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Changing Courses: Australia Since the 1940s.

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An important chapter in Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities shows the extent to which modern nation states are the product of the map-makers' art. They drew the boundaries and the state followed. By contrast, although Australia was also first produced on maps, it appeared on them not as a coherent entity but as Terra Australia Incognita, a place without a shape. Its existence was completed in the European imagination like a child's puzzle, a series of dots and lines produced by the first discoverers and explorers and waiting for further venturers to link them to reveal the true shape of the Unknown Southland they suggested. The schoolroom histories that faithfully retraced the journeyings of these early venturers began with the names placed on the charts by the Dutch navigators unfortunate enough to land on the desert shores of what they hopefully named New Holland, and continued to show how these were eventually joined to produce the outlines of a continent with an insular appendage and five teeming coastal shores from which the lines of inland exploration steadily radiated until they joined together in the dead heart. This pattern excluded New Zealand, which writers like Henry Lawson included in their mental map of the Australian colonies, but was just convincing enough to persuade Western Australians, including the influx of gold miners from the eastern states, to agree to inclusion in the Commonwealth that

took its birth date from the first day of a new century, so joining spacial and temporal symbols in a single narrative of identity.

As always, Lawson's work provides a convenient starting point for the exploration of nationalism. Yet if Australian nationalism is, as Sneja Gunew argues, built on an attachment to the land as a basis of difference¹, Lawson is a bad example. Although he exalts the character of the bushman and the bushwoman, most of his prose demonstrates his abhorrence for the bush, which drives men to drink or madness and reduces the nurturing strength of women like Mary Wilson or the unnamed Drover's Wife to the desperate eccentricity of Mrs Spicer. Certainly, in his verse he sings at times of the beauties of the bush, although usually, as in 'Eurunderee', through a warm glow of nostalgia that contrasts a happy past with the desolation of the present. From this kind of nostalgia can grow the kind of nationalist vaunt. We find this in its revolutionary sense in 'Freedom on the Wallaby', where the sense of shared suffering breeds a defiance of tyranny as the poet avers that "They needn't say the fault is ours / If blood should stain the wattle". This nation of battlers in this verse can however easily become a nation of braggarts. In 'The Star of Australasia' the poet finds that the sense of difference grounded in the common experience of the land is inadequate until it is allowed to demonstrate its superiority on the field of war:

We boast no more of our bloodless flag, that rose from a
nation's slime;
Better a shred of a deep-dyed rag from the storms of the
olden time.

From grander clouds in our "peaceful skies" than ever were
there before

I tell you the Star of the South shall rise--from the lurid
clouds of war.²

The poet welcomes this battle not for any principle of "right or wrong", but as an antidote to the rot of "a deadly peace". It is not paradoxical that this kind of nationalism has led to Lawson's adoption by the National Front as well as the radical nationalists as a symbol of inspiration.

Yet even as internationalist a poet as Christopher Brennan was prey to this kind of mindless vaunt, when under the duress of war he not only execrated the "bastard Teuton-Turk" but excluded the whole people of his enemies from the bonds of humanity, mere "carrion" to be cast into the dark that spring might return to the earth. While Brennan's bitterness was no doubt intensified by the failure of the hopes of his youthful time in Germany and of his marriage to a German woman, the racism, although extending beyond Lawson's to embrace the whole of Christendom in its approval, is as rigorously exclusive. The difference between the two is only that between imperial and colonial forms of nationalism.³

When, after the second world war, the left in Australia embraced the radical and democratic national tradition that they traced to Lawson, they excluded the kind of cosmopolitan culture that Brennan represents at his best. When in 1954 Stephen Murray-Smith established the literary journal Overland, he adapted from under Furphy the motto "Temper radical, bias Australian". In one of the essays the journal published to give substance its motto, A.A. Phillips expressed the radical view by

writing approvingly of an earlier nationalist journal, Archibald's Bulletin that it was

vulgar enough--happily and unashamedly vulgar. It met plebian taste by its snappiness and irreverence--but it was not pandering to the vulgar; its writers enjoyed that tone as heartily as its readers. If, with a firm free hand, the Bulletin writers poured the naked tomato-sauce bottle over their plain roast mutton, it was because they shared the national taste in cookery.⁴

Phillips goes on to emphasise that the Bulletin did not pander to the vulgar, but paid its readers the compliment of assuming that they could think for themselves. He distinguishes this from the tradition of English journalism established by Harmsworth in the wake of the public education acts, and now notoriously continued by Rupert Murdoch, once briefly Stephen Murray-Smith's student. However, his commendation of the "plebeian" taste of the Bulletin, and its manifestations in the writers he examines in the remainder of the essay, implicitly contrasts this work not merely with the popular press but also with work intended for a more cultivated audience. Although he emphasises the literary excellence of the writing of Lawson and Furphy and those who followed in their tradition, he argues that this quality arises from their origin in "circumstances which . . . are strongly based, not on a logic or a necessity, but on a communal pride of the heart."⁵

Murray-Smith develops this theme editorially when he vigorously defends Overland's stance against the purposes of the newly launched Quadrant, which he identifies as published by the "American-financed Committee for Cultural Freedom" and

characterises as providing a home for "a literature which is cut off from its roots in Australia and among working Australians". McAuley for his part had privately expressed the opinion that Overland's fiction as being little more than union propaganda.⁶ In the editorial that roused Murray-Smith's ire, McAuley had condemned the values for which Overland stood as representing the "ugly nineteenth-century vice of cultural nationalism" and the childish "rituals of a sentimental and neurotic leftism". With these exceptions, Quadrant planned to be eclectic, guided only by a natural interest in Australia and its problems, the principle that the material it published should be "worth reading", and a commitment to civil liberty and the values of the common law.⁷ Yet this apparent eclecticism is in fact limited by its own terms, each of which requires strict definition.

McAuley suggested this definition was suggested in his introductory his rejection of secularism and modernism, and his reduction the choices available in a time of "profound spiritual crisis" to "the materialist religion of Communism, . . . various eastern-tinted religiosities, mysticities and gnostic lures, [and] . . . a resurgent Christianity." It is evident from his choice of words that he sees only the last of these possibilities as viable. In a later essay expands this ideal by adopting the view that a "normal" society "would be a symbolic and analogical system, all of whose structures and activities, besides having their own reality, would exemplify in their own degree, principles that are in the first place cosmological but finally metaphysical."⁸ This order, which is recognisably mediaeval, is for all its invocation of liberty, more exclusive and totalising than the alternative, suggested by Phillips and Murray-Smith, of an

order based on the democratic traditions and communal experience of working-class Australians.

In appearing to reject the traditions of high art, the radical nationalists still spoke with a wide range of voices. As well as Frank Hardy's figures from the working class--traitors, clowns and tragic heroes--a cursory survey reveals Judah Waten's migrants, Kylie Tennant's women battling poverty and the authorities, Nene Gare's Aboriginal fringe-dwellers, the multicultural backgrounds of David Martin's characters and the varied city and bush predicaments that confront the people who crowd Alan Marshall's or John Morrison's stories and novels. The inspiration behind much of this work is the nineteenth century realism of Dickens or Balzac, but it takes its own form from the distinctive class and cultural nature of the Australian setting. The democratic ethos is forged in the absence of the kind of clear social structure and established values for which McAuley yearns.

Yet McAuley's desire for a society embodying metaphysical death is a reminder that realism tends to diminish life to a single dimension. The importance of such writers as H.P.Heseltine and Vincent Buckley, in his criticism as in his poetry, is not to reveal an alternative Australian tradition, but to show the metaphysical aspirations and absences at the heart of the democratic tradition. McAuley, looking for an alternative tradition, stifles the Christianity he seeks by divorcing it from its actual history in his country. His God remains an absent judge waiting to be received by the land and its people. Patrick White finds in the land itself a God of sorts, but this God justifies the ugliness and cruelties by

transcending them, by leaving the land. Buckley, however, searches for an incarnate God, immanent in place, in time and in the ordinariness of living. Paradoxically, he finds his Australian God by going back to his ancestral Ireland, finding there the source of the life he lives in Australia.

The incompleteness of life provides the subject of many of his poems, down to 'Golden Builders', which is both an invocation of the heavenly city in the streets of Melbourne, or rather of its inner suburb, Carlton, and a lament for modernity and the loss of the God invoked in the prayer that survives on the church wall: "Feed My lambs!" At the end of the sequence, the poet finds himself travelling back towards his childhood home, and encounters

three things converging
suddenly the thought of hot bread
entered me the car
filled with burning, driftsmell in the air
miles away, in front of cloudcover,
a great tuft of barnsmudge,
motionless slowly dissolving?

The bread is both sacramental element and symbol of nurturing home; the burning and driftsmell represent the cycle of natural life, so different from the mechanical cycle of building and destruction he had found, and celebrated, in the city, while the dissolving cloud is a vision of the constant death and renewal of the material universe itself, as well possibly as reminder of the heavenly clouds veiling the seat of God. This vision in the midst of a journey home enables him to reach the end question that ends the poem: "And my Lord's grave? His grave?" This

question is not so much an expression of doubt as a confession of his own forgetfulness, now recovered.

In two further collections Buckley trace his journey back to Ireland and the beginnings there of a new life and family. These in turn lead him to to his origins in Australia and the figure of his grandfather and all those "who were dead to before we were born", and who are separated from the present by time and from their own past by the near-loss of the ancestral language, for "Whom can you touch, or love, / in two half-languages?" All he has left is "a stillness / of whiskey like a land's stillness", and the toast, "slainte. Yet this is something.

You hand me the whisky, turn it

ice-bright as the light

in a mirror: I turn it

like music, and look into

the amber smokiness, turning me like music. (pp.12-13)

Again, the materiality of this world takes him into the immateriality of time and the recovered past.

The recovery of time and its connection to Australia forms the theme of Buckley's collection The Pattern, (1979), dedicated to the memory of his parents. The book opens with the sequence of prose and verse entitled 'Gaeltacht', which begins with the poet in Ireland, trying to find some way into the land and its speech. After meditating on the place and its history, he comes to his own family's part in it, and his link through them to the place of his ancestors.

They were from Munster, every part of Munster. But would not talk about it: "No, we're Australians now."

REally, a separate kind of Irish. From them came no cries of

"Up Tipp," or "Rebel Cork". They kept their heads low, ploughing the snake-like roots out of the thin-grassed Australian soil. Yet they talked occasionally in tongues, in a world-defying, wife-hating babble, drank Paddy, allowed a few books to insert themselves into the dour rooms, and leave a silver snail-trace everywhere over my childhood. That silence was not only lock but key, to be turned sometime in the future, their sullenness a burden to be carried secretly and placed back whence it came. . . This is a point of departure, not home for us, for anyone. (p.35)

The journey back to the point of departure allows him to recover what has been lost, to understand both the endurance and the deformation of their lives. It makes Ireland a part of his life, but does not make him a part of Ireland, which remains at the end of the poem still only a refuge for history's victims, a place that shines in his dreams "in the distance, like a whetted stone." By accepting separation as well as connection, the necessary silences of time as well as the recovered speech, he is able to accept himself and his past in Australia.

Although Buckley's acceptance is grounded on the immanent God he finds common to his experience in both Ireland and Australia, his experience remains particular to himself and to the history he shares. This historical contingency sets his work apart from the cyclical vision contained in the writing of his co-religionist, James McAuley, whose vision of Christendom renewed in Australia depends on reducing both history and place to the cyclical order of his 'Celebration of Divine Love'. His God remains stubbornly outside the contingencies of a world which provides at best an analogy for the cosmic order, a fact that

perhaps accounts for the pain of his last poems. Buckley's God, incarnate in materiality, has more in common with the order of things that Judith Wright finds in nature or Rosemary Dobson in both art and daily living.

It is easy but misleading to read Buckley's fascination with Ireland as just another exercise in antipodean Celtic nostalgia or sentimentality. The precision with which he distinguishes the experiences of his parents and grandparents in the new land from the life of their forebears in Ireland, and the separation he acknowledges between himself and the Ireland of the Gaeltacht, serve instead to renew the memory of Ireland as an active part of the history of the distinct nation of Australia. The family that he traces back to its roots is the agent of this renewal, through which it continues to reach into the future. This conception of the role and importance of the family distinguishes him from the realists, who as often as not were concerned with the disintegration of the family in the new land. The characteristic figures of Lawson's or Baynton's stories are the woman going mad at home while the men collapse into indifference or brutality in the bush. Even in Judah Waten's fiction, with its strong commitment to the future, the vision of solidarity tends to become a substitute for the lost communality of families which, despite the sustaining strength of their women, gradually disintegrates under oppression in the old world and a lack of supporting structures in the new.

The precision of Buckley's search for continuity in his own life, for the source of his own tradition, prevents it from becoming the basis for any totalising vision of the true Australian. It thus helps to clear the way for writers from

quite different backgrounds to establish these within the patterns of a continually diversifying Australian culture. Within these patterns, black writers have a quite distinct role, for they alone can trace their roots back within the continent we now know as Australia. It is however important to recognise that, while white settlement erased their traditional communities, it did not break their continuity, and they have from the first changed the nature of settler society as it has sought to accommodate, often brutally, to their reality. The elements of settler society are now also being recognised in their distinctness in ways that acknowledge their dimensions in time and spirit as well as in space.

I can mention only a few of the writers who have, like Buckley, been extending our understanding of Australia in these ways. First, Gillian Bouras, who in her accounts of life as a migrant in a Greek village has furthered our understanding first of what it means to be a migrant woman from Australia, and then, more remarkably, what it means to be a preliterate, strong Greek peasant woman. Similarly, Fotini Epanomitis, in her novel The Mule's Foal, takes us back into the world of a Greek village imagined completely from within, yet placed in a distinctive perspective by the fact that its author, as distinct from its narrator, comes from outside. Then we have Yasmine Gooneratne, whose A Change of Skies, a daring comic rewriting of The Fortunes of Richard Mahony, shows settler Australian society from the perspective of migrants from a society, Ceylon, which is older in both native tradition and links to the imperial centre. Again, Beth Yahp's The Crocodile Fury is written entirely from within Malaysian society, yet has won prizes in Australia where its

author now lives. It thus brings into the multicultural society of Australia the conflicts of another society embroiled in conflicts of culture, religion and different generations, and through them renews in Australia some of the Asian cultures with which it is entangled geographically and historically. Each of these works extends Australian national culture not by incorporating another element, but by adding to what is best understood as a braided fabric in which each strand contributes to the whole while both retaining its distinctiveness and establishing maintaining a living and changing relationship with its source.¹⁹

I would like to close by considering some lines from the late Ee Tiang Hong, another poet who became Australian without ever ceasing to be a part of his ancestral culture. He dedicates his poem 'Nearing a Horizon'²¹ "to his friends", whom he addresses in the opening lines, which encapsulate his condition as an exile, a traveller, who yet continues to live in his separate worlds:

Travelling separately, living under
different flags, but not so far apart as to
lose our bearings, we've kept in touch.

The poem continues with an invocation of the horizon, which was not something that enclosed that something they "walked towards", past the friendly and familiar to a world of legend and myth that was finally opened by the public examination that led to the immediate destination, the capital city. In the second part of the poem, however, he shows how within the horizon, as well as the beckoning path, lies the uncertain--wild beasts, crowded junctions demanding choice, and the "odd humans" whose monopoly

of political, cultural and economic power threatens and excludes. While the first horizon calls the poet from home towards its promise, these drive him away towards another horizon that he describes as "poor-rich, sad- / happy, be--not be." This horizon does not offer success, but only "the imminent relief--far from / the motley privileged. And out of the wheel." The final phrase, with its reference to the wheel of life, both makes Australia his last refuge and incorporates it in the world vision of Buddhism. In the subsequent poems of this, his last collection. *Ee Tiang Hong*, extends this theme of the poet, now living on the Swan River, as someone living outside his past, a contemplative but still involved observer who is yet getting on with his new life, weeding, wind-surfing, attending seminars, trying a new recipe on the barbecue. The suburban lawn in Perth is both his new world and, through his words, a part of the old. His imagined community incorporates eastern and western mythology and religion, global academic and bureaucratic practices and modern suburban living. This community he in turn offers to Australia.

Endnotes: Changing Australia--1940s to the present

1. Sneja Gunew, 'Denaturalizing Cultural Nationalisms: multicultural readings of 'Australia'', in Homi K. Bhabha (ed.), Nation and Narration, Routledge, London and New York, 1990, pp.99-120, specifically at p.103.
2. Colin Roderick (ed.), Henry Lawson--Poems, John Ferguson, Sydney, 1979, p.120.
3. 'Chant of Doom', in The Verse of Christopher Brennan, edited by A.R.Chisholm and J.J.Quinn, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1960, pp.194-5. For the circumstances of Brennan's attitudes to the war, see A.R.Chisholm, 'Introduction', *op.cit.*, pp.26-28.
4. A.A.Phillips, 'The Democratic Theme', Overland 5, Spring 1955, pp.25-27; quotation on p.22. Reprinted as 'The Democratic Theme' in The Australian Tradition, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1958, pp.35-37, quotation on p.40.
5. Overland 5, p.27; Australian Tradition, p.57.
6. In correspondence to Committee for Congress for Cultural Freedom Secretary Richard Krygier held in the AACF Papers, NLA MS2031. I have not been able to recover the precise reference.
7. 'Comment, by Way of Prologue', Quadrant vol.I, no.1, Summer 1956-7, pp.3-4.
8. James McAuley, 'Culture and Counterculture', Quadrant, 1976; reprinted in Peter Coleman, Lee Shrubbs and Vivian Smith (eds.), Quadrant: twenty-five years, UQP, St Lucia, 1982, pp.163-87. In the quotation, from p.177, McAuley acknowledges the source of these ideas in the work of Ananda K.Coomaraswamy and Rene Guenon.
9. Vincent Buckley, from 'The Golden Builders' in Selected Poems, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1981, p.135. Further references to this edition.
10. Gillian Bouras, A Fair Exchange, Penguin, Ringwood, 1991; Fotini Epanomitis, The Mule's Foal, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1993; Yasmine Gooneratne, A Change of Skies, Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 1991; Beth Yahp, The Crocodile Fury, Heinemann Asia, Singapore, 1992.
11. Ee Tiang Hong, Nearing a Horizon, Unipress, The Centre for the Arts, National University of Singapore, Singapore, 1994.