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Red Bones in the Sunset - the dead heart of Australian literature.

Text of the George Essex Evans Oration, June 18, 1972.

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Although the earliest European settlers in Australia were forced migrants, the settlement itself was promoted by men who had a vision for a new and better society in the south. This same dream nourished the explorers who searched for the inland sea, the squatters who pushed their flocks into the interior and across the continent, the unionists who fought for a fair wage today and the brotherhood of man tomorrow, the selectors who fought the squatters for a share of the land and the engineers who supported them with railways, roads and reservoirs. The dream, however, has been continually frustrated, by the harshness of the land itself and by the greed of the men who have exploited it. Australian literature is a record of this constant betrayal of hope.

v George Essex Evans' own life and poetry testify the failure of a dream. He started his life ~~in~~ in Australia as a farmer, but failed, and finished up as a public servant writing tourist propaganda. His best known poems record the same feelings of sadness and despair which other writers discovered in the face of a continent which remained implacable to man's civilizing attempts. In An Australian Symphony he writes

Is this her song, so weirdly strange,
 So mixed with pain, . . . ?
 Broods there no spell upon the air
 But desolation and despair?
 No voice, save ~~Morrow's~~, to intrude
 Upon her mountain solitude
 Or sun-kissed plain?

Similarly, in The Women of the West, he writes of how

The red sun robs their beauty and, in weariness and pain,
 The slow years steal the nameless grace that never comes again;
 And there are hours men cannot soothe, and words men
 cannot say --

The nearest woman's face may be a hundred miles away.

In both these poems, however, Evans runs away from his perceptions and hides in sentimental bombast. In this preference for the easy platitude rather than ~~to~~ the harsh truth Evans is still characteristically Australian. It is this philistinism which drives Patrick White's explorer to seek death in the desert in preference to life among men, and which ~~later~~ in White's later novel brings about the crucifixion of Himmelfarb. It is this change of attention from the harshness of the landscape to the crudity of

society which I want to examine today.

This change in emphasis can be seen in the work of Henry Lawson. His earliest sketches of bush life emphasize the harshness of the countryside, but against this he sets the endurance and fellowship of man. ~~These~~ Early stories like 'A Day on a Selection' and 'The Drover's Wife' tell of loneliness and poverty, but the wife in the latter story seems to redeem her environment by the courage with which she not only confronts the menace of the snake but, even more remarkably, maintains her humanity by dressing up each Sunday morning and taking the children with her for a stroll along the otherwise deserted track. This is courage of the same order as that which Mary Gilmore speaks of in her recollection 'Fire' (Old Days, Old Ways) in her tale of the bush wife who saves her hut and tiny flock of sheep by driving the sheep round and round the hut all day until she has a firebreak wide enough to keep them safe, and who then goes inside, has a cup of tea and sits down to her sewing. This courage, however, is ultimately defeated. We see the drover's wife again as Mrs Spicer in the pair of tales, "Water Them Geraniums". The symbol of civilization has dwindled from the Sunday walk to the 'few dirty grey-green leaves' of the geraniums which are her last thought before the death which comes to her through sheer exhaustion. The figure of Mrs Spicer, with her grim humor and recurring symbols of ~~death~~ madness and death, points to the eventual fate of the shy children of the bush schools and the hopeful maidens of the romances. But this fate is brought about not just by the harshness of the environment. The crucial factor in the destruction of the wives is the desertion of the husbands.

In his book The Great Australian Stupor, ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ the psychologist Ronald Conway distinguishes between patrist and matrist societies. Patrist societies are those in which people have identified with their fathers, and are characterised by respect for order, rigid morality and driving ambition and greed. Matrist societies, in which people identify with their mothers, show a greater respect for the arts and a greater compassion, but tend to over-protectiveness and moral laxity. Australia, in Conway's view, was for its first hundred years a patrist society, but one in which the ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ ^{rejection of} the imposed authority of England had left no generally accepted source of authority and no firm social structure, and hence no generally accepted standards of social or personal behavior. It represented the paradox of a patrist society without any conservative tradition, and was characterised by individual striving for wealth and power, by greed, drunkenness and brutality. In this society the code of mateship was merely a protective device for the dispossessed and powerless.

There is little doubt that the ideal of mateship expressed in the work of Lawson fits Conway's pattern. Lawson's own life was a failing battle with the hardship of a society indifferent to his needs and impervious to his ineffectual strivings to establish a place for himself within it. It is similar lives which he depicts most sympathetically in his stories. Although his verse descends to hollow ranting defiance, his prose delineates without illusion the vulnerability of his characters. ~~xxx~~ Like Joe Wilson, they are mainly men who have failed as selectors, or like Mitchell men who have failed within the family, and they have turned their backs on their homes for a life of aimless wandering. Their spiritual home is not the slab hut where a wife waits

for the cheque which never comes, but the wayside shanty where they follow the footsteps of Gentleman Once and Awful Example ~~mark~~ towards alcoholic oblivion.

Yet if Lawson's mateship has its origins among men who have been defeated by the barrenness of nature and the harshness of a patristic society, it does have its own tenderness and strength. Although it is a society of males, in its tenderness it has some of the qualities which Conway attributes to a matrist society. The tenderness is shown in the way the hard-bitten Mitchell tends a puppy in 'On the Edge of AhBlain', a tenderness which is counterpointed ironically against Mitchell's failure to settle down at home. The strength and the tenderness both appear in the story 'The Babies in the Bush', in which Walter Head lives with the fact of his own failure and the consequent destruction of his wife. The compassion which he extends to his wife in her present state is the measure of his strength. Yet in both stories the strength and the tenderness are discovered only in the face of ultimate failure, which they do nothing to hide. In its essence this failure is the failure of home and family, and in their absence the fellowship of bush mates can achieve no lasting value. Although Lawson's work testifies to the importance of human values, it also testifies to their final impotence.

Australian novelists of the twentieth century continue to share Lawson's revulsion against the greedy, materialist values of the city, but they still find no enduring comfort in the bush. Joseph Furphy is perhaps most at home in the inland, as he crosses and re-crosses the well-known tracks of the Riverina with his swagmen and bullockies.

Yet the ease with which the characters in Such is Life fit into their surroundings is deceptive. Behind the easy sociability lies the ~~man~~ never-ending struggle for grass. The men who yarn as mates steal one another's goods and betray each other to squatters and magistrates. The bush itself conspires to keep lovers apart and to lead ^{men} children to their deaths. The wanderers are men who have failed, and their yarning and utopian hopes are mainly an escape from harsh reality, but even the apparently secure social life of the stations is threatened by the greed of owners in possession and the lack of understanding of absentee partners. Joseph Furphy's bush and its people may be portrayed with affection, but it is the affection of nostalgia rather than hope.

Henry Handel Richardson's great trilogy, The Fortunes of Richard Mahony, differs from most Australian fiction of its time by being written from a conservative rather than a democratic viewpoint, and by dealing with the prosperous ~~man~~ middle classes rather than urban or rural workers. Mahony himself is a patrist figure. His surviving family are his mother and sisters, and like Mahony himself they are conscious of their membership of the impoverished Irish shabby-gentry. Mahony's ~~environment~~ whole environment therefore fits him for the patrist role of head of the family and upholder of tradition. It does not, however, fit him for the fiercely competitive money-grubbing society which he encounters in Australia, and as soon as a lucky break on the stockmarket makes his fortunes he retires to a life of patrician ease. However, the same fluctuating market which makes him subsequently ruins him, and the last volume of the trilogy chronicles his desperate

struggle against poverty and his long slide into madness. The precipitating factor in his succession of financial and professional disasters is the materialist society which neither accepts him as a person nor provides him with a sufficient income as a doctor. ~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~ The ethos of this society is revealed in the opening chapter of the last book, where Mahony has returned to Melbourne and taken up residence in his club.

Bitterly he regretted his over-hasty intrusion on this, the most exclusive club in the city; to which wealth alone was the passport. . . Well! if this was a foretaste of what he had to expect - snubs and slights from men who would once have been honoured by his notice - the sooner he got out of people's way the better. And bundling his clothes back into his trunk, he drove off again, choosing, characteristically, enough, not a quiet hotel in a good neighbourhood, but a second-class hotel on the farther side of the Victoria Parade. Here, there was no earthly chance of meeting anyone he knew. Or, for that matter, of meeting anyone at all! For these outlying streets, planned originally for a traffic without compare,- the seething mob of men, horses, vehicles that had once flowed, like a living river, to the goldfields - now lay as bare as they had then been thronged. . . after dark, feebly lit by ill-trimmed lamps set at enormous distances one from another, they turned into more desolate, wind-swept spaces, on which no creature moved but himself. (Ultima Thule, Penguin Books edition, p.2.)

Not only is the society vulgarly materialist, it is also ultimately

a failure even in its own terms, leaving only a wind-swept desolation in place of its early high hopes.

The true character of the society which is now revealed to Mahony is, however, no surprise to the reader. It is the same society which was castigated by Tangye in Ballarat in the first book. 'Here they lie . . . dreamin' o' their money-bags, and their dividends, and their profits, and how they'll diddle and swindle one another afresh, as soon as the sun gets up tomorrow. Harder 'n nails they are, and sharp as needles. You ask me why I do my walkin' out in the night-time? It's so's to avoid the sight o' their mean little eyes, and their greedy, graspin' faces.' (Australia Felix, pp. 283-4) It is the society which, in the succession of failing practices in Mahony's last years, denies him the human understanding he needs to preserve his sanity, and which ultimately incarcerates him in a mental asylum. This asylum denies the last vestiges of his human identity, and treats every attempt he makes to assert his dignity as a man as a further symptom of his disease and an excuse for further tortures of body and soul. It becomes the symbol of the whole society which has destroyed him.

Yet although it is society which destroys Mahony, Henry Handel Richardson shows this society as the inevitable product of the land ~~fraxxxkxkxixxxrxxxi~~ in which it develops. The opening chapter of the trilogy portrays the rape of the earth for gold, and prophesies the vengeance of the land on the people who despoil it. In this chapter one miner is crushed to death

in his own mineshaft. The Glendinning family, the Mahony's first paying patients and friends, and representatives of the squatting class, are destroyed one by one by the drink which is their resource against heat and hardship and their only way into the easy but fatal bush fellowship. 'Yes, there was something sinister in the dead stillness of the melancholy bush; in the harsh, merciless sunlight of the late afternoon.' (Australia Felix, p.195.) This is Mahony's own diagnosis of the cause of the blight hanging over the Glendinning homestead after his first visit there, but the heat is also a constant factor in his own destruction. It is heat which causes his collapse in Ballarat, and instils in him the fear of the sun and the distaste for his practice which requires him 'to go out into it, . . . to drive through dust-clouds so opaque that one could only draw rein until they subsided . . . to enter yet another baked wooden house, where he handled prostrate bodies rank with sweat, . . .' (ib., p.351.) It is his reflection on these circumstances which leads to his decision to sell up and return to England, but his experience of Australia has unfitted him for the narrow landscapes and tight little society of England either. He returns to Australia, where the heat and desolation of Barabogie destroys ~~his~~ first his child and then Mahony himself.

Although Mahony is essentially a patrist character, his patristism is of the gentry rather than the middle-classes, conservative rather than competitive, and thus unable to survive in the harsh environment of Australia. His patristism is softened, too, by a late-Victorian rehabilitation of feminine values, which

he shows in his regard for learning and the arts, both pursuits alien to the materialist society in which he finds himself. This restoration of feminine values was not, however, fully integrated in either society or individual personalities, and was expressed through an unreal veneration for the image of women rather than a real acceptance of women as people in their own right. Mahony shares this attitude, and so there is never any real understanding between him and his wife, Polly or Mary. She has a practical charity which copes with the environment much more successfully than does Mahony's touchy pride, but the lack of any mutual comprehension between husband and wife prevents the qualities of the one complementing those of the other. The consequence is that her compassion lacks depth, and his intellect lacks understanding.

The moral ambiguity of the Victorian male appears in also in Mahony in his intellectual flirtation with Grace Harriner. His failure to credit his wife with any intelligence leads him to overvalue Grace's intellect, and his lack of self-knowledge blinds him to the real significance of his own conduct. It is this split in his own consciousness perhaps more than anything else which leads to his failure to cope with the demands of the Australian environment. The values which he represents are real, but they are too divorced from human wholeness to redeem the society which needs them, or even to save the man who ~~lives~~ lives by them. It is therefore fittingly ironic that recent research has shown that the true cause of the madness which led

to the death of Mahony's prototype, the novelist's father, was syphilis contracted in his youth from a Parisian prostitute.

At the same time as Henry Handel Richardson was writing her trilogy, another woman novelist, Katherine Susannah Prichard, was publishing a series of novels set in the Australian bush. Unlike Richard Mahony, the characters in these books are mostly native Australians and at home in the landscape, but eventually the bush destroys them too. There is one highly significant difference, however, in the way in which destruction is brought about, for Prichard sees the bush not so much as a destructive force as source of potential harmony which we have yet to understand, and which therefore remains alien to us. In the last of this series of novels, Coonardoo, the bush is virtually the matriline spirit, represented in the life of the aborigines, and particularly in that of Coonardoo herself. The destruction of the harmonious life of the station, a life established in the book by Hughie's mother, is brought about by Hughie's adherence to a patriarchal code which denies him the ability to recognise Coonardoo's full humanity or his own true needs. Yet at the end the land still remains, waiting for someone who will understand its spirit.

This is a very different attitude from that of another contemporary novelist of the bush, Xavier Herbert. Herbert portrays human society as ~~self-destructive~~ vicious, brutal and self-destructive, but the landscape of his first novel, Capricornia, is equally hostile. When man does not destroy

himself, the job is done for him by drought, flood or swamp. Herbert finds no strength in either tenderness or pity, and the only quality which survives is a fierce and amoral joy in the fact of living.

By the time of the Second World War, therefore, Australian writers had created an image of a continent in which only the most brutal survive, and in which human fellowship is largely the refuge of the weak. Some, such as Katherine Prichard, discerned a hope of eventual harmony, but this hope was yet to be realized. Since this time, however, poets and novelists have approached the landscape in quite a different way. They have no longer been content to see it mainly as a theatre for man's actions, or even as a participant in those actions, but rather as an image for the inner life of man which lies behind all his actions. In adding this dimension to our literature, however, they have tended to react even more violently against the sterility of society than did their predecessors. Earlier writers condemned a materialist society because it denied human fellowship and compassion. Later writers condemn it because its pursuit of pleasure and material affluence denies the very being of man.

The new mood appears in James McAuley's well-known poem, 'Terra australis', which first appeared in book form in 1946.

Voyage within you, on the fabled ocean,
 And you will find that Southern Continent,
 Quiros' vision - his hidalgos heart
 And mythical Australia, where reside
 All things in their imagined counterpart.

The affectionate tone in the rest of this poem - 'the magpies call you Jack' - creates an environment which is no longer strange, to be explored and mastered, but one which is to be understood as part of our effort to understand the mystery of our own being. The voyage of exploration is now an inner one. But just as the luxury of reflecting on our inner lives had to be preceded historically by the struggle to survive, so the acceptance of the landscape in our more recent literature has only been made possible by the struggle of earlier writers to acclimatise themselves to its strangeness. McAuley's poem is made possible by ~~earlier~~ poems like John Shaw Nielson's 'The Poor, Poor Country'.

Oh 'twas a poor country, in Autumn it was bare,
The only green was the cutting grass and the sheep found
little there.

Oh, the thin wheat and the brown oats were never two
feet high,

But down in the poor country no pauper was I.

But Nielson's joy in physical beauty was hard-won, and his poetry remains haunted by poverty and death. It was left to a later generation to willingly choose the harshness of the inland in preference to the sterility of society.

This is the choice made by the explorer in Patrick White's novel, Voss. white's earliest novel, Happy Valley, published just before the outbreak of war, portrays as barren a landscape and sterile a society as anything in Lawson. His next three novels

explore human society in various environments, but in each the central characters are searching for some meaning beyond the details of the everyday round. White sees the material circumstances of life not as the main task but rather as trivia which hide the truth from us. This attitude reaches its extreme expression in Yoss, where the central character embarks on his expedition not to find new land for settlement, but to escape from settlement and find himself.

With Patrick White's work, therefore, Australian writing has come full circle. For the earliest writers, the land was a challenge to be overcome, and it offered the hope of a full human life. This hope, however, was defeated by the very harshness of the environment, which destroyed human aspirations and even human decency, and produced a society of utter sterility. The society was one dominated by masculine greed and aggression, and one in which human consciousness was fatally divided. In reaction against this society, writers have looked to the landscape for spiritual restoration. Instead of being an enemy to be conquered, and therefore eliciting the masculine spirit, the environment has been seen as maternal, restoring life and restoring the feminine qualities of human existence. As a result of this attitude, however, our writers have found themselves pushed aside by what is still essentially a patriarchal society. The hero of modern fiction tends, therefore, to be more often the lonely individual than the companionable weakling of earlier writing. The paradox is that in order to recover the feminine aspects of being he has had to

assert an essentially patrist independence of character. The interior as earth-mother produces strange offspring.