

AUSTRALIA--LAST OPPORTUNITY OR LOST OPPORTUNITY?

Reason, Mateship and the Commonwealth of Australia

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Australia, last discovered land of the new worlds, had long been the object of old world desire. At the end of the nineteenth century, this desire seemed to have reached a culmination in the inauguration of the new Commonwealth of Australia. At the end of the twentieth century, this Commonwealth seems to have lost its way. This cycle of desire renewed and frustrated forms a pattern for Australian literature as it seeks to recover lost hopes, and is itself an aspect of the crisis of legitimation that presently affects the world. In this crisis, people have only three options. They can turn to the authority of the law, of any legal or verbal system that has always been and that continues to enshrine power as it is. They can rest their faith on some apocalyptic account of the future, such as the crumbling Maoist dogma of China or the religious fervours of America. Or they can seek to find in the past of their own communities and society a tradition with the authority to suggest a way into the future. It is the third of these paths that I am attempting tonight, but the very endeavour raises the question of whether there was ever a sound basis for hope in the experience of white settlement in Australia.

This question is raised today in much of the revisionist and feminist reconsiderations of Australian history that have appeared over the last twenty years. In a different form, it

underlies both the movement to rid the Australian flag and constitution of foreign symbols and establish a republic, and the vitriolic opposition these attempts arouse. Most recently, and most urgently, the failure of confidence in the legitimacy of our tradition and our occupation of the continent which is revealed in these debates underlies the conflicting opinions of the High Court in its judgement on the Mabo land rights case. Although this judgement has been hailed as setting a precedent for redressing the historic wrong of the dispossession of the native peoples by white settlement in Australia, it should I believe rather be read as an evasion of the moral and political responsibility for this injustice by diverting it to an issue of legal process. Justice Brennan gives in his reasoning a detailed examination of the racist basis of colonial laws of property, and concludes that this basis can no longer be considered valid. Justice Dawson, in a dissenting opinion, asserts even more starkly that a racist disregard for the rights of the earlier inhabitants is integral to the claim of Australian sovereignty. In dismissing the plaintiff's claims, he argues that "if traditional land rights . . . are to be afforded to the inhabitants of the Murray Islands, the responsibility, both legal and moral, lies with the legislature and not with the courts." (p.171) This judgement recognizes that the law is locked into the past and therefore cannot undo it. That is the responsibility of the whole community, and I would argue that until the Australian people by constitutional amendment or other political agreement recognize Aboriginal rights the sovereignty of the nation will remain morally, if not legally, deficient. By relying on the courts to correct past injustices we merely avoid

our obligations and so both undermine the authority of the legal system and diminish the ability of the political process to deal with the fundamental issues that face us.

These issues will be understood only as we place them in both the geographic context of our environment and the historical tradition that has been produced by white occupation of this environment. It is the function of literature to provide this context. Much of the poetry written about the middle of the century served precisely this function as it brought these two aspects of identity together in allegories that turned Australia's geographical properties into metaphors for the condition of modern humanity. These metaphors thus placed the particular history of Australia within the more general history of European expansion and the consequent development of modernism. The condition of Australia became a measure of the modern world.

Kenneth Slessor saw this Australian history as one of heroic achievement, symbolized in the figure of Captain Cook, followed by a transition to the modern confusion but beauty of "Five Bells", where the lights and echoes of Sydney Harbour become an image of death transcended by beauty. Contrastingly, A.D.Hope found in the country merely images of Europe's final sterility: "a nation of trees, drab green and desolate grey" where the "river of her immense stupidity / Floods her monotonous tribes" and

. . . her five cities, like five teeming sores,
Each drains her: a vast parasite robber-state
Where second-hand Europeans pullulate

Timidly on the edge of alien shores.

Yet, if the country provided these images of nullity, its barrenness offered also a prospect of escape from the excesses of modernity, a place where the poet could "turn gladly home / From the lush jungle of modern thought, to find / The Arabian desert of the human mind." (1966, p.13 [1939]).

James McAuley develops these contrasts as an explicit parable of regeneration through despair. In 'Terra Australis', the country is simultaneously an expression of the easy ways of its people and of the pain and ecstasy their ease conceals. The land is a home where "the magpies call you Jack / And whistle at you like larrikins from the trees," but it is also a landscape where the twisted branches of the angophora preach like Moses, the cockatoo screams with "demoniac pain", and the termitaria of the fiery north stand as "ecstatic solitary pyres / Of unknown lovers, featureless with flame". These images bring together the inner and outer, the voyages of the discoverers and the voyage to be made "within you, on the fabled ocean" where the truth of all things is to be found "in their imagined counterpart". The implication of the poem is that the hope that Australia continues to offer, expressed in the easy larrikin sociability of the magpie, will not be realized until its people are prepared to make the inner voyage to the source of the demoniac pain they prefer to ignore. (1971, p.16 [1946]).

In other poems written during the 1940s, McAuley explored the denial that he found at the heart not only of Australian but of western civilization. He finally found an answer to threats of personal and social disintegration by accepting the disciplines

of the Catholic faith, conservative politics and traditional poetic forms. This acceptance enabled him to return to his theme of 'Terra Australis' in his epic of 1964, 'Captain Quiros'. This long narrative celebrates the voyage by which Quiros sought to plant the ideal order of Christ in a new land in the south. The poem serves the function of Quiros' ship, sailing "Inner and outer Ocean" to make real the dream of the spirit in the material world of Australia, whose people he calls on to renounce the evil that had destroyed Quiros's visionary settlement and realize their own destiny by accepting the order of Christ, making their Terra Australis the true

Land of the inmost heart, searching for which
Men roam the earth, and on the way create
Their kingdoms in the Indies and grow rich,
With noble arts and cities; only to learn
They bear the old selves with them that could turn
The stream of Eden to a standing ditch.

(p.113)

The heart of this injunction is not so much a Christian as a Renaissance awareness both of the splendour of human ambition and of the corruption that destroys it. The form of the poem, however, the pattern of rhyme and rhythm that controls its narrative and its passions, is the iambic pentameter of Enlightenment rationality that, in its ambition to bring the world under the control of reason, produced science, industrial capitalism, the United States of America and, eventually, the Commonwealth of Australia.

McAuley and Slessor, in their attempts to reconstruct traditions of faith and reason, recognize that, before the peoples of Australia had obtained an identity in world history, the land had had a history in the European imagination. Two elements of this history are embodied in the name chosen for the new state when the colonists came together to establish the Commonwealth of Australia. The first term, Commonwealth, represents an even nobler ideal than that of a republic. A republic is concerned with matters that belong to the public sphere. It is an abstraction which takes its modern force from the rationalizing and atomising tendencies of the Enlightenment, that eighteenth century flowering of genius that sought to subject nature and society to reason and instead bound both to the iron wheels of industrial capitalism. A Commonwealth, on the other hand, is based on the mediaeval ideal that people share a common enjoyment of the land and responsibility for each other. In the Middle Ages this ideal was, disastrously, entrusted to the sovereign, but the English sensibly killed this practice when, to inaugurate their own commonwealth, they beheaded their last absolute monarch. The use of the term commonwealth for the newly constituted federation of Australian states was an acknowledgement of continuity with this communal tradition, even if the operative parts of the constitution served to erase it.

The other term in our constitutional identity, Australia, is of similar age. In its Latin form, it appears on Mercator's map of 1569 as continenis Australis, the southern continent. Quiros invested it with mythic significance when he named his discovery *Australia del Espiritu Santo*, the South Land of the Holy Spirit. Flinders adopted the name for the continent he circumnavigated in

1802-3. Although Flinders used the name quite matter-of-factly, his term soon came into common use among the colonists as a way of setting themselves apart from others, and became the focus of the nationalist sentiments of patriots from W.C.Wentworth onwards.

From the first, the name Australia carried with it connotations of a freedom that had been lost in the old world. Even the idea of a convict colony was based on the Augustan ideal of regenerating the corruptions of civilization through the healing influence of nature. This offer of a return by government action to a supposed rural prosperity represented an increase in what Foucault has called governmentality. Whether in the form of the rational collective colony of Botany Bay or the variously planned settlements of South Australia and Swan River, the occupation of Australia was a calculated movement of people across the globe in order to improve social conditions at home and provide a rationally ordered society in the new world. This is in marked contrast to the combination of divine and piratic purposes that led to the extension of European society to the Americas.

These rational intents of Australian settlement were, however, subverted by cultural changes in England and by the material conditions of the new land. The rationalism that produced the Industrial Revolution generated also the reaction that we know as romanticism. While on the one hand the romantic heroism celebrated by Walter Scott and his successors provided justifying images for both the depredations of both the industrial capitalist and the frontier scouts and pastoralists, romantic individualism worked against the ideal of social

control. At the same time, the harsh realities of the Australian colonies subverted the myth of the pastoral hero into the image of the bushman, whose boast, in Hope's words, is not "'we live' but 'we survive'". (p.13)

Yet it is not only the settlers who have survived. While the image may have changed, the rural myth retains much of its original connotations and its power to the present day. In literature, in film and in politics, the idea that the country dweller is the true Australian remains potent. The virtues associated with the image provide the terms in which we can contest the meanings associated with our national identity as the Commonwealth of Australia. The issue of the Commonwealth is a question of how we wish to live, how we wish to relate to government, to each other, and to the different institutions and peoples who constitute the federation. The question of Australia on the other hand is primarily cultural rather than political, an issue of how we see ourselves and our relationships to the land, to our various traditions and to our neighbours.

The issue is cultural in the sense that culture is the web of meanings by which we understand the world. This web is the product of work done on and in the land. Work in turn is driven by desire--to eat, to love, to breed, to make--but directed by the ideas and values of the culture we inherit. Work uses technology to bring together culture and the land, changing both in the process. The earliest Australian culture belonged to an economy of hunting and gathering, and used the technology of burning to change the land to open forests. This economy produced a society of inclusion, in which functional divisions were based on gender and age, in which everyone during a lifetime

would share a privileged part of the totality. The white settlers brought a different economy, based on a culture of use and a technology of machines. This technology supported a vast increase in the population, but secluded most of the newcomers in cities and enclosed the remainder of the productive areas in fences and roads which enabled them to be exploited to feed the similarly increasing populations of England and continental Europe. In Australia, this economy produced a society of exclusion, in which functional divisions were based on class, gender and race, and privileges of enjoyment depended on rights of ownership. The culture of use, however, produced the contradictory hope that the resources and sheer size of the new land would produce sufficient wealth to free its people from the oppressions of the old world. This hope, which persists in the name Commonwealth, generated the ideology of radical nationalism that portrayed Australian society as classless, democratic, independent and egalitarian.

This ideology appears early in Australian history in the image of the currency lads and lasses, described by Peter Cunningham in 1827 as a "fine interesting race . . . [who] do honour to the country whence they originated." (Two Years in New South Wales, II, p.53 (AND)). In 1844, a character in Edward Geoghegan's play The Currency Lass remarks that "France may pride in her courtly airs and polished graces--to me the blunt sincerity and cordial frankness of a currency lad are far more grateful" (AND, p.187). Here we have the image of the down-to-earth Australian that has remained constant in popular literature and art. In the literature of the 1890s he becomes the bushman, reaching his most characteristic development in the ballads of

Banjo Paterson or the yarns of Henry Lawson. Joseph Furphy provides a definitive example, interestingly in the person of an immigrant rather than a native-born figure:

. . . he was a man who had staked all on Australia. He was a digger of the old school--that is to say, an immigrant fully alive to the pressure of release from the pressure of mildewed conventions touching squire and parson. A patriot of the Eureka type, he had stood for simple manhood against all aggressors. Unmarried, unpropertied, and committed to a precarious occupation, he had been a fiery advocate for every piece of legislation designed to promote prosperity outside his own sphere. He could claim a full share in the democratic movements which had chequered vast areas of monopolised land with freehold farms; which had replaced shoddy warehouses by busy manufactories; which had brought juvenile illiteracy and bigotry to a vanishing point; which, in short, had made Victoria--despite many grievous shortcomings--an object lesson in popular government.

'Tom Collins', 'The Passing of a Pioneer', Meanjin, Vol. 2, no.2, p.31.)

Furphy's character incorporates the confidence in a new country, the contempt for the old, and the hatred of privilege and pretension that constituted the bushman of folk legend. In his disrespectful guise he is commemorated in the anonymous verses on 'The Great Australian Adjective':

A sunburnt bloody stockman stood,

And in a dismal bloody mood,
Apostrophised his bloody cuddy:
"This bloody make's no bloody good,
"He doesn't earn his bloody food
"Bloody, bloody, bloody."

He said, This bloody steed must bloody swim,
"It's bloody me or bloody him, "
The creek was deep and bloody floody,
And 'ere they reached the bloody bank
The bloody steed beneath him sank--
The stockman's face a bloody study,
Ejaculating,

"Bloody, bloody, bloody."

(Adapted from Bill Wannan, The Australian, Melbourne,
1954, pp.pp.114-15.)

In similar mood C.J.Dennis composed his national anthem, to be
sung to the tune of 'Onward Christian Soldiers':

Fellers of Australia,
Blokes and coves and coots,
Shift your bloody carcasses,
Move your bloody boots.

Dennis had however already acclimatised the Australian to town
life in the larrikin figure of the Sentimental Bloke, also known
as the Kid, or plain Bill. In this book, which came into the
world with Henry Lawson's introductory blessing, the Bloke's

'Spring Song' celebrates the laconic endurance and hard-bitten exterior with which he expects the listener to identify, but at the same time flatters both subject and reader with the assurance that behind the tough face lurk feelings as fine as among men anywhere:

The world 'as got me snouted jist a treat,
 Crool forchin's dirty left 'as smote me soul;
An' all them joys of life I 'eld so sweet,
 Is up the pole.
Fer, as the poit sez, me 'eart as got
The pip wiv yearnin' fer--I dunno wot.

The young green leaves is shootin' on the trees,
 The air is like a long, cool swig o' beer,
The bonzer smell o' flow'rs is on the breeze,
 An' ere's me, 'ere,
Jist moochin' round like some pore, barmy coot,
Of 'ope, an' joy, an forchin destichoot.

The sentiments become so overwhelming that he is forced to conclude in desperation

If this 'ere dilly feelin' doesn't stop
I'll lose me block an' stoush some flamin' cop!

(The Sentimental Bloke, Sydney, 1965, pp.4-6.)

As we might expect, the Bloke finds he is in love, and, after

being duly civilized by his "lovin' tart" Doreen, settles down with her to respectable married life, quite unlike Lawson's bushmen. The sequence and the book end with the line, "Livin' and lovin'--so life mooches on. (p.48). By Dennis's next book, however, life has mooched on to a grimmer point. The Moods of Ginger Mick takes the larrikin off to war, but despite the inevitable casualties his laconic endurance survives the rigours of imperial service as even the dead "go singin', singin', singin' to the Gates uv Paradise". (p.58) After the war, Dennis himself turned back to the bush through the character of Ben Bowyang, which in turn became a comic strip drawn by Alex Gurney. Then, when the Second World War broke out, Gurney created the characters of Bluey and Curly, who face the hardships of their war with the same nonchalant disrespect that Ginger Mick had faced his. Thus the reality of imperial dependence is lost behind the myth of an individual independence bred by a free country.

This egalitarian, democratic myth is not confined to men. Barbara Baynton's work describes the appalling conditions faced by women in a male democracy, but Lawson shows how, in the last resort, this society depended on the strength as well as the work of women. Perhaps more importantly, Catherine Spence, writing from the radical and puritan colony of South Australia, showed both the brutality produced by men in their frenzied hunt for gold and the alternative possibilities open to women in a new colony not ruled by the prejudices of the old. She recognized, however, that these possibilities were open only to the minority of women who were able to obtain material independence. This reasoning continues to animate the work of writers later in the

century, including Louisa Lawson and Miles Franklin.

This myth of the independent, egalitarian, democratic Australian was resurrected after the second world war by such writers as Vance Palmer, Russell Ward and Arthur Phillips. who shows how it is emerges in the vernacular style of the Bulletin writers who "with a firm free hand . . . shook the naked tomato-sauce bottle over their plain-roast mutton . . . because they shared the national taste in cookery" (Overland 5, p.22). Although this may seem a long way from the Augustan classical vision, it shares with it the ideal that the space of the country will free people from the pretensions of the city. But while the Augustans believed that this simplicity would arise from the cultivation of the mind, of rationally governed sensibility, their romantic successors sought the cultivation of the instincts. In England, the romanticism of instinct in revolt against the technological rationalism of the factories located its ideals in the figure of the artist, who would free himself from the contingencies of the world by the cultivation of the independent soul. The Australian, on the other hand, reacted against the rational control of the convict system. In the harsh conditions of the frontier, the pragmatism and solidarity of the bushman made more sense than the lonely cultivation of the artist.

The radical national critics were, however, fully aware both that myth necessarily diverges from historical fact, and that the mythical ideal serves to hide the darker side of reality. One aspect of this darker side provides the "gloom thesis" or metaphysical interpretation of Australian writing expounded by such critics as Harry Heseltine or Vincent Buckley. Their

attention centres not on the laconic but enduring bushman so much as on the images of violence and madness that provides a continuity from the convict experience through the bush huts of the Drover's Wife or the Bush Undertaker to the twentieth century frontier of Capricornia. Graeme Turner has identified the importance in of this tradition that persists in images of enclosure from the the gaols of Marcus Clarke, to the schools and asylums of Henry Handel Richardson, and through to contemporary films like The Devil's Playground. (National Fictions, Sydney, 1986). We might now wish to add such television series as The Leaving of Liverpool. But Turner also points to the opposition between the cultural enclosure represented by these images and the frequently delusive and always elusive promise of freedom in the space of nature that surround them. Whether we see the Australian experience as oppressive or liberating depends on whether we look at the prison or the space. The radical nationalists chose to look at the space, but at the end of the twentieth century we need to be mindful of both.

The most intensive scrutiny of Australia's utopian hopes and terrors appears in Henry Handel Richardson's The Fortunes of Richard Mahony (London, 1930 [1917-29]). Mahony, a graduate of Edinburgh's medical school, is a product of the Enlightenment, who throughout the novel attempts to apply science and reason to the solution of human problems. In his desire to bring together inner and outer experience, to discover an individual unity of being rather than to impose an external unity of order, he is however thoroughly romantic, even if he represents the aristocratic rather than the democratic impulse of romanticism. He is lured to Australia by the individualistic promises of the

goldfields, which for Richardson, writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, represent the collective greed that, both in Britain and in Australia, has divided people from each other and from their environment. This greed, as Richardson describes it, has proven as fatal to democratic as to individualistic hopes. In her pages, the Eureka rebellion, far from being a demonstration of civilizing possibility destroyed by government brutality, is an embodiment of the greed and brutality of the mob. In the person of his old chum Purdy, this same mob eventually wreaks on Mahony the final act of destruction. Yet long before this, Richardson has shown that Mahony's own aspirations to an individual religious salvation are fatally flawed by their dependence on the profits of exploitation.

Mahony, refusing to share what he sees as the vulgar engagements society provides as substitutes for human communion, pursues instead an isolated search for the truth. Yet, as a colonist, he is torn by the conflicting demands of his ambitions, as his intellectual and spiritual aspirations depend on the prior achievement of a wealth that can be obtained only by exploiting the country or his fellows. At first, he escapes from this dilemma by returning to the practice of a medicine that is desperately needed in his new land, but even success in his profession depends on subjecting himself to the demands of a society based on greed. The success of his goldshares, the product of other people's labour, enables him for a time to escape his dilemma, but the crash of the nineties returns him to it in all its horror. His eventual collapse into despair and madness is a product of his inability to accept the reality of the exploitation on which depend the hopes of civilization in the

new land.

The novel does, however, offer an alternative possibility. Its justly famous proem portrays the vengeance of a land raped and despoiled by the violence of its settlers. Mahony attempts to escape this reality by returning to England, by constant travel, or by creating his own intellectual or artistic retreat. Each attempt at escape is thwarted by confronting him with the knowledge that the land he loathes has made him its own. The heroic moments in the book are when Mahony's brother-in-law, John Turnham, another visionary whose desperate despoliation wrecks his own life, courageously faces death without the illusive consolations of religion, and when Mahony himself refuses the easy escape of suicide. Both men live out the consequences of their choices and their consequent alienation. The ability to bring reconciliation is, however, given to Mahony's wife Mary. She alone accepts the land as it is and the life it brings, and through acceptance is able at the close of the novel to entrust her husband to the soil where he had never found ease while alive. Mahony's grave is in the land that had tormented him, and within sound of the sea that symbolizes both his restless temperament and the medium that linked Australia to a world united by imperialism. The close of the novel heals the wound the land had tried to avenge on Mahony and his fellow miners:

It would have been after his own heart that his last bed was within sound of what he had perhaps loved best on earth--the open sea. A quarter of a mile off, behind a sandy ridge, the surf, driving in from the Bight, breaks and booms eternally on the barren shore. Thence, too, come the fierce winds

which, in stormy weather, hurl themselves over the land, where not a tree, not a bush, not even a fence stands to break their force. Or to limit the outlook. On all sides the eye can range, unhindered, to where the vast earth meets the infinitely vaster sky. And, under blazing summer suns, or when a full moon floods the night, no shadow falls on the sun-baked or moon-blanching plains, but those cast by the few little stones set up in human remembrance.

All that was mortal of Richard Mahony has long since crumbled to dust . . . The rich and kindly earth of his adopted country absorbed his perishable body, as the country itself had never contrived to make its own, his wayward, vagrant spirit. (p.990)

Mahony's tragedy is a consequence of the masculine, exploitative energies of imperialism. The novel shows however that the settler can make himself at home only by accepting the land on its own feminine, nurturing terms.

The Fortunes of Richard Mahony is a thoroughly materialist novel. Mahony's attempts at finding spiritual succour are futile, and make a mockery of John Turnham's stoic death. The church is merely a social institution that lets him down when he needs it, and is irrelevant to Mary's practical compassion. Yet the reason for the church's failure is that it has replaced its faith with repressive moralism and social conformity. Like Mary, it cannot meet Mahony's deepest needs because it is not aware of them. Similarly, the pretensions of spiritualism are shown to be hollow, relying on a false intellectualism that Mary rightly identifies as irrelevant in face of the absolute fact of death.

Only in the novel's concluding pages are we pointed in the direction of a religious sense that would repair the fatal division between Enlightenment idealism and instrumentality.

The impulse to fiction of settlement continued through the interwar years in the work of Katherine Susanah Prichard, Miles Franklin, Xavier Herbert and, later, the rather different kind of historical novels of Eleanor Dark. These writers examined the function of the land in creating, for good or ill, a new kind of personality and hence a distinctive nation, composed, one might say of equal parts of the democratic and the brutal. This style of fiction culminated in Patrick White's The Tree of Man, although this represents a rewriting of the genre rather than its mere continuation. For White, like Lawson, the land produces eccentricity and madness, but unlike Lawson he finds in this madness a way of escape from stifling reality.

In this postwar period the focus of populist fiction returns to the cities, although the emphasis of the social realists remains, like Lawson's, on the working man and his struggling wife rather than on middle-class domesticity. The model for their urban characters remains that of the bushman, who continues to be celebrated by popular writers like Alan Marshall, Dal Stivens and Bill Harney. The idealised version of the common man celebrated in their work omits the conflicts and contradictions of the society that produced his image. Stivens, in his more serious work, examined the problems of industrial capitalism; Marshall, in his final stories, confronted the problem of male inadequacy and violence, and Harney vividly depicted the consequences of the racist exploitation of the Aborigines. Marshall and Harney, however, suggest that these problems would

be overcome if we would only return to the ideal of good-humoured mateship. While their work thus represents the best qualities of secular tolerance, it avoids confrontation with the sources of the problems it describes. By contrast, White's work, and some of Stevens, finds these sources in the inadequacies of humans who are unable or unwilling to face up to their own inner nature and its needs, and who therefore impose their own suppressions on their neighbours. The only escape White is able to find from this dilemma is through a transcendental communion with being. This communion satisfies the inner yearnings of the communicants, but fails to engage with the ugliness of their world. Among the postwar poets, however, we find a sustained attempt to bring together this inner world of desire and need with the outer world of work and society. Judith Wright, in particular, in both prose and poetry explored the dilemmas she had set out in her earliest work.

In Generations of Men (Melbourne, 1959), Wright traces a family history which is also a study of the fulfilment of the pastoral dream. The first chapter tells of the establishment of a comfortable family estate at Dalwood in the Hunter valley; the last describes their successors' achievement as pastoralists on the New England tableland. In between, they suffer the usual settlement catastrophes of loneliness, heat, drought, disease and debt, but the women of the family sustain them through to the plenitude of a rural aristocracy. The families come to accept and love the land as Richard Mahony could not, and are rewarded as it makes them its own. Wright's poems come from the popular tradition of ballads like Barcroft Boake's "Where the Dead Men Lie" or Mary Hannay Foott's "Where the Pelican Builds Its Nest",

which used images of the land's harshness to produce the idea of the enduring bushman. Wright, however, celebrates achievement as well as loss. The settlers have planted their vineyards and built their homes, but they have also planted hedges to hide them from the knowledge of the destruction that was part of the building:

She has forgotten when she planted the hawthorn hedge--
that thorn, that green, that snow;
birdsong and sun dazzled across the ridge--
it was long ago.

Her hands were strong in the earth, her glance the sky,
her song was sweet on the wind.
The hawthorn hedge took root, grew wild and high
to hide behind.

(Collected Poems, p.15)

Judith Wright never hid behind the hedge. 'Nigger's Leap', the following poem in her collection, recalls both "the screamed calling from the lipped cliff" and the deliberate oblivion to which we consigned the native peoples, refusing to recognize a common humanity:

Did we not know their blood channelled our rivers,
and the black dust our crops ate was their dust?
O all men are one man at last. We should have known
the night that tided up our cliffs and hid them
had the same question on its tongue for us.

And there they lie that were ourselves writ strange.

(p.15)

For Wright our alienation from the land is a consequence of our refusal to recognize or learn from its first possessors. She seeks an identity based on unity with the land and its first possessors, the Aborigines. But, like those of McAuley or the radical nationalists, her vision is essentially provincial and inward-looking, concentrating on what is distinctive in our existence rather than to what relates us to the rest of the world. These visions alone are insufficient to identify a possible future.

Some steps towards identifying this future have been taken by more recent writers who have tried to strip us of our national illusions. Robert Drewe, for example, has shown us the ugly Australian abroad, blundering into an Asia he neither understands nor respects. Mudrooroo Narogin, in a series of novels and sequences of poetry, has imagined the alternative possibilities that were destroyed by our dispossession of the first peoples. Tim Winton, in his stories of battlers, shows the continuation of the bush myth and the marginal status of those who still live by it. His work has always been characterized by an undercurrent of violence, but in his most recent novels, A Winter's Tale and Cloudstreet, violence becomes the condition of an historical alienation from the land that cannot be overcome either by pretensions of love or by practices of mateship. Similarly, Helen Garner's work shows people caught in the urban landscape of a modernism that denies the individual more than the momentary support of fleeting personal relationships. By contrast, Georgia

Savage celebrates people who turn their backs on the city, and on the confines of convent, family or convention, in order to make lives from societies they create for themselves. Her novels, completely modern in their settings, recreate the visions of a new Australia, based this time however on the rule not of law but of feeling. Her characters are prepared to explore their own inwardness and to open themselves to others. They therefore escape the twin confinements of reason and religion.

The contemporary novelists who do most to open Australia to its circumstances are, however, both men. David Malouf explores the same issues of meaning as Patrick White, but goes beyond him in finding his answers in the material world rather than in a metaphysical dimension that remains inaccessible to language or imagined experience, and which we must therefore take on trust. Malouf's first published novel, Johnno, studies both the potential and the inadequacies of mateship. His later work takes us beyond Australia. In An Imaginary Life his characters stand on the edge of civilization, gazing into the void at an originary moment of the modern world where the Roman Empire confronts the vast emptiness and possibility of Asia. The novel could be a metaphor for an Australia that still has to find its existence. The nature of this existence forms the substance of both his collection of short stories, Antipodes, which explores our European inheritance as it is made different in its southern counterpart, and of his novel Harland's Half Acre, which shows the country coming into being in the minds of its inhabitants, starting with the discarded landscape of southern Queensland, littered with ghosts of departed hope and memories of the displaced peoples, and finishing with the the paintings by which

Harland reclaims the land as his own by giving himself fully to it. His most recent book, The Great World, extends and tests the ideas both of mateship and of a possessed land into the testing ground of Asia. Like his other work, its importance is guaranteed by the concrete physical detail from which its characters build their world and themselves.

While Malouf builds from painstaking detail, Rodney Hall, most political of contemporary Australian novelists, incorporates the great sweep and the grand vision. In Captivity Captive he uncovers the gothic horror produced by the sexual repression of a religion that alienates people from each other and from the land they desperately claim to own. In Kisses of the Enemy he imagines the disastrous consequences of Australia's attempts to live culturally apart but economically integrated with a global capitalism. In Just Relations these concerns come together in a novel that at once fantasizes escape from this national captivity and an alternative to it. The village of Whitey's Falls is a metaphor of an Australia that is locked in its past, where memory whispers "Misery, misery" to the present and no children are born to provide a future. Whitey's Falls wants only to keep to itself, but is invaded by time in the form of a threatened road and the promise of development. In the face of this challenge, the people unite, life begins again and a baby is born. In the end, however, in the face of inevitable defeat, the people retreat once again, this time into a Tolkien-like wilderness where they become as one with the trees. The novel, published in 1982, can be read as an eery prophecy of the history of the Hawke government, which began with such promise only to collapse in the face of international capitalism and the demands of a free market

economy. It can also be read as a criticism of the more mystical elements of environmentalism and its refusal to confront the of political and economic pragmatism with an equally rational alternative. The death of Whitey's Falls is not only the death of an older Australia; it is the death of an Australian future, destroyed by a failure of courage by the politicians who refuse to reclaim the present.

The dominant mode of discourse in Australia today is that of economic rationalism. This discourse reduces all societies to the single scale of measurement based on the atomisation of culture and the market value of work. This model of society is one of the more extreme developments of the Enlightenment project of subjugating nature to rational control, and inevitably has generated various kinds of opposition based on the rejection of rationality in favor of religious mysticism and superstition. In Australia and other postcolonial societies one of the forms of this rejection has been the attempt to return to older and supposedly less complex forms of living. The myths of the bush and of mateship underpin a rewriting of history that will sustain this nostalgic hope at the expense of any actual engagement either with the divisions within contemporary Australia or with its dependence on the rest of the world. The novels I have examined suggest the alternative possibility that these myths retain the capacity to renew our society, but only if we remake them as inclusive rather than exclusive.

The Australian tradition offers the strengths of secular scepticism and egalitarianism, but it requires us also to face its exclusions and betrayals if these are not to constitute merely a defensive tyranny. Similarly, nostalgic adherence to

the dead Victorian shibboleths of crown and empire merely guarantees impotence and irrelevance. McAuley's attempt to restore the motivations of religion within the framework of rationality breaks under the weight of its own contradictions. Judith Wright's mystical identification with the land recognizes the importance of an imaginative openness to experience and the environment, but, like McAuley's, her vision is totalizing, and thus implicitly totalitarian. Yet both writers, through their exploration of the significance of our past, remind us of the constantly provisional nature of the new world, and of the human capacity to fashion it to our needs. If however our fashioning is not once more to end in the disaster that Quiros's settlers brought on themselves, if we are not to languish like Judith Wright's "Brother and Sisters", merely staying on while

Years grew like grass and leaves
across the half-erased and dubious track
until one day they knew the plans were lost,
the blueprint for the bridge was out of date,
and now the orchards never would be planted

(1971,p.18)

we will need the courage to acknowledge the failures and injustices of the past in order to build on its strengths. These strengths include a sceptical tolerance, a distrust of the totalizing vision of prophets, an awareness of the demanding and fragile beauty of the land, and a sense of mateship that can be extended to become community. Both David Malouf and Rodney Hall in their fiction recognize the limitations of these strengths,

the disasters of an Enlightenment reason that controls without understanding, and of mystical unreason that dies for want of intellectual effort. Yet their work also points to the integration of reason and imagination, the global and the local, that could produce a genuine Commonwealth of Australia. / We still have a last chance to fulfil the Enlightenment vision and the romantic hope of a new land where east and west can come together in a community that lives easily with itself and the land.

The fact that we can no longer believe in a single grand narrative of human progress is no reason for abandoning the search for both where we can find the best of both worlds.