is one of observation rather than engagement. In 'Father and Son' he engages directly in dialogue with his ancestry, but in a manner that reduces the squabbles of orange and green to a family division in the Australian past. Other poems are mainly lyrics of domesticity or the land. The book, however, concludes with the fully engaged and powerful sequence, 'In the Time of the Hungarian Martyrdom'. Although this hinges on the figure of the Hungarian cardinal, József Mindszenty, who had in the postwar period become the symbol of the church's resistance to Communist tyranny, the poem is less directly political than a meditation on the human spirit that awaits God's grace in the midst of the world's oppression:

... Across a foreign sea
A great city lies in state.
A city whose women keep
Four waxen tapers for their death,
And prayers to grant his life—that sleep
He walks in, when the tormented breath

Goes in like smoke before his will ...

Now by the distant rumbling of the trams,
By daily shops and factories wherein
Man occupies his darkening life, I wait
The thunder and the resurrection of the dead.

These lines show God's purpose through the lives of individuals, not through concerted action, whether the kind of the Sinn Fein or of the Hungarian resistance, or indeed of his own kind of active anti-Communism.²¹

His next book, *Arcady and other Places*, includes a sequence of directly political poems which explicitly condemn those who give themselves to the lies of totalitarian politics.²² Yet among these is his own declaration of intent, of withdrawal, as he rejects 'hard-faced men, who beat the drum / To call me to this Cause or that', and accepts instead the harder task, 'the sweeter work I'm at, / The building of the honeycomb'.²³ As a complement to this sweeter work, his essays in *Poetry and the Sacred* furthered his constant drive to integrate his poetic and religious vocations, or rather, his religious vocation of poet in a secular world.²³

Buckley's retreat from politics followed his own father's incapacitation by a stroke, and the slow collapse of his marriage consequent on his wife's illness. At the same time his poetry, as Lyn Jacobs has observed, moved from what he rejected as the bardic rantings of his early work to a more inward and exploratory poetry of understatement which reveals the world as a presence.²⁴ This poetry was to reach his culmination in his return to Ireland, where he was also able to escape from the conflicts that had embroiled him in Melbourne. His new calm was assisted by a new marriage, celebrated in the poems of *Late Winter Child*.²⁵ Yet finally not even Ireland could reconcile the drive for community and the sense of loneliness that he brought from his childhood. A paper written near the end of his life with the title 'What is a Catholic?' reveals the anguish that continued to plague him. He starts this paper by claiming that he intends neither to define Catholicism nor to discuss his own faith, and then, of course, proceeds to do both. 'Whether or not God is dead, the Pope is—dead within the Christian soul', he declares. He then discusses the dissolution of what had been the church's 'indissoluble triad' of its body of doctrine, authority to teach and actual belief. With the church's loss of authority it has lost the strength it drew from its embodiment of both historicism and sacramentalism. Yet he cannot accept the alternatives of a humanism that rejects mystery, a protestantism that elevates a single event, or an orthodoxy that arrests time in ritual.²⁶

These alternatives resound through the title poem of *Golden Builders*, the collection that marks his new, sparer and more allusive style.²⁷ Ireland does not appear in this collection, but at its end he returns to his birthplace and memories of his family. The title sequence of 'Golden Builders' is in part a hymn to inner-city Melbourne, in part a meditation on the simultaneous creativity and destruction of human life. It finishes as he leaves the city, journeying back to his 'timber birthplace' and, perhaps, to 'my Lord's grave? His grave?' The question will take him out of Australia, away from London or Cambridge, and back to Ireland. Here he embraces both the simplicities of a placed life and the passions of the ancestral nationalism he had earlier suspected.

On his returns to Ireland Buckley lived for extended periods in Dublin and travelled extensively to his ancestral country in Munster. *Memory Ireland* records his continuing ambivalence.²⁸ The title is ironic, signifying both his own memories of Ireland and his belief that the Irish had lost their memory, replacing it with a mythological past that catered for tourists but kept the people from confronting their own present. He found that the four bulwarks of the older Ireland—the church, the sense of clan communalism, nationalism and the culture of poetry and song—were all dead or decaying. In their place were violence, both criminal and political, drugs and a referendum that undermined the authority of both the episcopate and the political elites.

This disappointed search for a past that will justify his present provides the subject for *The Pattern*, the companion to *Late Winter Child*. This collection treats life in suburban Dublin, the attempts to find kinship among the people and landscapes of the south, and the loss of connection among his Australian forebears. The themes of loss and connection come together in its major poem, 'Gaeltacht'. The name of the poem refers to those districts where people still speak the ancient language, which is foreign to Buckley himself. The sequence alternates spare free verse stanzas with five prose poems that provide vignettes of history, from Edmund Spenser's involvement in a massacre to the settling of Buckley's family near Melbourne, where they refuse to talk of the past, insisting 'we're Australians now'.^{ENDNOTE???} But their silence remained 'not only lock but key, to be turned some time in the future', and their ancestral land remained waiting for their descendants return, shining in the distance 'like a whetted stone'.^{EN??} And, as he says in a later poem, they settled in the new land

To remember
The green graves, and to forget
The saints' wells and the music,
And to learn the full taste of meat.²⁹

Their place in the new land, and the material satisfaction it yields them in place of the poverty of Ireland, provide some kind of victory over history, but such victory does not integrate them with their past or bring reconciliation for the cruelties inflicted on their forebears by the English. Instead of the moral and intellectual tradition of Arnold, we have only the poets Walter Raleigh, busy 'forming the execution squad', and Spenser, watching 'interested as usual in the techniques of death and disposal, dedicated maybe to the neatness of death', while he works at his poetry 'with passionate neatness'.^{EN???} Spenser works at his poetry for his bride, while outside his window he ignores Buckley's suffering ancestors. The telling phrase, 'almost acclimatised', while it refers grammatically to the pollarded willows of the landscape, condemns Spenser,^{EN???} whose writing, in the words of the earlier book, suffers from 'the twin mechanistic principles of too-great externality and too-great subjectivity', and so fails to connect with the tragedy he is actually assisting.³⁰

In *Memory Ireland*, the Irish themselves are shown as themselves complicit in their present fate. The book centres on the martyrdom of the hunger-strikers, which acts as an indictment of the moral cowardice of both English and Irish governments and the lack of social responsibility among the people at large. As with Mindszenty in the earlier poem, however, suffering and martyrdom remain ~~however~~ only as a summons to stand against the world's ills, not as an answer to them. He explicitly rejects violence against civilians as a political tactic, whether employed by governments or by guerrillas.³¹ A sequence of poems in his posthumous collection suggests that his pacifism had now become almost absolute. Although he understands the attraction of war, with its skills and technology, he sees ~~it~~ as the ultimate destroyer of everything human in humanity. In another sequence in this book, 'Hunger Strike', he transforms the idea of the warrior into the martyr, who wishes to live but by his death condemns the men and women of power who are against violence but support the conditions that produce it.³²

The last encounter I had with Vin was at a seminar in the Melbourne University English Department. The seminar was about cultural studies, and the participants were talking about high and low culture, cultural traditions and the English language. Vin had made no contribution, until at last he stood up in anger,