Western Australia represents 10% of the Australian population and is home to approximately 6% of the total number of publishing houses operating in Australia. Western Australian publishing houses produce roughly 3% of the total number of new Australian titles published in a given year and are responsible for less than 1% of all book sales in Australia in which the book was produced by an Australian publishing house.¹ The mind boggles at the infinitesimally small percentage claimed by Western Australian publishing houses of total book sales in Australia, including both Australian and imported titles.

Of course, comparable statistics could be produced for any Australian state or territory excepting New South Wales and Victoria – arguably the cultural centres of the nation and, without a doubt, the traditional centres of book publishing in Australia. Therefore, this analysis is not a specific indictment of the Western Australian publishing industry, but rather an indication of the difficulties common to regional publishing houses.

Still, there remain features distinctive to book publishing in Western Australia:

In this state because of geographic and, it might be argued, psychic distances, previous governments have made decisions to support Western Australian publishing. This remains a distinctive feature within cultural policy and planning in Western Australia, and virtually unique across the nation (certainly through its longevity and levels of support). This investment has, without question, paid off manyfold.²

Furthermore, many Western Australian publishing houses share a common concern: “It is as important a writer now feel free to conceive work in terms of a local environment as it once was to feel able to conceive it in terms of an
Australian environment.” These two features – state government subsidy and a commitment to local or regional expression – define the distinctive publishing environment of Western Australia. This article examines this environment and, in particular, a publishing house that has tapped these features on its way to achieving national and international success. Unsurprisingly it is also Western Australia’s best-known publishing house – Fremantle Arts Centre Press recently renamed Fremantle Press.

The Press receives a substantial subsidy from the Government of Western Australia, an important aspect of its history that has been justified on the basis of “Western Australia’s relatively small population, its distance from large markets and the attendant difficulties in marketing and promotion – all of which contribute to high unit costs and difficulties in market penetration.” As a result, this publishing house has been more successful in establishing a profile for Western Australian writers and writing than any other publishing house in the state and “is seen in other states as a model for a regional publisher which is achieving national prominence.”

Western Australian writer Peter Cowan has remarked that “the day of orientation to English or American publishers has not gone, but it has been lessened, and if it is passing for West Australians it is because of the existence of the Fremantle Arts Centre Press.”

This article continues with an in-depth exploration of the early years of this most significant Western Australian publishing house. This relatively brief period of time had major consequences for the future of the Press, not least because it was in the first five or so years following its foundation – remarkably quickly, by all accounts – that the Press made itself known as an astute and distinctive contributor to the Australian publishing and literary landscape.

In 1972, the Fremantle City Council established the Fremantle Arts Centre, and local poet and visual artist Ian Templeman was appointed its inaugural Director. The newly renovated Fremantle Lunatic Asylum, a colonial gothic structure built using convict labour and opened in July 1865, was chosen as the Centre’s first home. This imposing historic landmark building in the port city of Fremantle, Western Australia, had served many different purposes in the intervening years between the closure of the Asylum in 1900 and the opening of the Fremantle Arts Centre (in 1973, the year after it was established), but it was particularly well-suited to the latter organisation’s needs; it is still the Centre’s home after more than thirty-five years.
One of the earliest developments at the Fremantle Arts Centre was the establishment of a Community Arts programme, through which it offered practical, hands-on classes to the public in painting, sculpture and various crafts. The Centre also offered creative writing and literature appreciation classes. In addition to the Community Arts programme, the Fremantle Arts Centre exhibited the work of Western Australian painters, sculptors and craftspeople in specially designed galleries on the premises. The Centre did not, however, have an established means of “exhibiting” the work of the writers participating in its Community Arts programme, nor indeed the “wealth of writing activity in WA.” then perceived by staff at the Centre.⁷

Accordingly, the Fremantle Arts Centre began to publish *Patterns*, a poetry magazine, and *Pinup*, which Templeman describes as an “experimental project aimed at making more widely known the work of Western Australian writers”; it was a poster “devoted to the work of a single writer, either in poetry or prose” and “designed with accompanying graphics to ensure that the poster is attractive and could be pinned up on a school notice board, kitchen door, or in a public place.”⁸ Perhaps unsurprisingly, *Pinup* was phased out of existence, while *Patterns*, which had attracted a limited term guarantee against loss from the Literature Board of the Australia Council, became a regular feature of the Centre. *Patterns* was published quarterly and distributed through a small number of retail outlets in Western Australia. In 1981, the format was changed to include short stories. This continued until the end of 1985, after which *Patterns* ceased to be a separate publication and appeared as a section of *Fremantle Arts Review*.

Even in the early days of *Patterns*, however, Templeman felt the magazine presented insufficient opportunities to Western Australian writers. More generally, “in Western Australia it was felt that there was limited publishing access for local writers, with markets also concentrated in the eastern states.”⁹ Consequently, Templeman “seized on an election promise [in 1974] by [Western Australian Premier] Sir Charles Court that, if re-elected, a West Australian Literary Fund would be established to help local writers get published.”¹⁰ Court was re-elected and just such a fund was established. It was an important early contributor to what would become known as Fremantle Arts Centre Press.

Prior to this, however, a feasibility study into the establishment of a publishing unit within the Centre had to be conducted. Fremantle local Terry Owen was commissioned for the job, and after she returned with positive results, she also played an integral role in the drafting of a
constitution for the proposed press, which included the following mission statement:

To publish and promote to the widest possible audience the works of Western Australian writers and artists who may otherwise not be published by commercial publishing houses, and to record the cultural heritage of the State in a form that is easily accessible to the widest possible audience.11

The constitution, which was submitted to the Department of Corporate Affairs for approval, identified the proposed publishing unit as a non-profit distributing organisation.

Owen had further recommended that the organisation be called Centre Press, but this name was rejected by the Department on the basis that another business with a similar name was operating in Western Australia at the time. This confusion over the name of the press was reflected in the first newspaper article to mention its formation:

The City of Fremantle through its Arts Centre is about to publish poetry and short stories. A publishing unit, called Centrepress, has been formed, a typesetting composer bought and a manager commissioned to produce the first book of poems by next March.12

The press was not actually referred to in the media as Fremantle Arts Centre Press until its first book (published in March 1976, as predicted above) was reviewed in The West Australian on 24 April 1976.

In the meantime, the name on the application to the Department of Corporate Affairs was changed from “Centre Press” to “Fremantle Arts Centre Press” and the application subsequently accepted. Owen was named General Manager of the Press, with Templeman, who was still the Director of the Fremantle Arts Centre, appointed to the role of its Chief Executive. The Fremantle Arts Centre functioned as a host organisation and provided limited use of its staff, including Clive Newman, who was Deputy Director of the Centre and offered accounting and financial support to the Press. However, the vision was always for Fremantle Arts Centre Press to have as much financial and managerial independence as possible, and a Board of Management was formed, consisting of “representation from the literary community of Western Australia, the Fremantle City Council and people with publishing and business experience.”13 The members of that first Board included Ian Templeman, Terry Owen, Clive Newman, Bruce Bennett, Ronald Warren, Anthony Evans, and John Birch.
The Western Australian Arts Council provided a grant (the Western Australian Literary Fund would not start distributing funds until 1977) of $11,500 to cover Owen’s initial salary, as well as to purchase a typesetting composer, and promised a further $3,500 in working capital. It was expected that the Literature Board of the Australia Council would provide further funding in the form of publication subsidies for selected titles, as well as subsidise book production operations through the Book Bounty scheme it operated with the Department of Customs. An important distinction between funding received from the Literature Board of the Australia Council and State Government funding, is that only “the states … provided general subsidies towards the operations of … publishers,” while both the Literature Board and State Government offered “project grants … towards a single title or a group of titles.” Of course, all “state-subsidised presses were located outside Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra.”

Fremantle Arts Centre Press, established in 1975, published its first book, *Soundings*, an anthology of Western Australian poetry edited by Veronica Brady, in 1976. The book literally fell apart as a result of poor binding and had to be returned to the printers where it was stapled through the cover and spine to hold it together. Nonetheless, it was received positively:

For present trends in West Australian poetry *Soundings*, from the Fremantle Arts Centre, provides a catholic selection (including full-page photos of the poets). [...] In general, the book is one of the best offered to lovers of poetry for some time. Perhaps our isolation and our emptiness are spurs to poetic achievement.

This reception did not, however, signal an end to Fremantle Arts Centre Press’ trouble with *Soundings*. Lloyd Davies, solicitor and ex-husband of writer Dorothy Hewett, whose poems were included in the volume, threatened to sue the publishers for allegedly libellous material contained in one of Hewett’s poems. Fremantle Arts Centre Press received a letter from a law firm citing action pending, and *Soundings* was subsequently withdrawn from the trade. Happily for the fledgling publisher, however, most copies of the book had already been sold.

Fremantle Arts Centre Press’ second publishing venture was a companion volume to *Soundings*, an anthology of short fiction by Western Australian writers titled *New Country*. Local artist Guy Grey-Smith’s woodcuts adorned the covers of both books, a feature of the Press’ commitment not only to Western Australian writers, but also to Western
Australian artists. However, unlike the poetry anthology, which contained a few poems from each of a large number of poets, *New Country* presented the work of only six short story writers, with each writer contributing between two and four stories. Fremantle Arts Centre Press went on to publish stand-alone collections of short stories by all but two of the contributors (Iris Milutinovic and Hal Colebatch) to this early anthology, and single-author books by all but Milutinovic. *New Country* was fittingly edited by the single most vocal proponent of a regional conception of Australian writing, University of Western Australia academic and Fremantle Arts Centre Press Board member, Bruce Bennett. In his introduction, Bennett notes that “this is the first book devoted to short stories by Western Australians since Henrietta Drake-Brockman’s anthology *West Coast Stories* was published in 1959.”

The two books that rounded out the first year of publishing at Fremantle Arts Centre Press were Nicholas Hasluck’s *Anchor and Other Poems* and Elizabeth Jolley’s *Five Acre Virgin and Other Stories*. These two titles marked the beginnings of the West Coast Writing series, “a paperback series from Fremantle Arts Centre Press devoted to the work of Western Australian writers whose work has appeared in journals and anthologies but who have not yet had a collection of their work published. Each volume in the series is devoted to the work of one writer.” This passage appears on the back covers of both volumes, where it also notes that the Press “receives financial assistance from the Literature Committee of the Western Australian Arts Council and is supported by the City of Fremantle.” The support the Press received from the City of Fremantle did not come in the form of a direct subsidy, but rather in access to some of the resources (including staff) at the City-funded Fremantle Arts Centre. This same acknowledgement appeared in *Soundings* and *New Country*. Another point of similarity with *Soundings* and *New Country* is that the early volumes in the West Coast Writing series all feature cover and interior illustrations or photographs by Western Australian artists.

Hasluck’s *Anchor and Other Poems* was not a great sales success. Nonetheless, it marked the beginning of a distinguished literary career. Hasluck would go on to publish a further four books with Fremantle Arts Centre Press, including a volume of short fiction and a novel. Eventually, he left the Press and took up with Penguin, who published his *The Bellarmine Jug: A Novel*, which won *The Age* Book of the Year Award in 1984.

At the time *Five Acre Virgin and Other Stories* was published, Jolley had a very limited and local publishing record, yet she had been writing for a long time and sending her manuscripts to publishing houses in Melbourne.
and Sydney. She had received rejection letters from nearly every publisher in Australia prior to her first book being taken up by Fremantle Arts Centre Press. Clive Newman, Deputy Director of the Fremantle Arts Centre at the time *Five Acre Virgin and Other Stories* was published, recalled the event on the occasion of the Press’ twentieth anniversary:

Elizabeth Jolley, in the mid-seventies, was not yet published in book form. Her *Five Acre Virgin and Other Stories*, provided our first rush of adrenaline when enthusiastic reviews prompted strong sales in Perth. We boldly sent review copies of the book to literary editors around Australia, most of whom responded by running prompt and positive reviews, and discovered what was to be a major problem for the Press for many years – how to effectively and efficiently distribute our titles on a national basis. Discerning readers outside WA had to demonstrate remarkable persistence in order to acquire a copy of the book. Not many stores outside WA responded to our telephone promotion of a new Australian writer from an unheard of publisher, and those that did tended to order in minimum quantities. Many copies of *Five Acre Virgin* found their way interstate in single book parcels and we spent an inordinate amount of time chasing up outstanding invoices for ridiculously small amounts of money.\(^{18}\)

As Newman says, distribution problems were a recurring theme in the Press’ early development, as indeed they are for most Australian publishers, but particularly for those located outside the traditional centres of book publishing.

Another theme in the development of Fremantle Arts Centre Press – one not restricted only to the Press’ early years – is the loss of successful writers to larger, mostly multinational publishing houses based in the eastern states. Jolley is a prominent example of this trend. Her first book, published in the latter half of 1976, had to be reprinted the following year to meet demand. She published seven books with Fremantle Arts Centre Press, including three collections of short stories, three novels, and a final book – a slim volume of poetry and personal observation in diary form. This last book, *Diary of a Weekend Farmer*, was published in 1993, but Jolley had long since moved away from Fremantle Arts Centre Press. *Mr. Scobie’s Riddle* and *Miss Peabody’s Inheritance*, both published in 1983 by Penguin and University of Queensland Press respectively, are the two books that confirmed Jolley’s national literary reputation, and from this time her star was set to rise far beyond the reach of the small Western Australian publishing house that had given her a start.
Even allowing for the commercial success of *Five Acre Virgin and Other Stories*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press recorded sales of only $3,058 in its first year of publishing.\(^19\) This figure amounted to 17.6% of the Press’ costs in 1976, the remainder of which were made up for by a grant from the Literature Committee of the Western Australian Arts Council. The following year, Fremantle Arts Centre Press improved on this figure: a recorded $8,985 in sales constituted 26.4% of costs.\(^20\)

In this year, 1977, the Press published five new titles. The first three were single-author volumes in the West Coast Writing series by writers featured in either *Soundings* or *New Country*. These were presented in the same black-and-white format as earlier Fremantle Arts Centre Press books, with artwork by local artists featured both on their covers and in the interior. The most significant of these titles is a collection of short stories by T.A.G. Hungerford, *Wong Chu and the Queen’s Letterbox*, since Hungerford would go on to be a major author for the Press. *Wong Chu and the Queen’s Letterbox* was also the first book from Fremantle Arts Centre Press to receive its funding from the newly established Western Australian Literary Fund.

The other two books published in 1977 deviated noticeably from the Press’ previous publishing programme. The first of these, *Other Earth: Four Greek-Australian Stories* by Vasso Kalamaras, is a bilingual edition in Greek and English, translated from the original Greek by Reg Durack in collaboration with the author. This was only the second book published by the Press that was supported by a publication subsidy from the Literature Board of the Australia Council (the first was Lee Knowles’s collection of poems, *Cool Summer*, published earlier in 1977).

Another development in the Press’ publishing programme involved its decision to accept non-fiction manuscripts. This move was initiated when Peter Cowan presented Fremantle Arts Centre Press with a collection of his great-great-grandmother’s letters, which were eventually published as *A Faithful Picture: The Letters of Eliza and Thomas Brown at York in the Swan River Colony 1841–1852*, edited by Peter Cowan with an introduction by Alexandra Hasluck. Although it was not the case with *A Faithful Picture* in 1977, non-fiction would eventually prove to be one of Fremantle Arts Centre Press’ most lucrative publishing areas.

In March of the following year, Fremantle Arts Centre Press effectively announced its presence on the Australian publishing scene in a way that even Jolley’s *Five Acre Virgin and Other Stories* had been unable to. *The Weekend Australian Magazine* reported that Fremantle Arts Centre Press’ “public ‘coming out’ was really Writers’ Week in Adelaide earlier this year. They arrived armed with their catalogue and their books ... both amazing
and being amazed by the interest they generated.”

The Press still did not have in place an efficient mechanism for national distribution of its titles, but at least their presence at the Adelaide Writers’ Week ensured that from 1978 onwards most Australian booksellers knew Fremantle Arts Centre Press by name and, with increasing frequency, by reputation, as well.

By the time this article appeared in July 1978, Fremantle Arts Centre Press had published ten books under its own imprint and five more as commissioned work using the Press’ staff and facilities but not its limited distribution networks or imprint. The latter included titles such as *Woodline: Five Years with the Woodcutters of the Western Australian Goldfields* by L.R.M. Hunter, and *Let Me Learn the Steps: Poems from a Psychiatric Ward* by Mary Morris and Bill Hart-Smith. These publications did not contribute to the establishment of Fremantle Arts Centre Press’ reputation as a publisher of fine books, but the income they generated through the hiring of Press machines and on-staff expertise provided a valuable, though modest, source of income for the Press. This arrangement would continue for several more years before tapering off (though it would be briefly reinvigorated following the 1995 “Review into the Investment of Government in the Publishing of Literary Works” as a way of reducing the Press’ reliance on Government subsidy, and again in the last couple years as a “corporate consultancy” service).

One arrangement that came to an end in 1978, however, was Terry Owen’s appointment as General Manager of Fremantle Arts Centre Press. She was replaced by Ray Coffey, and the role’s title was changed to Managing Editor. At the time of his appointment, Coffey was the only full-time employee of the Press, as Templeman remained Director of the Fremantle Arts Centre in addition to his role as Chief Executive of the Press. Furthermore, the Press’ accounting and financial support continued to come from Newman as Deputy Director of the Centre.

However, the Press’ most significant contribution to literary culture in 1978 was not a book it published but rather a seminar it organised. In October, the Press convened a three-day gathering that explored the theme of “Time, Place and People: Regionalism in Contemporary Australian Literature.” The seminar featured speeches by well-known writers such as Frank Moorhouse, Thomas Shapcott, Elizabeth Jolley, Peter Cowan, and T.A.G. Hungerford. Their presentations were later reprinted in *Westerly*, which gave them greater circulation and cultural currency. The conversation about literary regionalism in Australia did not begin to take shape until the late 1970s and into the 1980s, and Fremantle Arts Centre Press’ first seminar was of unparalleled importance in this development. The Press would host further seminars in 1980 (“Writers and their Audience”), 1982 (concerning biography and autobiography), and 1984 (“The Writer’s Voice”), but none would replicate the influence of this first seminar.

After publishing four books in its first year in operation, and five books in its second and third years, Fremantle Arts Centre Press took the major step of publishing ten new titles in 1979. Most notable among these publications were the Press’ first collection of short stories by Peter Cowan, *Mobiles and Other Stories*, and Jolley’s *The Travelling Entertainer and Other Stories*. Both writers had published collections of short stories on previous occasions (Jolley with Fremantle Arts Centre Press, and Cowan with several different publishers); therefore, the publication of these particular titles by Fremantle Arts Centre Press marks a shift in the emphasis of the West Coast Writing series. The series was originally conceived as “a paperback series devoted primarily to the work of Western Australian writers whose work has appeared in journals and anthologies but who have not yet had a collection published.” In fact, this statement still appears on the back covers of Cowan’s and Jolley’s books, though it would be removed from books in the series beginning with those published the following year. This event, coupled with a new cover design for books in the West Coast Writing series (trading the old black-and-white format for a four-colour, full-bleed image), seems to signal a shift in the Press’ self-understanding: it clearly no longer saw itself as merely an amateur outfit servicing new writers and a small local readership, but rather a publishing house with significant commercial concerns, providing a valuable service to a broader community of both writers and readers.

Several more important publishing events happened at Fremantle Arts Centre Press in 1979. First, the Press published Dorothy Hewett’s play *The Man from Mukinupin* in conjunction with Currency Press, the Sydney-based publisher of theatrical and film scripts. In the foreword to this first edition
(a second edition was published in 1980), Katharine Brisbane of Currency Press writes that “this book ... is the first fruit of what we hope will be a rewarding partnership between Fremantle Arts Centre Press and Currency Press in the publication of West Australian playwrights.” While the two presses would publish a few more books together, including Rod Ansell’s and Rachel Percy’s *To Fight the Wild* in 1980 (published to coincide with the release of a film by the same name), this venture never gained traction. Whether this failure resulted in, or was the result of, a lack of theatrical and film scripts being written in Western Australia, it is difficult to say.

Another important publishing event that occurred at Fremantle Arts Centre Press in 1979 was the publication of *Fremantle: Landscapes and People*, a photography book with text by T.A.G. Hungerford and photographs by Roger Garwood. This black-and-white production is the first of many photography books published by the Press, undertaken in many cases for their potential commercial appeal; the profits from these books were typically intended to subsidise other, less commercial projects.

The final book in Fremantle Arts Centre Press’ 1979 publishing programme was *Out of Water into Light*, a collection of poems by Wendy Jenkins. This title was the first in the short-lived Shoreline Poetry series, which the back cover of the book describes as “a paperback series devoted primarily to the work of new Western Australian poets whose work has appeared in journals and anthologies but who have not yet had a collection published.” Clearly, this series was taking over from the West Coast Writing series, which (as mentioned above) in 1980 switched its focus from Western Australian writers “who have not yet had a collection published,” to simply “poetry and short stories by Western Australian writers.” Furthermore, the design of the Shoreline Poetry series is simpler and, therefore, less costly; the books are so short they resemble chapbooks, and the bindings consist of staples through the spine, rather than the “perfect” binding used for books in the West Coast Writing series. It is clear that even in this early chapter of its history, the Press was taking actions expressly designed to maintain the delicate balance between commercial sustainability and “publishing those titles which they believed needed to be produced.” It is worth noting that titles in the Shoreline Poetry series were nonetheless attractively produced and could be purchased for a small sum, all of which accorded with Fremantle Arts Centre Press’ hopes for the series – “to bring new poets to a wider audience.”

The following year, 1980, saw the publication of a further three titles in the Shoreline Poetry series. A collection of poems by Philip Salom, *The Silent Piano*, was also published in the West Coast Writing series. Salom
had not previously published a book of poetry, and his work had not been anthologised in any collection of Western Australian poetry, such as *Soundings* and *Sandgropers*; in fact, prior to the publication of *The Silent Piano*, Salom had only ever had two poems published, both of which appeared in the Press’ *Patterns* magazine. Nonetheless, the book went on to win the prestigious 1981 Commonwealth Poetry Prize for the Best First Collection of Poetry.

In addition to expanding its programme of poetry publishing, Fremantle Arts Centre Press published its first novel in 1980. Reflecting on this event in a 1996 magazine interview, Clive Newman had this to say:

“There seemed to be a certain novelty value in short stories by new Australian writers. It was not for some years that a novel came along deemed strong enough to publish” [said Newman]. That novel was *Southfalia*, a complex satire by Antonio Casella, chosen, said Mr. Newman, because it suited the sort of publisher Fremantle Arts Centre then wanted to become, producing quality books that wouldn’t have got a second glance from mainstream publishers. *Southfalia* seemed a worthwhile challenge and all copies were sold – eventually.25

The publication of *Southfalia* is exemplary of something Newman discussed in a 1998 interview:

There’s no question that in our early career we were seen as elitist in some quarters because we were doing works of literature, not commercial works. That comes from the charter that said “books that mightn’t be published by commercial publishers.” We didn’t ever see it quite like that, we certainly didn’t consider ourselves elitist, although we did some specialist books along the way. We published Elizabeth Jolley for instance and she is undoubtedly a literary writer, but she has a wide readership.26

From the way all the copies of *Southfalia* are described as “eventually” selling, it is clear this was not a book that enjoyed a “wide readership.” The description of *Southfalia* given on the flap inside its front cover sheds some light on why this might be, as well as giving credence to the observation that Fremantle Arts Centre Press was “seen as elitist in some quarters”:

*Southfalia* is a burlesque novel in the manner of Voltaire’s *Candide*, Johnson’s *Rasselas* and Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* that concerns itself
with Australia’s contemporary social, political and intellectual life. And in the larger context it is a satiric parable which examines what the author sees as the social and spiritual dilemma in modern western civilization.

Clearly, the book is couched in high literary terms, as were many of the Press’ early publications. This would change with time, both as the Press grew savvier about the way in which it presented its books to a reading public, and as the Press’ publishing programme shifted to include more “popular” titles.

Though certainly not “commercial,” titles in Fremantle Arts Centre Press’ Community Publishing Project were not “literary,” either. The first of these titles published under the Fremantle Arts Centre Press imprint, *Yeera-muk-a-doo*, relates the story of author Nancy E. Withnell Taylor’s ancestors in the late 19th century, in the process providing a social history of north-western Australia. In fact, this was the fourth book published under the auspices of the Community Publishing Project, a special funding initiative of the Western Australian Literary Fund; the first three titles, however, had been handled by the production unit of Fremantle Arts Centre Press without ascribing the Press’ imprint to the books. The Project produced its first title in 1979 and proceeded to produce a further ten titles before the Western Australian Literary Fund was dissolved in 1982, putting an end to the Fund’s Community Publishing Project.

Following the dissolution of the Western Australian Literary Fund, Fremantle Arts Centre Press (which had continued to ascribe its imprint to each of the titles in the Community Publishing Project following on from *Yeera-muk-a-doo* in 1980) attempted to perpetuate the legacy of local and social histories, usually with a very limited geographical or industry-based scope, first made possible under the auspices of the Project. In 1983, the Press published *Selected Lives*, a collection of writings by four Western Australians, which it explicitly linked to the Community Publishing Project. Coffey wrote in the introduction to this book about the Press’ “aim ... to make available, to both the general public and historians, books of local and family history, written from first-hand experience, which contributed to the understanding and recording of the social history of Western Australia.” It has been noted elsewhere, however, that titles in the Community Publishing Project had a “smaller print run” than other Fremantle Arts Centre Press titles, and that “the best biographies or social histories are promoted into the FAC[P] lists.”
The new format first seen in *Selected Lives* was meant to allow more writers to be published than was previously possible, as gathering together multiple writers in a single volume reduced the costs associated with publication. The Press would publish another book in this format – *Working Lives* in 1984 – before abandoning the project. While there may be an element of truth to Coffey’s observation that “these ‘selected lives’ are living, personal reminiscences which are an important contribution to the life story of Western Australia,” the books were perhaps too poorly written and their scope too narrow to attract an audience large enough to justify their publication based on economic or even social terms.29

The publication of *Yeera-muk-a-doo* in 1980 seems a world away from the phenomenally successful publication of A.B. Facey’s *A Fortunate Life* just one year later. After all, *A Fortunate Life* has now sold nearly one million copies. Yet, *A Fortunate Life* is a close relation of the less commercially successful Community Publishing Project titles and shares many of their characteristics, including first-person narrative and a focus on social history and the life of “ordinary” Australians.

The Press’ handling of *A Fortunate Life* was markedly different, however, from its treatment of these earlier publications. There was no marketing budget for the book, so the Press approached well-known figures such as former Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, and renowned historians Humphrey McQueen and Geoffrey Dutton. These endorsements, as well as a particularly strong recommendation from the host of a books segment on a high-rating Sydney radio station, drove a national demand for *A Fortunate Life*. Furthermore, the Press had negotiated extract rights for both a national and a Perth-based newspaper.

Fremantle Arts Centre Press had already built a significant profile for itself as a publisher of literary works by the time it published *A Fortunate Life*, but this one title changed everything. Much has already been written and said about *A Fortunate Life* as it contributed to the growth of this small publishing house, as well as its links to Western Australia’s sesquicentenary and the Australian bicentenary. *Yeera-muk-a-doo*, on the other hand, has gone largely unremarked in the history of Australian letters. Yet both are significant; *A Fortunate Life* because it marks the beginning of a new era at Fremantle Arts Centre Press, and *Yeera-muk-a-doo* because it marks the beginning of the end of an earlier era. This era was characterised by many experiments, only some of them successful (and even fewer commercially successful), though their cumulative effect would be to provide the foundations for the future success and national recognition of both the Press and Western Australian writers and writing.
NOTES


4 White, 5.


6 Cowan, 86.


8 Ian Templeman, “The Fremantle Arts Centre,” *Westerly*, 3 (September 1975): 44.


11 Taylor, 22.


15 Glover, 88.


19 Derrick Tomlinson, Chairman, Fremantle Arts Centre Press Board of Management, letter to Haydn Williams, Chairman, Western Australian Arts Council, 29 March 1983.

20 Tomlinson.

22 Katharine Brisbane, foreword to *The Man from Mukinupin*, by Dorothy Hewett (Fremantle and Woollahra: Fremantle Arts Centre Press and Currency Press, 1979), iii.


26 Winn, quoting Clive Newman.


29 Coffey, 3.
Rory Harris

Toys

the gulf
lays itself

flat & broad
& blue

a sun
finally takes

off its
overcoat to

nudge what
lies queued

along the horizon
as a child

would stack toys
at the end of the day
Sinister technology wraps the upper trunk and, attached to the branches of the *Eucalypt*, earphones dangle; a willowy weeping for visitors to hear each gulp and grind transforming sun and air. Sounds, once hushed in secret whorls, amaze

as a moment’s vivid sunlight in a dappled day. There is the thirsty click, tongue on upper palate; branches slurping as children with the dregs of milk. I look through scattered foliage to bulging clouds suspended in drab malignant blue. Memories shuffle greedy koalas and bickering corellas in a long pink twilight. Rain bounces heavy light heavy light silver green. Leaves pressed and rubbed are fresh and pungent. Here in Kew, the scraggy freckly trunk peels away the hiding place of wood lice, panicked and rolling over and around sap oozing from syrupy sacs along the too straight speckled girth. Where are the shapely stumbling roots; the chair and table in the shade? This is the banished tree searching deep, burying what should be bared, adapting as exiles do. And here I am exposed and sharing peppered air.
I have walked between the wind and the dying light
I have emptied your chalice into the sleeping fire
    where there was once stillness
there is a turning dizziness
where there once was sand
    the waves have broken

    in the time it takes
to bend an oleander branch
the morning will have escaped us
    and tethered itself
to a wandering breeze
and awakened the need we have
    to claw at the sky
and give back
what the past has taken
The opening sentences of a forthcoming article in *Five Bells* on Australian poetry by anthologist and publisher John Leonard make a large claim: “Australian poetry is at an interesting crossroads. An opinion can be heard, and I share it, that more poetry books of quality have been published here over the last few years than at any period in our past.” Do the fifty one recently published books under review here bear this out? And are we at a crossroads where new ways radiate out, or is it just a bend in a well-known road?

First impressions. Despite the quantity, there’s no doubt about the quality of the production of current poetry books. Compared with the 1970s and 1980s, print, paper, editorial care, production values are highly professional, and of a quality not seen since Edwards and Shaw books of the 1950s. As is obvious from the attached list, some publishers have embarked on ambitious programs of multiple volumes a year. How has this come about? There are no longer generous government grants and bounties as there had been from the 1950s to the 1980s, mainstream publishers have cut back their lists in other genres because of high costs and fickle markets, yet the stream of Australian poetry publishing is running a banker. Despite most commentators’ beliefs, perhaps there are more readers out there than poets reading each other’s work.

But that’s a judgment of the covers. Second impressions. What’s inside? In a review in the *Weekend Australian* (21–22 February 2009) Geoffrey Lehmann gives some indication: “But what is surprising about Australian poetry now is the sheer number of poets who have written outstanding poems.” He even goes on to say “Some readers may be surprised by how enjoyable much of this poetry is.” He’s right. And many of them are by poets who are only just making their names.
And third impressions. These are text-based literary poems. The wider public and more popular poetry of performance poetry, song lyrics, bush poetry are not there. Which leads me to the obvious question which puzzled Geoffrey Lehmann: “Australian poetry is enjoying a golden age. This claim is true, but I doubt whether the Australian reading public is particularly aware of this fact.” So why are there so few readers? John Leonard reflected on the lack of this necessary complement to the current high point in Australian poetry. Part of the problem is the standard of reviewing and criticism: “Most poetry reviews, though – and there are plenty to be found in various literary corners – are addressed to the simpler task of being promotions for the genre. Speaking as if to an almost empty room, they value the unremarkable and the excellent with an equal gladness. Sometimes the best books receive only a couple of notices, since there are many books to be busily covered.” This reviewer is very conscious of these pit-falls, and no doubt such limitations will be evident in this article. However, the result is to estrange the general reader, for as Leonard observes “Poets have taken over the care of poetry almost entirely. They pitch in like family, as if readers other than poets have little stake in the art. This of course locks poetry up: ‘recognition’, for a poet, starts referring mainly to the institution’s own cycle of inclusions and rewards. That self-containment has come to seem perfectly natural.” A quick glance at the back-cover blurbs of the books under review confirms that view. The general reader would be led to believe from them that genius, originality, and importance are to be found in all of them. So how to choose? And who would trust such devalued currency?

The cure Leonard believes is a wider engagement of readers rather than poets in the critical process, whereby curiosity and delight would drive the written response, rather than the routine performance-review vocabulary of fellow poets. In the United States, newspapers run short articles (1000 words or less) on significant poems, for example Michael Dirda in the Washington Post, which when well-done, drive the reader to Amazon and an order of that poet’s latest work. Where is the equivalent in Australia? Happily in this year’s collection of books is an example of this sort of exercise, though it is by a poet, Geoff Page, and not a reader/critic. Page’s 60 Classic Australian Poems has short essays on poems from Adam Lindsay Gordon to Bronwyn Lea which set historical contexts for the poems, comment on their prosody, and share with the reader his delight in them. ABC Radio National’s Poetica program also conveys that element of delight and surprise which can arouse the listener’s curiosity, but such interactions with the wider reading public are rare. Yet the publishers keep
publishing, and there are still many well-endowed prizes, so somewhere out there among the twenty million scattered across the continent there must be readers apart from other poets.

What will they find in this season’s crop? Fourth impressions. There are significant collections from senior (mainly male) poets, a very strong group of early volumes by young women, some substantial works by mid-career poets (mainly women), a miscellany of well-known names, and some idiosyncratic non-columbaria. In all of this there are a couple of volumes which really hit the spot for me (more of that later), and quite a few which needed a more sympathetic reader, which I suppose is not unusual in a list this long. Of the first group there is a posthumous collected works, Vincent Buckley; selected poems from several decades, Jan Owen; or many decades, Peter Steele; and new and selected from a long and fruitful career, Robert Adamson. Add to them John Kinsella’s ambitious epic length *Divine Comedy* and you have enough evidence of the broad highway which brought us to this year’s crossroads.

Vincent Buckley shows us the Romantic pieties of the 1950s landscapes, more directly and brutally revealed than Judith Wright’s. The great poems that moved me in the 1960s and 1970s are there: “Stroke” and “The Golden Builders” with their passion and grace, and most surprisingly for me, late poems which chart the course of ageing: the elegiac lament to an older A D Hope of memories of young women:

Eyes everywhere, ready
to guide us into old age,
vestals, anxious lovers,
hurrying the past

back, reaching out to see
if something transparent
waits in the flesh, reserved,
rousing to shine at last.

And more poignantly, the waning of creativity in ‘Pen Sickness’:

Well, the glossy white
Is there, wanting its darkness,
The stroke by which music passes
Out of the head.
There are no such uncertainties in Peter Steele’s retrospective. Art and the spirit flow in liquid stress-based verse (more fluent even than Auden’s syllabic essays), as a subtle and well-informed mind charts the decades from the 1960s:

The last big reading time was years ago,
   with Proust and Mann unfolding steadily
day after day in summer. Hooked, of course,
   I padded back and forth at home,
devouring print with all the manic air
   of one hoping for wisdom straight.

There is plenty of feeling in this selected, yet not of the sturm und drang confessional type; but it is thought which dominates in calm meditative odes on works of art, places, people, and all bound together with remarkable modulations of tone. As well, he has a precise and intuitive eye and ear for sights and sounds which give the poetry a warm brilliance. It is a very satisfying and moving volume.

While Peter Steele uses a classical formulation of language, Jan Owen has formed a language of her own: direct, phrasal, energetic, worrying the sense out of a feeling or an experience. Her poetry has a relaxed urgency, and if that’s an oxymoron it might have an explanation in some lines from the prize-winning poem “Scent, Comb, Spoon” in which a man searches for meaning in the memories of a lost relationship:

He writes the idea down,
   remembering how they watched two otters once –
that sinuous skein more fluid than water itself.
Do thought and feeling twine like that,
a spiral helix speeding time?

The twining of thought and feeling is in Owen’s verse, and it has remained remarkably consistent throughout the last three decades as she has ranged across whatever experience took her fancy. This might lead to dull repetitive exercises, but her imagination is too powerful for that. The last, hitherto uncollected poems show her powers at their peak and bear out the back-cover’s blurb: “glowing labyrinths of thinking and language.”

John Kinsella’s ambitious project to domesticate Dante’s Divine Comedy to the West Australian wheatbelt landscape (perhaps that could be the
other way round) is a daunting task for the reader. Individual poems catch the imagination and attention, but it is hard to hold in the mind as well the overall architecture of how the poem fits into Dante’s plan (despite the titles of the poems suggesting these links). Somehow the more opaque of Pound’s Cantos seem more approachable, but that is possibly because of the weight of commentary they now carry with them. Kinsella has written some direct and immediate evocations of the small area of his habitation (both physical and intellectual), and some rank with the best landscape poetry written in Australia, but the “bigger” picture that the Divine Comedy parallels suggest were beyond my capacity in a first reading. I couldn’t help thinking of another collection of poems which used a great work as its foundation: Derek Walcott’s Omeros, where the greater sense of narrative kept the epic parallels alive as one read the foregrounded poem. Although there are domestic story-lines embedded in Kinsella’s poem, I felt the metaphysical had a higher priority and that attenuated the impact of the fine descriptions of the physical world, but perhaps that was a product of my failure as a reader, rather than his as a poet.

Les Murray in his Bunyah Idyll-wheels and Robert Adamson on the dark estuarine reaches of the Hawkesbury have also explored in imaginative detail a contained landscape, but the results are very different. Adamson has a long-recognised gift, as the back cover with generous compliments from Ashbery, Tarn, Creeley and Malouf recognises, of keeping the energy of Romanticism alive in Australian poetry. In contrasting his poems about birds, including new poems in the last section of this book, with Judith Wright’s bird poems or Les Murray’s “translations from the natural world,” you realise that this is not like their versions of Organicism, but closer to the traditions of the late nineteenth century, the Parnassian, Yeatsian sense of Art over-riding Nature. His late style, spare and direct shows this clearly. It is an important moment in Australian poetry’s accommodation of its inherited traditions to its still-strange natural world. In the new and opening poem of this collection, “A Bend in the Euphrates,” Adamson evokes the mythic Garden of Eden, the challenge of art, and the “reality” of the here-and-now:

In a dream on a sheet of paper I saw
a pencil drawing of lovers: they seemed perfect,

Adam and Eve possibly. Steeping into reality,
I read lines of a poem on a piece

of crumpled rag I kept trying to smooth …
The poem ends with an open-ended introduction to the whole collection which asserts an independent vision and the craftsman’s intellectual and emotional control over the material world:

The map’s folded away, I travel by heart now, old lessons are useless. I shelter from bad weather in the oyster farmer’s shack. The moon falls in a column of light, a glowing epicycle –

this pale wandering spot on my writing table these fragments of regret:

Moving away from ego-based poetry of observation and reflection to more expansive poetry strong on story and narrative drive was a bracing change. Barbara Temperton’s three verse stories in her collection *Southern Edge* were one of the highlights of this annual review. She writes in the long and great tradition of Australian radio poetry—these poems are alive in characterisation, imagery and sheer sound and they plunge on with their stories of love, madness, murder and mystery, all set in the booming sea-world of coastal south-west Western Australia and the Kimberley coast. The greatest challenge with the long poem is variation, and Temperton has solved that decisively. She varies pace and point-of-view, carries it off with a muscular and lean verse which matches the immediacy of tone which poetry for radio must have. This collection is definitely an exciting reading experience nevertheless, and an example of what Geoff Page said about how enjoyable (and approachable) some recent poetry is.

Another revelation was the strength of the volumes by younger or less-established women. I put aside eleven to return to at leisure, for all of them gave me considerable pleasure and excitement at a first reading. There is an openness and clarity of vision and diction in these books which seem to be the mark of this decade’s poetry. Whether it’s Elizabeth Campbell sharing her passion for horses and music, or the spare processing of grief:

as if my heart were laid beating
in the mouth of some creature

on the soft tongue of a knife-toothed creature:
tyger or more alien: crocodile, shark
I have felt the cold teeth
as claw-setting to heart-gem
as the bars on my crib when I roll
and I think they are your teeth

and you are that creature, dead brother
by your own hand dead and I know

you are always my present & future
ghost-writer, dead hand
and that you have been gentle till now.

or Sarah Holland-Batt’s diction, keen as her subject in “Table Addresses Cleaver”:

The arctic joy of a clean
spine; the dull nub

of the heft. You, rusted
murderer, filleting splice –

how many throats
have you split
easy

as soft grapefruit,
tremors pumping
still air?

I soak up your blood. I receive
everything and ask for nothing.

The clever distancing of the poet into the not-so-passive table turns violence into wry observation. Violence and despair inspire Bel Schenk, but the poems are playful as well as desperate, helped by a language which is off-hand and racy. It’s attractive and intelligent, full of the teasing suggestion which she describes in “Index poem 1”:

Those lines you write,
I try to read between them
but get caught
in the flash of the pop-up ad
and the ratio of alphabet
to on-screen white.

There is the same yoking of violent insight with a creative eroticism in L. K Holt. Her poem “Portrait” shows her lyric gift and a striking economy of language where poetry and paint are indistinguishable:

Once paint dries
there is left only an air of bone,
a cleaned and stretched hide:
the body’s brute-matter loan.

More relaxed in her metrics, mimicking conversational rhythms but with sharp flashes of brilliant imagery, Kate Middleton also treats the ‘secret alchemy’ of creativity in “Whistler’s Boatman” where the painter is asked by a boatman to teach him to paint and the poet concludes:

From the oar to the brush, from mud-bottomed river to the peculiar chemistry of the palette, it is all one action,
one arc, one journey through the shimmering slurry.

Sandy Fitts and Jessika Tong are very different stylists. Fitts likes the long line and flowing syntax and a good argument with her reader, while Tong is spare and taut, poking her lines in your face, the verse sounding sometimes like fragments of a voice heard in a howling wind. But despite the differences, the similarities are striking. A deliberate and uncompromising engagement with the world out there, both past and present – a sort of resolute empiricism unlike the crypto-Romanticism of earlier generations. The same observation might be made of Petra White’s *The Incoming Tide* where a clear eye and a highly evolved and subtle style are evident in a very convincing first volume. And Marcella Polain takes risks skirting the inheritance of the powerful women poets of the previous generation, but always something unexpected happens, as in “in their gut” where ten medium grannies (apples) can be eaten (alive), but the cook has prepared them so well there are “no seeds to settle in their gut/sprout roots from which a tree might grow.” Bronwyn Lea has a lot of the physical
world in her poems, but they are mediated by the demands of art and the spirit. These are bright, discursive poems which bear their weight lightly, and art often has to defer to the real as in “The Ballerina’s Foot”:

six petite bones suffer
one hundred & six pounds

as the foot aspires to walk
upright on the extreme tips

of the toes. The long vamp
draws the foot closer

to the shank & the arch breaks
your heart as art arrives

at the pointe.

More established poets, Pam Brown and Alison Croggon, also arbitrate between the physical and the metaphysical, though Brown’s poetry is much more placed in the here-and-now with a collage-like catalogue of sensation as it strikes her. Croggon revels in the bricollage of political-speak on television, but in other poems mythology, religion, opera predominate. The collection is called Theatre and one is unsure where the stage ends and the audience starts, a potent emblem of the subject/object split and the nature of the real.

The strain of empiricism is also strong in Anthony Lawrence’s Bark, another book I shall be coming back to for many re-readings. Fragments of the real cohere into story and argument; subjects of a poem, a bird, a landscape, a black telephone are given presence and transmuted from object into numinous subject, as in “Style”:

He used half an acre of fallen timber
and fifty tractor tyres
stacked in the manner
of an old time bonfire
bound together with fencing wire
to provide light for his signature
on a document of closure
for the ravens and the banker:
his fingerprints on the trigger
Andrew Sant’s Mr Habitat trails along after the poet in a world-wide anabasis, in which he and the reader try to catch up with the speedy poet. It is a world of speed and translocation in which identity and experience blur, as the poet says “In the beginning, there was never / a getting away from stretching / and backflips – propulsion” (“Alpha”) – it’s clever and frenetic, as a story of sorts evolves, that of a hard-boiled detective poet trying to solve the mystery of his own identity.

John Jenkins, on the other hand, deals with his history directly in a series of memorials, places, times, people: Melbourne in the 1950s and 1960s under the watchful eyes (and eyebrows) of Australia’s headmaster, Robert Gordon Menzies:

In my dream, Mr Menzies is leading me down dark corridors. “Of course, there are facts, secrets too, but everyone sees them through the prism of their own interior life,” he says, and pats me on the head. “History is always like that, and political necessity must never try to overstep the impossible.”

Menzies might be an object of fun, but the times were not, as these poems show. It is a tour de force of memory, and the taste and smell of the times, as well as its corrosive conformity return uneasily to those who were alive then. Jenkins’ easy style, with its careful evocation of the conversational rhythms of the times, is another example of the approachable and enjoyable poetry Geoff Page noted in his review.

If, on the other hand, you want to be challenged, and profit by it, try Alex Skovron’s prose-poems Autographs. The density of thought is mirrored in the hieratic rhythms of the language, mimicking music and sacred texts. These are true autographs: direct transcriptions of the author’s cognitive and intellectual processes. That sounds very serious, but there is wit and fun here as well, and an engaging autobiography at the heart of it.

And of course there are those unpigeonholeable books mentioned earlier. The most idiosyncratic would be S S Prasad’s 100 Poems. They are concrete poems inscribed microscopically onto printed circuits and printed in their millions. They can only be read in their natural state through a powerful microscope, but helpfully they are reproduced in slim book form. Like many concrete poems they are witty but soon exhausted.

The other, very moving volume, is Janet Frame’s posthumous collection of poems The Goose Bath, so titled because she used a goose bath to store her unpublished poems. What a presence is in them. It starts with the first poem:
I take into my arms more than I can bear to hold
I am toppled by the world
a creation of ladders, pianos, stairs cut into the rock
a devouring world of teeth where even the common snail
eats the heart out of a forest
as you and I do, who are human, at night
yet still I take you into my arms more than I can bear to hold

and is still ringingly there in the last “How I Began Writing”:

Vowels turn like wheels: the chariot is empty.
Tall burning consonants light the deserted street.
Unwrapping the world,
unwrapping the world
where pine trees still say lonely, sigh, night, and refuse,
refuse, and their needles of deceit drop in my eyes,
I began to write.

A best-seller in New Zealand, the volume has now been published in Australia where it should be widely read as an example of how strongly an individual mind can inform a voice so that it becomes free of artifice and manufactured feeling.

So where are we in Australian poetry? On the Nullabor Plain or approaching some suburban nine-ways? It seems to me that I sense a change in direction, away from the established routines of the past where a search for the numinous in the natural world, for revelation in art, for revolution in politics, relationships and identity were the implied programs, to a greater sense of the empirical and the cognitive and affective processes by which we make sense of reality. Stylistically poets have turned to hard-edged modelling of those thought processes and how the world impinges on us – sharp imagery, fluent syntax, a strong individuality in line and phrasing – and from this year’s selection it would seem the younger women have already taken this exit from the cross-roads. This is not to make less of those who got us to this point, and there is plenty to be proud of there, but I think there is change in the air, a sense that the poet does not make things, but things make the poet. Perhaps we could take our lead from New Zealand. Janet Frame had already been there in her poem “The Place”:
I do not remember these things
– they remember me,
not as child or woman but as their last excuse
to stay, not wholly to die.

POETRY RECEIVED 2008–2009
Those marked with an asterisk are mentioned in the above review.

*Fitts, Sandy, *View from the Lucky Hotel*, Parkville: Five Islands Press, 2008
*Kinsella, John, Divine Comedy: Journeys Through a Regional Geography*, St Lucia: UQP Poetry Series,
*Lawrence, Anthony, Bark*, St Lucia: UQP Poetry Series, 2008
*Page, Geoff, 60 Classic Australian Poems*, Sydney: University of NSW Press, 2009
*Polain, Marcella, Therapy Like Fish*, Elwood: John Leonard Press, 2008
*Sant, Andrew, Speed & Other Liberties*, Cambridge: Salt, 2008
*Skovron, Alex, Autographs*, Melbourne: Hybrid Publishers, 2008
*Steele, Peter, White Knight with Beebox*, Elwood: John Leonard Press, 2008
*Temperton, Barbara, Southern Edge*, Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2009
JENNY SCHWARTZ

WHILE I AM WALKABOUT, WHO WILL TELL MY HEART TO BEAT?

Unstable. Unstable. Sand collapses, reversible volcanoes descending.
From my lawn, through the anthill, and into a stir of antennae. “Taste this! Taste this!”
All crowding to give, all shouting to share, and I, overwhelmed, burst out, burst up, thrust from a grass tree, shredding my nakedness, reforming in the black burning of years with neck craned, legs locked, to become a spear to pierce freedom, alone. To hook a star with a webbed foot and fling it under dirt where metal-shelled scorpions devour its riches, squirting poison in tailings lost men scrabble and hoard away. Let them. Extend my wings, turn away. The dark call of the river, its long lazy curve, sweeps me down to splinter the barley sugar reflection of city lights. Down to wait in the mud and stink of endings for the cockatoo flaring of sunrise.

Oh God, wash me out with the tide, beach me in the blue, tumble me clear as a jellyfish, and tender with pain.

Sun on the angled leaf of silver green. The kookaburra hoots his cackling claim to the tall shadow of a flowering gum. I am that laughter. I dance in the heat.
In the shimmer, in the sun-blaze, I am.
In the dazzle and the dance I dive deep.
In the lap and retreat of the river
I hear the pulse of the land, my heart beat.
MARKAY I

Depending on context markay means ‘spirit’ in Kala Kawaw Ya, the language spoken in Northwest Torres Strait

I began with a desire to disincline the dead, those shadow-folk of memories past.
Back then they were nothing to me
but images, stories, hiding under blankets.
Once though, I saw one as a lad, shading through my bathroom door.
My sister didn’t but I knew the corner of my eye gazed on that spectre.
It was a confirmation, my initiation.
The dead avoided me from then on, had made their point, no need for rappin’ and tappin’.
Sent their kin to me from time to time though.
Devil-types.
Had a hell of a hard time getting rid of them.
Haven’t heard from them for a good while now
No complaints there, too much screaming and twisting for my liking.

But one night, not so long ago, a dead man hitched into my dream.
It wasn’t really mine, he met me on the way to say goodbye to his mother and boy.
You see, a bullet had torn through his lung on the left side
He was sitting on a bucking backhoe knocking through the scrub chasing deer with his mates drinking and laughing with irises wide for light
When the bloody thing went off.
Christ it was a big hole, weeping and crying all that good stuff.
Lucky someone knew something and irrigated a stream into his arm
Said his veins carried pink cordial when he flopped on to the morning helicopter.
Say goodbye to a breathing man, got to think about digging now.
Death isn’t nothingness, but he passed there
sleeping days and nights
While our bodies shivered towards grief
Here, back home.
Day after day we twirled and prayed in the cool dark of the church of the
setting sun
And I stumbled in, wrong way.
“Might die now, stupid bastard.”
Didn’t say it straight, too much peril, but I knew I was a dead man
walking.

That was when we met.
At the backdoor of his house.
I lived there too.
He had come a big stretch, a thousand miles, knocking hard.
I got up out of my night cairn
Wondering why it was this gate and not the other.
I talked to him under the leaning frame.
Went something like this:
“I want to see old lady and my boy.”
I saw his abode long way, a hospital trolley-bed, and couraged hard,
“You can’t, go back to where you belong”
He turned, walked off and I lurched into daylight.

Months later he got off the plane and walked back into his room.
All cigarette smoke and puckered skin
flushed gently as living does.
And me still stinging from the bite of pointing pith to peel.
I freighted that thing for a long silent time, all spike and fear when his
mob went by.
Didn’t want the spirit burden that came with that magic and
there had not been a ghost-talker for a generation in that place.

Turning and turning I flew away and set loose my reverie on his cousin-
brother
who knew what strides markay can make if calling is on their mind.
“That’s our way, talking with spirits,
You got it now, you savvy that thing.”
Seems they all walk, the dead, through one place and another.
Fiona Wright

Ulladulla
For Peter

Each year the road winds a little less
the clustered coastal towns
progressively bypassed
to local traffic only,
to longer twilights, saltburn
and white ants.

We know each car’s trajectory now,
who’ll stop just out of Nowra for strawberry milk and petrol,
who detours to the blowhole,
or delays their toilet stop
until the crumbling doughnut shop
on High Street.

What it is that makes tradition out of chance:
the kilo box of stonefruit
that squeezes stomachs hard and round
as peach pips overnight,
the stubborn chaos of communal groceries,
the fridge filled with strings of sausages
longer than all our intestines combined.

We stack the beer fridge, stand
windswept on the headland,
feed our ankles to wet sand.
as the firstnight waves hiss towards the dark,
inevorable as breath, as earsong.
The great discoveries of gold in Western Australia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries sparked what was arguably the greatest and most spontaneous flowering of writing in the State’s history, but it has been relatively ignored by researchers over the years.

This is probably because access to this writing has always required disproportionate effort. Hardly any of the work was published in book form; virtually all of it appeared in local newspapers. AustLit, the online resource for Australian literature has recently taken up this challenge to recover and document the work of Goldfields poets. Beverley Smith’s pioneering MA thesis on goldfields literature remains a valuable starting point for anyone contemplating studies in this area. Smith had estimated that there were around sixty goldfields newspapers publishing literary work, but AustLit research suggests that the number was even higher. Tens of thousands of men from all over Australia and overseas had descended on the WA goldfields to try their luck as a result of the economic fallout from the so-called Long Depression of the 1890s. These T’othersiders were from all socio-economic backgrounds and they seemed to have a burning need to write about their “exile” and the new experiences they confronted on a daily basis in the harsh outback. In booming towns like Coolgardie (which quickly became the third largest settlement in Western Australia after Perth and Albany), Kalgoorlie, Boulder, Cue, and Meekatharra, as well as many others now virtually forgotten, talented newspaper editors quickly set up printing presses and actively sought contributions from local writers in the belief that topical verse was an integral component of good journalism. They were especially interested in verse (and to a lesser extent prose) written from personal experience and with local “colour” and they were prepared to pay for it. In nineteenth century parlance, this was...
referred to as “Manly Writing” and “Manly Wit,” meaning working class writing and working class wisdom derived from the so-called “University of Life.” To encourage and develop the talents of local versifiers and storytellers, work by eastern Australian and overseas writers was often reprinted from sources such as Sydney’s *Bulletin* and *Smith’s Weekly*. It was also supported by criticism covering contemporary literary developments. In some ways comparisons can be made between the editorial policies of the goldfields newspapers and contemporary talkback radio, insofar as there was a continuing dialogue between the newspapers’ journalists/critics and their literary contributors/readers. But, unlike talkback radio where feedback from listeners is mostly “off the cuff,” the material submitted to the goldfields newspapers was edited and polished before it was printed.

As was commonplace at the time, many Goldfields writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries published under pseudonyms. And while some famous names emerged from among them, much of the work accepted for publication appeared anonymously. To address the problem of attribution of this work, AustLit has established an “identity” known as “The Goldfields Poet.” While the anonymous work is inevitably of uneven quality, some interesting aspects of Australian history are being uncovered. “The Song of the 16th in the Trenches, Gallipoli,” describes daily life during the battle and reveals that field cooks were braving Turkish sniper fire and shelling to bring hot stew up the line to Quinn’s Post, the most forward of the ANZAC positions. Colloquialisms long lost to our language are also being rediscovered. But mostly the works shed light on the colourful local characters who rubbed shoulders on the fields, including those who made fortunes and many others who did not, along with the politicians, police, entrepreneurs, labour exploiters, claim jumpers, drunks, conmen, wowsers, the women and the often formidable but inevitably dispossessed Aborigines. Some of the works also recover the sounds and noises of the times, such as the rhythms of the great quartz-crushing stamps, the “Tinned Dog” chime of Kalgoorlie’s town centre clock and the “Cock-a-doodle-doo” steam whistles of the trains speeding troops to the ships that would carry them to the trenches of World War I.

Another outcome of AustLit’s goldfields research has been to uncover details about the life of the so-called ‘Meekatharra Poet’ whose 1925 book, *Selected Poems from the Works of J. E. Liddle* (published in three editions), contained a substantial body of work written against the trend of “Manly” poetry. Virtually nothing was known about Liddle beyond his book but AustLit has now established that he was a “Hatter.” In Goldfields speech this meant that he was a man who lived and worked alone (in a house on
Queen Road, at the outer edge of town). Tall and thin, he owned a bay horse and buggy and sometimes hired the rig to others. In Post Office records he is listed as a resident of Meekatharra between 1920 and 1930, describing himself as an insurance agent. He also corresponded with the Library of Western Australia about the loan of books during these years. But mostly he wrote poetry, and his work was often published in various Murchison district newspapers. Liddle left town in 1930, and his trail is cold after that. What we have discovered is that he left behind a wooden crate of manuscripts that he intended to send for. Alas, as time passed and no word from Liddle was forthcoming, local children accessed the pages that were soon lost in a game that involved tossing them into the air to be whipped away by the desert winds.  

Hesperian Press author and tireless Henry Lawson researcher, Chris Holyday, has recently made an important discovery that he has shared with AustLit. It has long been known that Lawson made his 1896 trip to Perth with his wife Bertha with the intention of travelling on to the goldfields. Until now it was thought that he remained in Perth with Bertha, living in a tent near Perth’s Causeway, because accommodation, due to the gold rush to the West, was scarce. But Chris Holyday’s discovery of an article by journalist and poet, Andrée Hayward in an early Perth newspaper has overturned this notion. It recounts a meeting with Lawson in Perth at the now long demolished Grand Hotel in Wellington Street. Also present was the mining promoter and writer, Randolph Bedford, and an unnamed photographer. Lawson had arrived at the Grand after finishing a job of house painting and his coat was marked with white paint. Bedford, a long-time friend of Lawson from Sydney, introduced him to Hayward. Hayward reports that during conversation Lawson mentioned that he had visited the WA goldfields before setting up his well-documented tent dwelling. The notion that Henry Lawson made it to the goldfields (possibly without Bertha) throws new light on some of his writing, and in particular, his short story, “The Shanty Keeper’s Wife.” In this story, written for and published by Perth’s Western Mail newspaper (12 September 1896), the narrator tells of a stop along the way during a bone-shaking Cobb & Co. coach journey to a rail connection at a place named Dead Camel. Dead Camel? Yes, satellite maps show that there is such a place, north of Coolgardie. In 1896 the rail link from Perth ended at Coolgardie, but prospectors had headed north into the Murchison and the rail to the various strikes was piecemeal. Was Lawson’s story coloured by details from first-hand experience of such a journey? In his book, Into the West: Henry Lawson and Other Writers in Western Australia: 1890 to 1930, Holyday had speculated that stories and poems
by Lawson with West Australian themes, such as “The Shanty Keeper’s Wife,” and “The Bulletin Hotel,” were probably influenced by information he had gathered through correspondence with some of his mates on the fields, such as “Smiler” Hales, “Crosscut” Wilson and Charlie Webb (who owned the Bulletin Hotel at Yundamindra). Now it seems Lawson may have had his own knowledge of the goldfields.

Randolph Bedford made several fortunes by grub staking prospectors in return for a share of their gold if they struck it rich. He was a close friend of Norman and Lionel Lindsay and Lionel worked for Bedford for a while when the entrepreneur established Melbourne’s Clarion newspaper (1897-1909). Norman Lindsay was a contributor to this publication. It is known that Lionel Lindsay accompanied Bedford on a visit to the West Australian goldfields in search of copy and advertisements for the Clarion, but a column recently discovered in The Sun (Kalgoorlie) suggests that brother Norman may have been along as well. The unnamed correspondent claims that Norman Lindsay captured the likenesses of Murchison “publicans, store keepers, agents and general hustlers at so many guineas to be afterwards immortalised in the Bedford journal”.11 AustLit has tracked close to seven hundred works of poetry and prose written by Randolph Bedford, and while he was certainly prolific, “Dryblower” Murphy was apparently not impressed, claiming that Bedford’s work made him “yell for salt”.12

As mentioned earlier, writers frequently used pseudonyms in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and it seems that many women masked their identities in this way. Lists identifying the birth names of writers using pseudonyms once held by various newspapers are no longer available. The famed editor of the Sydney Bulletin’s literary pages, A. G. Stephens, was compiling a list of pseudonyms linked to the identities of these writers that he was planning to publish, but this project was never completed.13 AustLit has obtained a copy of Stephens’ manuscript containing about two hundred names and cross-checking has confirmed that many of the writers listed were women masquerading behind pen names. Unfortunately, Stephens was inclined to link the initials of some of the married women’s husbands to their names, making it sometimes difficult to establish their given names. It was thought that very few of the West Australian goldfields writers were women, and that they tended to recite the works of others rather than write their own verse and prose.14 This now seems unlikely and it appears that women were writing but often hiding their identities, possibly to increase their chances of publication. As AustLit research into the Goldfields Bards continues, more fascinating information about them and their lives will emerge.
NOTES

1 AustLit has been assisted in its research by gaining access to an invaluable collection of photocopied material from goldfields newspapers held by the Perth-based publishing house, Hesperian Press.


3 AustLit has established records for seventy WA goldfields newspapers and this number is expected to increase as more are uncovered.

4 The Sun (Kalgoorlie), 1 August 1915.

5 The Goldfields Poet, “The Song of the Stamps,” The Sun (Kalgoorlie), 29 November 1903.


7 M.E. Morrell, “Sixty Years Ago,” in Geraldton Graphic, No. 4, 1976, 43-44.

8 Selected Poems from the Works of J. E. Liddle, Meekatharra, Western Australia: Telegraph Printing and Publishing Company, 1925; Perth, Western Australia: Albert and Son, 1925; Mullewa, Western Australia: Mullewa Mail Newspaper, 1925.

9 Recounted to AustLit by a former Meekatharra resident born in 1919 who was involved in this incident.

10 Hayward, Andrée, “Men I Ha’ Met,” The Spectator, 18 June 1904, 3.

11 The Sun (Kalgoorlie), 21 December 1924.


Where Mammon Meets the Desert

Bark watches the tourists dressed in Nike shoes and surf shirts milling around the shops, buying knick knacks for their third drawer down back home that houses the forgotten. The town wasn’t always like this. Bark remembers the days before the expensive villas spotted along the coast went up, when there were tin boatsheds on dirt tracks and not much more, and he was one of the only whitefellas in town.

He sees a lady speed walker trailing her buttocks and fisted hands behind her and regards her floppy skin timed off bone. Too young for the SAD brigade, she’s probably one of the new boomer variety keen to back an artist hobbyist. Rich with dollars and poor of sense - there’s an attitude in town among the boomers that the paintbrush is a consecrated icon. Out here they can be at one with their zenith, if they can only supply the necessary cash, whereupon approval is granted to watch over the shoulder of the artist-giant whose splashes of colour are pursued with hedonistic zeal. It’s a hippie-yuppie attempt at creativity by proxy: artist and Mammon are one.

Two Mormons ride up on their shiny black bikes.

“I’m deaf” he tells them winding up the window of his 4WD, and they hurry away. The town is full of them - Mammons and Mormons: M&Ms, Bark chuckles.

The sea and red dirt, the boabs and the heat - the landscape will survive them all. He knows this is why indigenous art will outlast the mongrel breed of white man art out here.

He goes back to watching his girl who is sitting on the side of the road with her younger brother and sister by her feet, arguing with each other. The one with bangs in her hair starts to cry as she wipes her brother’s snot from her arm onto the footpath and she stands up and hits the boy who promptly hits her back, harder.
Eupheme, his girl, is striking. She has dark curled hair, black eyes, and milky brown skin. He never tires of looking at her but hasn’t spoken to her yet. She has the thin legs of her people, yet is in perfect proportion, petite, with softness to the jaw and forehead. She ignores her sister’s tears and moves further back along the footpath trying to get away but the younger girl only moves closer.

“Shut up and leave me alone,” she yells at her sister. They’re waiting for someone or so it seems, perhaps for their mother? Bark realises Eileen could be there anytime and he feels a rising panic. He twists the ignition key and turns the air conditioner full bore. It’s hot as hell in the car. He wants to keep watching his girl, but the blonde biddy who owns the local IGA store comes outside for a smoke.

* * * 

That afternoon the rain starts up like clockwork. Heavy, warm drops fall and release the scent of the ground and trees – a fertile smell Bark realises he has missed since living in the city. He passes the sign on the outskirts of town:

**DUMPING THE FOLLOWING IS PROHIBITED**
CAR BODIES   FENCING WIRE
RAINWATER TANKS
DEAD ANIMALS SKINS  OFFALS

He takes the turnoff to the cemetery with its headstones like white teeth jutting out, just before the fuel station pit stop, last one for 250k’s. Only the Aboriginal dumpies lie beyond, and the open road.

Eileen’s mother was buried somewhere in the town cemetery with her
head bent like a black rose growing down. He walks along the neat rows, stopping at the only unmarked headstone, assuming it is the one.

He remembers there had been an outcry about Eileen’s mother’s burial some fifteen years ago. The traditional setup of the town cemetery was to bury Catholic feet pointing toward sunrise and Protestant feet pointing toward sunset, with wooden markers for the Japanese and the Malay who died water deaths in the pearling tides. He whistles *the times they are a’changing* and empties the water atop of his akubra before sitting down beside the blank headstone to pay his respects.

Until Eileen’s mother, the blackfella was never buried in the cemetery, as per council regulations. That was until the new shire president, hot on the inspiration of the Aboriginal right to vote and in the spirit of feigned utilitarianism, passed an order the blacks would be buried just like the whites. Not willy nilly somewhere out in the desert where anyone could stumble upon their bodies. The shire president had argued it was no good for the kiddies - Johnny Dexter had seen one dead and so had little Eliza Roe.

Eileen’s argument was that her mother was wrongfully buried in the town’s multicultural death compass. She and her people went into deep mourning of the kind that displaces the body and leaves the soul amoebic. The burial had been the first sign of what was to come. It had stripped Eileen away like a ringbarked tree denuded of its bark and starving without a conduit of nourishment from root to leaves.

* * *

Twenty years ago Bark had been carpet bagging around Australia. He had stopped off in town close to the petrol station, fuel gauge on E. After parking his old bomb he’d gone off to get a few supplies and thought maybe he’d schmooze up to a woman – give them the old traveller’s luck story and the Rhett Butler twinkle.

What he found was this woman doing these drawings, crazy patterns in the path of shoppers who stopped and stared at the Aboriginal with beautiful hair, long and wild about the shoulders. People watched as she created loops and curves like portraits of the wind or some spirit endlessly traced and retraced by her dusted ochre fingers and an old and lost compassion seemed to flutter up inside and surprise them. They reached into their pockets and pulled out gold coins. Bark put his coin back into his pocket, reached down and took the woman by the hand.

After that, Bark commissioned Eileen to produce art for him – *only*
for him, he explained his terms and she didn’t ask questions. He kept her in a hotel in town in a room with a small Kelvinator refrigerator and a double bed. The overhead fan turned in lazy orbit and made cutting noises through the air above the huge canvasses she stretched out on the floor. Bark supplied the paints and promised to keep her well fed and clothed. He let her keep the small monetary token offered by the town shire for her Tuesday art demonstrations in the mall. Otherwise, when a painting was sold he kept the money himself.

He raked it in after that. The market was ripe for dots and swirls, dust devils and the shifting sands of a land-soul that mystified the whitefella. Bark remembers telling his dealer back in Perth his thesis: how the whitefella would suck up indigenous art in an effort to stave off that fear of a distance beyond themselves – trying to tame that wildness out there where the mountains are in shreds and the plains are the colour of dried blood, where the spinifex spears are poised like arms at the ready in the silent wake of eternity.

He had spent the next few years laughing at the befuddled white man’s effort to give meaning to the unknown, trying to eek out a sense of place. The white man lie – believing they had usurped the indigenes by way of an easy relationship to a bought piece of canvas hanging proudly on the mezzanine wall, had Bark laughing all the way to the bank.

Then something happened. The market matured and became saturated. People began to regard sacred knowledge as the domain of a few Aboriginal elders and Eileen’s work went cold. After her mother was wrongfully buried in the town cemetery, Eileen’s comprehension, understanding and perception – her ability to know and work became clotted and filled with too many selves auditioning for reality. One night they found her dressed in a dark hessian sack clawing at the dirt over her mother’s grave. There were worms in her hands and her hair when they found her was like Medusa’s.

The town copper was called. They brought in a mobile floodlight. It lit up the hole Eileen had dug, revealing the tip of her mother’s decomposing brow. Eileen was taken away and the hole respectfully filled and turfed. He’d heard later that Eileen had gone walkabout after they had released her. He hadn’t seen her since. It was only a few days before the grass on the plot of her mother’s grave had turned to a brown crunch.

* * *

His girl’s name, *Eupheme*, is Greek. He looks it up on the internet one night. The name means *well spoken and the nurse of the muses*. It sounds special
– the lightness of a feather. He can’t imagine where the name has come from. It couldn’t have been Eileen’s choice, rather someone else in the fray back when his girl had been born who suggested it – some educated tosser sniffing around Eileen’s art after he’d left town, maybe his old dealer?

*A nymph of Mount Helikon,* Bark reads, wherever the Christ that was. *She nursed the goddess Mousai, was loved by the god Pan and bore him a son named Crotos.*

His daughter was gloriously young. She wouldn’t be bearing sons anytime soon, of that he was sure. The plan – his plan – was to carpetbag a modern shift in the desert sand dreaming. Youth and romance was where the Aboriginal art market could be at. Bark wanted to shove it up the rule-like insistence that had robbed him all those years ago – the idea that a soupy eyed elder Aboriginal was required for good art, as if the eye developed keenness of spirit with the pooling of age. Bark was willing to stake his return on a new kind of dreaming: getting away from all those damned dots, the ancients supplanted by the modern obsession with youth that takes its rightful place, the same way it had done in the European market. He was thinking of Banksy’s graffiti and street art in particular. If the girl had a good eye she could be the next big thing in an indigenous art world reformulation, but first he had to get past Eileen.

* * *

In the morning Bark drives the 4WD onto the track leading up to the dummies. Dogs and children weave through the tumbling dwellings that look like the withered weed and an old Koori seated in the middle of the road is swaying and dozens of random, jagged scars mapped across his chest puzzle through the air. He is dressed only in a pair of jeans and has dirt up to his neck. Bark stops the car and walks over. He can see the blackfella is pissed, his eyes blood wet like open wounds.

“Eileen here?” he is careful to avoid eye contact with the old man.

“Paint dreamin’” the old man mumbles and points a talon to a lone figure a hundred metres up the track. She is standing beside a stringy-bark eucalypt, “dat way,” he ushers.

Bark tips his hat and walks over. He looks around the camp for Eupheme, but his girl is nowhere to be seen.

He finds Eileen stripping bark that is harvested near the end of the rains when it comes off soft from the tree. It is used for cheap canvas after it has been laid out in the sun to harden. He knows Eileen is still painting. She’s been significant, but never successful like in the good old days. Yet if
the established market was anything to go by, Eileen’s best years were still to come – in the twilight of old age.

“Eileen,” he steps into her line of vision. She regards him with suspicion and at first it seems like she doesn’t recognise him then she starts laughing.

“You back ta make money outta me?” she grins. A fair call, there was history after all.

“You owe me lost income,” she challenges him.

So that was how she is going to play it. Bark isn’t surprised. He tells her to wait and walks back to the car. He takes an envelope stashed under some parking tickets in the glove compartment and returns.

She counts the money quietly and without expression.

“Not enough though is it?” Eileen knows he’s made nearly a hundred thousand on the back of her work over the years.

“All that’s left Eileen.” There is a moment when Bark isn’t sure what will happen next.

“How have you been Eileen?” he steps closer toward her, brokering peace.

“Tired.”

Her matter-of-factness is disarming. He always knew her to be passive, quiet – not untruthful, but never to give away her misfortunes.

He is sorry to hear it – “of what?”

“This,” she gesticulates impatiently towards the camp. “Always this,” she sits down heavily on a broken tree stump.

Bark doesn’t want to lay his cards down just yet.

“Some folks been doing real well though – making thousands. Your best years are yet to come,” he gives her his best smile but they both know there are few opportunities in the camp. That it’s been dead around here for years. Only Mimmupakka, an elder, is doing well out here. Bark read in the paper before he left the city that the old fella had delivered thirteen Toyotas to his family last year. Yet even poor Mimmupakka didn’t have enough money for a pack of cigarettes.

“You got to get away from camp,” he knows the suggestion could offend her. What he means is “away from family.”

Bark decides to go for it, “it’s tough – that’s why I’m back. I think I’ve found a way out. About our daughter,” he began.

* * *

Eupheme is even more beautiful up close. She has her mother’s features
but there is something in her mouth that belongs to him. Eileen had laughed at his plans, “that girl has never held a paintbrush in her life,” she cracked.

Now it is time to see.

Bark knows what he wants – what will sell. He doesn’t want dots and swirls or mythical figures and sacred sites. He wants worlds to collide – the graphic and raw edge characteristic of modern street art with the black, yellow, red and white pigment colours giving it an indigenous twist.

“Like Emily Kame Kngwarreye,” he explains to Eupheme, “but more modern with more graphic hard detail.” If he gets the style right the drawcard of his daughter’s youth will mostly be in marketing.

He shows Eupheme pictures of works on surfboards and skateboards and he brings out the acrylic paints and the canvas from the back of the 4WD. For the first time her parents stand together united, instructing her how to paint.

* * *

What resulted was breath-taking. Abstract and colourful, the work obscures the underlying tradition.

“A blackfella Pollock,” Bark quips and opens a bottle of champagne but before he touches the glass to his lips, Eupheme comes at him with the back end of a shovel.

“Cheap bastard,” he hears Eupheme quip, “and where the fuck have you been all these years,” she accuses just before he falls heavily to the ground unconscious.

Then he sees his girl coming at him out of the spinifex grass covered hillocks where she strides past the white contorted trunk of a ballerina gum in dance. Eupheme is commanding him to dive deep into the land. He will grow there, she tells him and he will live there and be there, where the dealers and white-man collectors are buried with their golden heads growing down. “It is the dollar-dreaming,” his girl is saying to him as he feels his legs harden and lock cold, “where Mammon meets the desert.”
CONVERSATION
“The whole vocabulary of nakedness.”
Garrison Keillor

In time look how eloquent
we have become –
even in night’s blindness
the braille of your back
parentheses of hips
breasts that pout
and insist on pampering
each unedited kiss punctuating
sentences that all contain
love’s eccentric syllables
encyclopaedias of reach
and touch and all
the footnotes of desire
paragraphs full of the same
inflexible message
hidden deep in the lexicons
exclamations of our only
second language.
CAMERON FULLER

MORPHECOLOGY

linguals ascend the escarpment momentarily trapped like salt in the air between ocean and mountain but butterflies and pollutants fly around her gardens the peppermint and sage at tackled by unsavoury organisms organic pollen causes muscle spasms in nostrils and gesundheit in exotic accents truncated patches of forest are lonely in the city morphs are followed by emus aussie bush mythology is more than a picnic with emus and busy thumbs thumbing sms codes the beach interrupts the view of steelworks the illusion of romance is alive each night by a gas flame above the pacific in valleys and along the coastline currawong calls echo recall history through images of animated pterodactyls and tall ships shared meanings don’t begin with the end eavour sailing through the heads learn how not to forget the burning fatigue of summer afternoons produces a guttural nonce a worldview articulated in alphabetic smoke signs travel without vitamins and antimalarials try to photograph the dense terrain of memory cloud plant
ations thrive in highlands the future is not a package tour
ronicities of fake watches and the humid smell of desperation sticking to hawaiian shirts a tour group forms a tribe and discovers in its collective psyche a small endangered mammal

This year as in years past, the story of self told by self or other is strongly represented in this article review, and ranges from Brian Dibble’s impressive and endlessly fascinating biography of Elizabeth Jolley, to the earnest memoir of Paul Crittenden, crafted with integrity but a little too much attention to the dross of life, to Kim E. Beazley Sr. monotonous but historically worthy recording of his time as a politician who attained high office at state and federal level. Susan Lever’s critical study of David Foster’s ouevre draws on “the writer and his life” template, and frequently reads as a biography of sorts of a writer of a rather odd sort but also of a body of work that, as she notes, is quite indistinguishable from its author; Rosemary Lancaster’s Je Suis Australienne: Remarkable Women in France 1880-1945 takes the prize for the most abstruse title while delivering an engaging and well-crafted study of a range of Australian women who spent time in France in the stated period. A couple of works from UQP’s Series, Creative Economy and Innovation Culture, provide knowledgeable overviews of the fields of research they explore, and no doubt will prove extremely useful earners through that venerable profession of the “set text book.” Among this year’s work Philip Mead’s Networked Language: Culture and History in Australia History stands out head and shoulders above the rest, at once a real pleasure to read and an intellectually prevaricating study of Australia’s culture of letters. On occasion a little less scholarly brio would not have gone amiss, though it is a joy to engage with such uncompromisingly intellectual writing. A number of other works by renowned and unknown authors complete the list of non-fiction received by Westerly this year.

Brian Dibble’s Doing Life: A Biography of Elizabeth Jolley is an excellent contribution to Australian literary scholarship, a product of thorough research, patient analysis and mature intelligence. Although there is never
any doubt how close the biographer is to his subject, Dibble’s work shows that it is possible to write about that subject with deep affection and unflinchingly honest scrutiny. To say that the book offers a celebration of Jolley and of her work is not overstating or misrepresenting what it does with such critical insight and analytical sophistication. This is a densely researched study of the writer in the novels but equally of the novels as works of fiction that draw closely on the life experiences of their author. Each work is explored with patience and insight, its richness brought alive by an obvious closeness between the biographer and his subject, intellectual as well as emotional. As it comes to a close the biography opens up into a gentle and loud acclaim of the life and work of one of the most significant Australian writers in the last quarter of the twentieth-century and a woman whose life was as complex as her fiction. Jolley’s work is today far less popular than a decade ago or so, as Dibble points out, yet it remains no less radically subversive and inexhaustibly enjoyable for the passage of time. The biography will not only fill in the gaps in knowledge for Jolley’s extensive and varied body of readers but it will go on giving pleasure to generations of readers interested in the work of the much-loved and rather quirky West Australian writer.

Dibble quotes in his study Jolley’s view that autobiography is only ever half as good as the life one has lived, a view of which she often reminded herself. To have experienced much and richly is no guarantee of a good story, or a story told well and entertainingly. She should know, having spent a lifetime mining what Dibble shows us to have been at all times a complicated but clearly rewarding existence. Paul Crittenden’s Changing Orders: Scenes of Academic and Clerical Life seems set to illustrate Jolley’s words. Crittenden is obviously a good man who has lived a remarkable life. As a philosopher he achieved enormous academic success, reaching the pinnacles of the philosophy establishment in Australia as professor and chair at the University of Sydney, and eventually Dean of Arts for two terms. He was, even if we hear of it first hand, a gentle and just leader, an inspirational teacher and an exemplary mentor; he is also, unusually in an age when everyone is a celebrity, a modest man who prefers not to dwell on his achievements. One of the book’s most memorable aspects is the care and respect Crittenden conveys for the many “others” in his life, in a classic instantiation of the generosity of his memories, crowded not with his own self-importance but with touchingly ethical recognition of the masses of men and women he met and worked with. Among these there is an array of men, not all particularly appealing human beings, who played key roles in the recent history of the Catholic Church in Australia.
and the memoir’s drearier dimension rests in the detailed debates about Catholic intrigue and fine, or crude points of theology. To be sure, as a lapsed Catholic I found these laborious sections quirkily soporific.

In 1983 Crittenden abandoned his career as a Catholic priest for a life in the contemplative world of academic philosophy, a shift highlighted in the title of his book. It was, we read, an unbearably difficult decision, but clearly one for which he was fated. In the kind of behaviour that speaks volumes about the man, Crittenden himself regularly struggled with his own crises of faith but somehow stuck to his chosen vocation. At times it seems that this was less the result of his commitment to his beliefs than of a fear to hurt the men who taught him at the seminary, most of them teachers about whom he speaks with great affection and respect. In the final section of the memoir, and perhaps the most engaging for those whom the incestuous world of intrigue of the Catholic church explored earlier in the memoir did little to excite, Crittenden writes at length about the problems in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Sydney, infamous in the 1980s and early 1990s and of his role in the conflicts and their resolution. As a life, Crittenden’s has been rich, complicated, adventurous, courageous, joyful, painful, and what he has to say in the memoir is a central element to Australia’s recent cultural make-up. I wondered, though, if a more supportive editor might have persuaded him to let go of the minute detailing of a life lived most worthily but hard to narrate with the same intensity and nuance.

Kim E. Beazley’s *Father of the House* is no less lead-footed in its obsessive concern with the act of remembering as an academic exercise, memoir less as an act of memory than as a list of things remembered chronologically. In between there will be moments worth recalling and some which by sheer dint of their historical significance ensure that the memoir will endure in its recording of a time in Australia’s recent history. Reading the memoir some time after finishing Paul Crittenden’s, I was reminded of the latter’s comments, about a colleague: “unimaginative in outlook but well-meaning and proper in his ways.” This is autobiography whose significance derives not from its memoro-aesthetics nor the revelations made, or indeed the peculiar insight provided on them. Its importance, perhaps its function, is deeply entrenched in the social history of contemporary Australian society, even if it is hard to imagine that any reasonably informed Australian will be surprised by what Beazley Sr. recalls or recounts. These are generally well-trodden historical memory paths he walks. The writing is methodical, perhaps even mechanical but also lively; Beazley writes with energy and a great sense of the drama that framed some of the events, and of his place in them.
The real significance of texts such as Beazley’s is as historical documents for the use of scholars in search of direct witnessing of a colourful and problematic period of Australian political history. As a key actor in many of the most salient phases of Australia’s twentieth-century life, Beazley Sr’s portrait provides readers with an extensive account of dates and details, personalities and temperaments. Significantly, it provides also a representation of a certain way of being Australian. For while the memoir is often remarkably candid in its depiction of Beazley Sr’s love for his wife Betty this is essentially the story of a man’s world. This was most certainly not the Australian Labour Party that now includes among some of its top leadership women ranging from Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard, Health Minister Nicola Roxon, Climate Minister Penny Wong and the current Queensland Premier, Anna Bligh. To read Father of the House is to travel back to a time of overt, even naturalised sexism and unreconstructed patriarchal power. Betty’s presence obviously meant the world to her husband but her role was to stand beside him, the quiet and unquestioningly supportive and loyal partner whom Beazley acknowledges so generously. Indeed, the theme of Australian masculinity is picked up in a different way in Crittenden’s memoir, and here it is no less remarkable for its cloistered nature. To read Crittenden and Beazley is to visit a period of Australian history when “men were men,” even (especially?) in the walled world of Catholic schools for boys, seminaries and the parliament.

Rosemary Lancaster’s Je Suis Australienne: Remarkable Women in France 1880–1945 is thus a welcome journey into a different world, noticeably away from Australia. The book consists of a series of stand alone chapters devoted to figures such as Daisy White, Jessie Couvreur (Tasma), Stella Bowen, Christina Stead, Nancy Wake and some of the nurses who served in European theatres of war. As Lancaster explains she is concerned with the “Australian women’s changing sense of self and place, sharpened not in Australia, but, significantly, abroad”. At her best, she stresses in her readings a cross-cultural sensitivity that the author obviously shares with her subjects, even if she treats them with a little too much reverence. Ironically, as an intellectual and structural conceit, the focus on France as seen through Australian eyes is most effective when the study addresses the experiential self the writing evokes, as in the case of White, Bowen and Wake, for example. Lancaster is especially insightful when discussing Australian women artists who spent varying periods of time in France through analyses of their autobiographical writings, diaries and even letters these women wrote to friends and relatives in Australia. The chapter on Stella Bowen is especially strong, as the material is rich, Bowen’s writing
persona vibrant and honest and her life in Europe gripping. Lancaster’s book is a labour of love and is marked by a deep sense of admiration for her subjects’ risk-taking personae, for their exhilarating and messy lives, and the unpredictability of their daily experiences. In “Digger Nurses, the Western Front,” the chapter she devotes to nurses who spent time in WWI, the material is “intimately revelatory” in Lauren Berlant’s words, and captures the unique ways in which the self is shaped by often traumatic but also pleasurably memorable life experiences. While the chapters on the fictional writing of Tasma and Stead fail to produce the same level of insight and subtlety, as a whole this is the kind of study that will amply reward its readers.

Susan Lever’s *David Foster: The Satirist of Australia* is an equally timely study of Foster’s entire oeuvre to date, but as in the case of Lancaster and Dibble here too the tone at times is a bit too deferential. Lever is right to argue that Foster’s work deserves greater critical attention than it has received to date; but to say that its intellectual and aesthetic complexity eludes most critics is to over-simplify the issue. There are many reasons why certain writers “go out of fashion,” not least their own propensity to alienate the very public who reads their work and supports their artistic vision. Foster’s writing can be intellectually provocative, ambitious in form and subversive in its treatment of complex themes and issues. And satire, his preferred modus operandi, is notoriously slippery as a form. But his work is also so obsessively concerned with the performance of a peculiar mindset in Australian society as to position itself at the most irrelevant margins of its cultural maps. Lever seeks to counter the veil of silence that shrouds Foster’s writing through readings that are critically informed, imaginative and insightful. For this alone the book is a worthy enterprise and a genuine contribution to contemporary Australian historiography. For example, the decision to place the novels side by side with a series of essays that Foster himself has closely aligned with his creative work creates some interesting echoes and underpins some of the most polemic critical observations. Lever writes with authority and deep knowledge, in part the product of her long engagement with Foster’s writing.

However it is hard not to let the unreconstructed narrow-mindedness Foster’s non-fiction proffers overwhelm works of fiction that might otherwise have managed to go on to tease and taunt their readers, and through the latter’s uncomprehending resistance to elicit original and intellectually gratifying responses. However, to be faced with the obvious links between the vitriol Foster likes to dish out in his non-fictional essays as the outpourings of an alienated soul and his imaginative writing is to see
the integrity of the latter undermined and compromised. Foster’s growing sense of living in a state of siege, exiled in his own country because of his gender and of his skin colour, a man assailed at different points by women, gays, “multiculturalists” and Indigenous Australians, possibly also by the weather, has led to much cloyingly self-pitying nonsense. As a reader, I struggled to respond to Lever’s meticulous and scholarly study of Foster’s writing; her insistence on taking the reader from the novels back to Foster the man leads to a sense of critical schizophrenia that I felt I could not overcome. Ultimately, Susan Lever’s critical skill, her patience and obvious analytical sensitivity simply could not make Foster or his work any more appealing, and I found myself, repeatedly, returning to Leigh Dale’s comment that men like Foster love playing at being victims, a view that Lever quotes but clearly disagrees with.

The last of the works I have been tempted to place under the life writing category, though loosely understood, is Catharine Lumby’s *Alvin Purple*. This is a study of the film by that name rather than of a “real AP”, though the point of the book is that for a generation of Australian men and women *Alvin Purple* gained a unique sense of embodiment in a society caught up in challenging currents of social and political change. Lumby aims to place the film in the period of its production, and explores its reception and circulation partly to gauge the political temperature of a particular period of Australian culture. She writes: “*Alvin Purple* is a film that arrives on the brink of enormous social change but before the broader Australian public had processed their own positions on issues around sexual liberation and feminism”. However, she also notes that “it would be a mistake … to read too much social or political comment into the movie, despite the radical and avant-gardist pedigree of many involved in its production. But it is, in hindsight … a valuable document of a particular moment in Australian film-making”. Lumby’s investigation of the film’s outrageous treatment of gender roles is thus done with reference to what she sees as a quest by the film-makers for a form capable of taking Australian cinema out to a public yet to be persuaded of the value of home-grown product. Lumby suggests that Tim Burstall was determined to show to others as much as to himself that it was possible to create work with popular appeal and artistic integrity. To an extent he succeeded but the critical response and the vocal debates the film occasioned about censorship, changing social mores and the evolving power dynamics between men and women, not least in matters of sex and love, meant that *Alvin Purple* was immediately swept up in a whirl of ineffective controversy and noise. Lumby’s study offers a thorough and critically provocative analysis of the film as an artefact, of
the networks of power and influence that framed it and of the limitations
it exposes in the Australian collective psyche.

Philip Mead’s *Networked Language: Culture and History in Australian
Poetry* (Australian Scholarly Publishing) is the result of its author’s “equal
fascination with poetic language and with the networks of culture and
history within which it lives.” It is impelled by a desire to understand how
poetry is linguistically embedded, and politically, institutionally, and so
on. As Mead points out, one way of speaking of this web of relations might
be to consider it a “discourse” but the term is now so weighed down with
meaning as to be virtually meaningless. At another level, inextricable from
the latter aim, the book’s attention to poetry as an activist genre seeks
to highlight its value as a thing of beauty. By insisting on a reading that
places the poetic work in open dialogue with the material and ideological
forces that frame it, the book ultimately underlines the relevance of verse
as a cultural form. In the words he borrows from the American poet, Lyn
Hejinian, “Poetry [...] takes as its premise that language is a medium
for experiencing experience.” This is a serious intervention in Australian
letters, offering a series of erudite and conceptually very sophisticated
readings of a number of influential and often contentious twentieth-
century Australian poetic texts. Mead’s obvious passion for the material,
combined with an authoritative view of the field and his ability to cross-
reference between Australian, American and British poetry and literary
criticism means that there is hardly a dull moment in this book. Mead
posits the book as a step in the articulation of “a small, fragmentary
contribution to a less conventionally ‘literary,’ and in fact largely unwritten
project, the sociolinguistic history of language art in Australia (theoretical
and applied).” In *Networked Language* he succeeds admirably, producing
six essays dealing with verse as diverse as that of Kenneth Slessor, James
McCauley, Judith Wright, Lionel Fogarty and πο. In the process he creates
a map for what might be described as Australia’s long twentieth literary
century, a project echoed in the book in a reference to Deleuze’s own
acknowledgement of Bergsonian *durée*. This is not an easy read, for Mead’s
writing is theoretically dense and critically challenging. However, the
persistent and discerning reader will be rewarded by a critical study of
Australian poetry that is simultaneously original, gutsy and generous.

Among the miscellany received by *Westerly* this year there are a number
of unusual contributions that do not fit easily in any particular category.
Cameron Raynes’s *The Last Protector: The Illegal Removal of Aboriginal
Children from their Parents in South Australia* is one such work, an earnest
and painstakingly researched study of William Richard Penhall, a devoted
functionary whose actions resulted in so much suffering among Indigenous Australians in South Australia. Penhall was the last Aboriginal Protector in South Australia, between the years of 1939 and 1953 a force that determined with unflinching brutality and cold-heartedness the fate of countless Indigenous Australians. At seventy six pages this is a short book, a passionate polemic, but it is also so tiresomely repetitive that it feels as if it might never end. Given that so much of that knowledge is anything but new, this is the kind of work preaching to the converted while doing little to persuade those who will always refuse to see in Australia’s treatment of Indigenous peoples a betrayal of basic human values. After all, it is worth recalling the mood of the period in which the actions Raynes finds so objectionable took place; perhaps far more shocking is how in recent years such actions have once again emerged as justifiable by governmental structures that remain primarily concerned with performing the deeds of a hegemonic whiteness. “Sorry” has a long way to go.

In //Creative_ecologies// where_thinking_is_a_proper_job John Howkins draws on the scientific understanding of ecology as “the study of relationships between organisms and the environment, which probably includes other organisms. An eco-system is an ecology of several different species living together” to explore the synergies between art and science, creativity and innovation. Howkins is concerned also with the structural and material networks that underpin creativity and innovation, ranging from institutional settings to the way individuals access, process and generate knowledge and creativity. While he does not set them in terms of a dichotomy, and might even be said to differentiate between knowledge and creativity, there is a sense in which they are inextricable. As he asserts in “New_Places, New_Policies,” “A government’s job is to know and control, but creativity is often not knowable and never controllable”. Although the book seems designed with the academic market in mind, it is also a valuable contribution to the study and theorisation of “creative industries”. Ultimately Howkins seeks to get to grips with how certain ideas and movements emerge and flourish, and others do not. Some of the issues he raises are especially topical in a world obsessed with objectives and outcomes, suggesting that true creativity is the product of imaginative processes – “thinking”, as he puts it, “is a proper job”.

John Rainford’s Consuming Passions: Australia and the International Drug Business is a lively and informed story of the murky business of drugs. Rainford focuses as much in the drugs that make the 6 o’clock news as on the banal and perhaps far more pernicious trade in legal drugs. As he convincingly shows, this is indeed big business and not a pretty one either.
The key difference is that “[t]he market in illicit drugs operates in the same way that markets in other commodities operate” and the “degree of risk” varies. Rainford’s book offers a comprehensive exploration of how Australia and Australians engage in the business of drugs, legal and illegal, as well as of the equally labyrinthine economic and political structures that frame it. He is especially good at situating the debate about drugs within broader concerns that relate to political and economic power blocs, and aims in this way to argue that there is a close link between control over drugs and drugs as a form of control.

Colin Dyer’s *The French Explorers and Sydney* is one of those books that settler societies are wont to generate, yet another layer in the narrative of the white nation, variously refocused and rewarding. Through a reading of the writings of French sailors who visited Sydney over a period of many years Dyer in turn produces a history of Sydney’s growth from a campsite-like settlement to a vibrant, busy and sophisticated town that leaves lasting impressions on many of the visitors. Time and again the French visitors write of Sydney’s beauty, of the striking growth they notice between visits and, most of all, they remark on the hospitality of Sydneysiders and the elegance of their lifestyles. As a narrative conceit, the use of Sydney as a focal point on which to anchor the vast body of material Dyer draws on works well, the growth of the settlement providing simultaneously a foil for a detailed and insightful discussion of the relationships between the residents of Sydney and the visiting French. Through detailed analyses of the writings of French explorers such a Lapérouse, Bougainville and Freycinet, to name but the best-known among a large cast of French travellers moving through Sydney Dyer shows the differing viewpoints on matters of politics, culture, social mores and, indeed, etiquette. The French are less than impressed with the treatment of convicts, too, though for their part the English are shocked when they hear reports that one particular French expedition shot at a group of Indigenous Australians. Generally, the mood is one of mutual admiration, with one René Primavère Lesson asserting that “everything we saw in the settlements of New South Wales [la Nouvelle-Galles du sud] gave us a wonderful idea of the English genius for colonization”. He goes on, lavishing his praise on the spirit Joseph Conrad too would come to celebrate, only then with reference to Africa: “This nation’s understanding and organisation of the smallest details needed for the success of a civilisation, implanted onto shores once inhabited only by poor wretched people [les peuples misérables], deserve sincere praise”. [sic]

To see the above books as generally representative of non-fiction published in 2008–2009 might be a stretch, but it reflects a general mood in the field that is as capacious as it is unpredictable.
NON–FICTION RECEIVED 2008–2009

Those marked with an asterisk are mentioned in the above review.


ASHLEY CAPES

THE JACKET

on the chair
there’s a filthy spring jacket
light enough
to catch every stray hair

a landscape
deep with ridges
from weeks spent crushed
into couch cushions, an ant might
spend a season in exile
dragging a single
crumb like penance

how important tomorrow
becomes, for the moses
of this desert is
your jacket, its pockets
full of stubs and receipts

I could map out
days and weeks, movies
you’ve seen, coffee
at hudson's and gelati
for summer

in the jacket
you linger in traces
and I rake them with my hands,
collect every scent.
I saw my first harvest today
– it was all dust and sunset.
On a byroad to Grantchester Village
in a leonine August, I halted
my bicycle. Wheels still, saddle-seated,
air like a malty basket;
in its belly plumes of chaff.
Lengthwise and widthways
the land spread, ruched, in low undulations.
On the one side, the grass green and trodden, full of cattle;
from the other blew a dry, oily meal wind
– the husk and raw of severed wheat.

Yellow sky, yellow field. A far off machine
– like a child’s plaything – rolled its scythe;
funnel pumped seed into the dump.
Closely huddled were the waiting fecund heads,
their fattening done. As the broken
stalk and stem-stump wake expanded,
I was minded of a rending imperfection.
How even the agents of ruin
are picturesque.
JOANNE RICCIONI

THE MOMENT IN THE DRAUGHTY CHURCH AT SMOKEFALL

He doesn’t remember the climb being so precarious. Looking up, he considers the unevenness of the ancient cobbles, the steps with no handrail, the ache of his bunions and bad choice of shoes. As a boy he would make the climb to the church of Santa Maria Del Soccorso barefoot and in less than half an hour. But at seventy-five he knows he will have to spend most of the afternoon on the trek, stopping far more often than he really wants to survey the hills panting in the sun, the huddles of buildings wedged like ticks in their folds, all the time thinking of the pumice of his tongue and the grind of his petrified knees. He will listen to the steady pulse of the crickets keeping the afternoon alive and worry about the dubious beat of his own heart rattling in his throat.

He hadn’t imagined it would be so physical, such a constant companion, this business of dying. Like someone unsavoury reading over your shoulder on the bus. His breath tastes permanently of old pennies and his skin seems to secrete the scent of boiled asparagus. Even his extremities no longer feel his own, like he is already dead around the edges. Perhaps that is why he has come back to the beginning – to make the end a little easier to bear.

He traces the wispy line of the river winding through the valley, a silver hair left behind on a sofa. Elizabeth had always wanted to visit Italy, to see where he grew up, but he never did bring her. There were always good excuses: the children, the cost, so much of Australia to see on their doorstep. But now he would have liked to watch her face squinting up at the bell tower slapped against the summer sky, or looking down on the tumble of rooftops in the village below. His eyes follow the patchwork of terracotta until he fancies he can see the roof of the old house in Via Garibaldi, until he is staring through the distortions of the ancient glass at his mother creaking in the walnut chair, nursing his new brother. There is mirth in
her black eyes and he can almost feel the liquid tremble of her laugh, as he leans against her belly to suckle at her other breast, the milk bursting tepid and sweet against the back of his throat.

He stops for water at the roadside shrine of Santa Lucia. The statuette under her stone arch has recently been whitewashed and in her hand a plastic, battery-operated candle flickers weakly in the afternoon sun. She is his namesake. “The Saint of Light shines through you, Lucio,” his father liked to tell him randomly, while they were laying corn to dry or stacking firewood under the eaves of the pig house. “The night you were born, the Madonna of Succor smiled down on me from her litter during the Festa. She told me I would have a son who would shine with the pious light of Santa Lucia.”

A shining, exemplary life. Is that what he has led? He thinks of all the years behind the Formica at the Deli in Brookvale, slicing salami for young Australian housewives dreaming of Mario Lanza and thinking themselves a little adventurous. Perhaps he did shine for one or two of them, although not in the way his father had envisaged. He prefers to remember the story his mother whispered to him when he dreamed of blindness and cried out in the dark. Her lips on his ear, she would tell how she had climbed the mountain at Colle Lungo with him swaying in her belly, just to smell the living rock of the cave and taste the mossy water of its natural spring. Cupping her mouth under the stream, she had felt water fill her shoes and saw them steaming in the freezing December air. Alone, she delivered him into the blanket of dusk, while across the valley she watched the trembling snake of lanterns winding up the mountain to the Church of Santa Maria del Soccorso for the Festa. He was her light, her Lucio, she told him. She brought him down the mountain in the dark and he lit her from within.

He looks at the Church of Santa Maria squatting stubbornly above him on the hilltop, the clouds and time rolling on behind it. Its immutable, looming presence exhausts him more than the climb itself. He leans back against the cool stone of the shrine and listens to the sawing complaints of a donkey rising up from the valley. At his feet a column of bull ants is circling a discarded peach stone.

In the honeycomb light of morning he would squat in the Vigna Alba, lining Father Ruggiero’s willow baskets with fig leaves. Wedged in the fork of a peach tree, his father would twist off the fruit with woody fingers and roll them, precious as eggs, into his palms. He would imagine those stiff hands growing gnarled and ancient from the branches, would will his father to turn to wood and disappear into the hoary trunk. But when he looked up again, there he was, industrious and sullen, not leaving a single
split fruit for the ants, never stopping to let either of them taste the orange flesh. Afterwards, Lucio would be sent to Santa Maria’s to deliver the basket to Father Ruggiero. More than once, stamping up the track, he had gorged himself, biting into the velvet skins two at a time, choking on the juice and his own breathless anger. Later, at evening Mass, he would not take communion and looked away when the padre placed the wafer on his father’s cracked tongue, still tasting the yeasty sweetness on his own.

His father left the village for the first time in his life, marching under the flag of the axe and rods. He could not single out his face among the lines of men being blessed by Father Ruggiero in the piazza. He could think only of the empty pocket of his father’s new uniform, the space where his gift should have been: the perfect ripe peach wrapped in a fig leaf and cradled in his hand all the way to the piazza. He had wanted to run up and press it into the bark of his hands, but the sun flashed on the lines of new boots and liquefied the cobbles until all he could see was the flag tugging impatiently at the air. As the soldiers moved out along the Viale Roma, he had squeezed the peach in his fist. The juice had dribbled down the backs of his bare legs and dried sticky in the wind.

Halfway up the track to Santa Maria’s, he reaches the boulder of split granite. His shirt clings with sweat and his legs tremble beneath him. He steadies himself, placing his hands on either side of the fissure in the enormous rock. *Rocca del Spaccone*, they had called it – Braggart’s Rock. It was his brother’s game. “Sono Re!” he pants into the crack, “I am king!” And Thomasino’s voice, high and still unbroken, answers back across the years, “Salta! Salta, Re!” Of course, the king had to jump. It had been worth their endless errands up the mountain, loaded with fruit baskets or sacks of vegetables for Father Ruggiero. The King of the Mountain had to climb the split rock and jump into the scree twelve feet below, rolling with the cuts and bruises. That was how they had found the ammunition left behind by the Germans. It was their secret, their one toy. They would squat, the two of them, across the split in the stone platform, the languid valley breathing below and the line of bullets winking, complicit in the sun. Only a true king had the skill and the courage to smash a bullet with a rock thrown from his bare hands. When the explosion bounced back at them from the valley, the ravens chasing the echo and the quail beating out their applause from the nodding grasses, they felt they had the power of kings, standing up there with the world coming alive before their eyes.

He calls a little louder, now that his legs have become solid again. “Sono Re!” But this time there is no echo. Only Thomasino’s eyes staring back at him, wide as a snared hare. His brother’s arm had pumped glossy rivu-
lets of blood which snaked between the rocks, copying the river below. An American soldier had snatched them down. He remembers his hair, yellow as maize and the jacket of his uniform thrown inside-out at his feet. In the lining under the arms there were dark wet circles and, on one side, a small tear. Lucio had stitched and re-stitched it with imaginary thread. When he could look up again, he saw the soldier pissing on Thomasino, pissing all over the raw stump of arm and into the pools of blood that curdled in the dust. Just as Thomasino was folding into the chalk road, the soldier had scooped him up around the waist and run the rest of the way to Santa Maria’s, the boy swinging limp as dead quarry under his arm.

The Virgin of Succor had watched Lucio, vague and expressionless. He had sat at her feet listening to the silence rising up from Father Ruggiero’s rooms and sucking on the brown bar the American had given him. It was sweet as honey and sultry as the dregs of the coffee the padre used to drink with the Germans. He let it melt on his tongue like the communion wafer, but it felt warm and comforting and wrong. He wanted her to look wrathful as a powerful Queen should, or draw him to prayer with a mother’s soft look. But she didn’t. Afterwards, under a pale fingernail of moon rising in the watery sky, he had vomited into the lake behind the church. On the way down the mountain, the American spoke to him in a soft voice, but he didn’t understand a word.

The heat of the afternoon bears down on him like a burden. On the ribbon of track winding below, he watches a willow basket swaying rhythmically towards the village. Underneath it a woman intermittently sings the chorus of an American pop song in unintelligible English. She has been collecting snails. Elizabeth would always order the polenta with snails and wild mushrooms at Fellini’s, urging him to taste it every time, but he never could stomach the irony of war food becoming a delicacy. On the slope below, the long grasses exhale, the crickets are silent and the world stops turning.

His mother would sing at harvest time, strange songs in the mountain dialect. The harvest before the Germans left, she put his father’s scythe in his hands and rocked him in her solid arms, teaching him the rhythm of the raccolto. He had felt glad then that his father was on the other side of the world. His mother kept the letter from the POW camp at Hay tucked behind the picture of the Weeping Heart of Jesus. In the letter his father told him to remember communion and to ask Father Ruggiero to watch over them. He was to pray to the Virgin and Santa Lucia to become a guiding light for Thomasino and the children of the village. At night he would hold a candle to the frail envelope and wonder whether the water
stains were his father’s tears or just the rain, the elements of countless countries as it travelled across the world.

It had been a good harvest that year. Father Ruggiero held a Mass and asked Santa Maria to deliver it from the Nazis. Afterwards the padre had asked his mother if she could not spare two more sacks of maize. Back down the mountain, they watched the rest of their crop disappearing down the Viale Roma in the back of a German truck. He prayed to the Madonna to help him shine, but he knew it was just the habit of words. When you were hungry prayers tasted bitter.

At the Festa of Light that December, Father Ruggiero had asked him to carry the Virgin’s litter. He wanted to feel grown up and proud, but he knew that he and a few scrawny kids were all that were left since the older boys had been taken in the Nazi recruitment. In the clean night with its lacing of frost his stomach creaked louder than his shoes along the frozen mud of the lake. A group of German soldiers were stamping the ground like horses and he could see their white breath in light of the lanterns. His mother nodded at him as the procession passed. The Virgin on her dais surveyed him blankly, her skin pearlescent beneath the golden coronet of rubies that flashed red as coals, black as blood.

She was stripped of her crown that night. After mass, Father Ruggiero closed the vestry door on him and he stood watching the torches floating down the mountain, waiting for his mother to come forward from the blackness. A dog howled in the valley and the icy night cracked in two, as if the beginning and the end of something had come at once. His fear drew him to its source among the naked chestnuts. At first he thought the soldier was stabbing his mother, her body rocked so violently against the tree, her mouth slack, her head lolling backwards. But the soldier’s grunts subsided and she pulled away, letting her skirts fall and her eyes open. Lucio watched her walking alone towards the dark bulk of the church, while he stood with his lantern among the trees.

No one in the village knew for sure who took the crown, so they blamed the Germans. After all, they had taken everything else. But Father Ruggiero never did leave him alone again as he prepared the silver censers in the vestry. He didn’t care. They had food on their plates after the Festa that year. His mother would hum and rock on her heels as she stirred the polenta or kneaded gnocchi and he would think of the Loaves and the Fishes when he and Thomasino delivered bowls to half of the houses in the Via Garibaldi. Sometimes he even sensed a faint glimmer of light within himself.
Long after Liberation, when the days and nights had begun to follow each other again without notice, he came home from school and found his father kneeling at the Weeping Heart of Jesus, the rosary turning in his wooden fingers. In the kitchen he saw his mother with her head bowed over the sink, struggling to breathe. The next day, his father had taken him door-to-door asking their neighbours for money, calling on their love of the Virgin, their pride in the village, their own self-respect. His father wrote the donation of each family in his little pocket book, like a tax collector. Only Assunta Onorati, who had lost three sons in North Africa and two grandsons to the partisans, stood square and silent in her door. As they turned away, the old woman's voice rumbled like gunfire in the mountains, “Plenty of food in Australian prisons, eh Guido?”

On the table his father counted more money than he had ever seen. Lucio watched as he drew an even bigger role of notes from his own pocket and added them to the pile. “Weaving baskets can make a lot of money in the right country,” was all he said. He pressed his lips between his teeth for a moment and then bowed Lucio’s head with his hands, closing his eyes emphatically, just as Father Ruggiero did when he wanted him to pray for forgiveness. In the kitchen, a pan clattered and rang on the flagstones. Through the door Lucio could see his mother on her knees, running her hands through the passata, smearing it over the stone and up the cracked walls as she sobbed.

His father went to Rome to collect the new crown. He had over a million Lire rolled up to look like a panino in his pocket. Afterwards he said the jeweller looked him up and down and complained because he thought the notes smelled of salami. He would have liked that, his father. Christ was just a peasant, after all. And he would have liked that it was drizzling slightly that year at the Festa as he solemnly handed the coronet to the Bishop of Segni, the rain dripping down his neck and running into the sleeves of his uplifted arms, the jewels shining through it all. But all Lucio saw was the Virgin’s face, languid and apathetic underneath.

It was all he could see then and it is all he can see now as he leans in the draughty doorway, breathing in the damp stone and feeling the years come and go with each trembling rise of his chest. It is just the two of them, now. She is not conscious of the past or the future. She looks down, but not quite at him in particular. He might be one of a million motes of dust spiraling at her feet, or a mosquito buzzed into the musty quiet from the throb of summer outside. He looks up at her ageless face, her radiant skin, the slender grace of her figure under the blue robes. She is timeless. No one can touch her. How could she ever understand the conflicts of the
world of men or of the human heart? He shudders and coughs, the sweat
chill on his skin in the dank air. He is dying around the edges, dying right
at her feet and she looks on, oblivious. She always has.

Behind her through the high windows he can see the honey light
turning smoky. He moves towards her. He wants to get it done before
nightfall. He wants to feel the gold, cold and solid in his hand as he takes
the crown from her head; he wants to watch the rubies blink in the last of
the sun outside; to see the grey glass of the lake shatter as it hits the water.
But most of all he wants to watch each ripple fanning out from the circle
of gold as it sinks to the silent depths.
SHEVAUN COOLEY

LACRIMIS SIMONIDES

Simonides of Keos, 556BC–468BC, was a poet renowned for his moving elegies, so much so that an elegy was sometimes referred to by later writers, such as Catullus, as lacrimis Simonides, or the tears of Simonides.

On the city bus, today,
I saw your childhood best friend, red-haired,
in a nice shirt, and thought, too quickly,
of the story he’d told of the two of you –
how, with a new crossbow, you decided to experiment
firing straight upwards. With enough power,
two kids could have split troposphere, stratosphere,
mesosphere, thermosphere;
it was a good experiment,
hit an arrow landed deep in the earth
at your feet.

I think he stopped crying to tell the story.
And surely we all thought the same thing;
that to have you this long
may have been a miracle,
and also we wanted to laugh.

It’s a small city, stepbrother, at times.
Your friend stepped off the bus for a moment
to let others alight, and I touched him
on the sleeve, uncharacteristically.
You see it now, stepping out into it –
the cranes and their great hooks
hauling up the air, and the new cavities
of knocked-down buildings, everywhere,
as if we too wanted to make more room
in the sky.
MEREDI ORTEGA

EMU IN THE SKY

because our dreams
were always linear
our markers white
we only saw the crux
(a dot-to-dot for balladeers
and madding flag wavers)

because our dreams
were white lines
we did not see
a beaked nebula
and neck stretched
along the milky way

because our dreams
were white fences
we did not see
a mounded lacuna
and legs trailed
between stars

we did not see
a great emu in the sky
DOROTHY HEWETT’S PATHS TO *THE CHAPEL PERILOUS*

In 1958, after a silence of over ten years, Dorothy Hewett announced her return to writing with the novel, *Bobbin Up*. Years later she wrote that she had been “silenced by political activism, the deep-seated anti-culturalism and socialist realist dogmas of the Australian Communist Party, plus the terrible struggle to survive.”\(^1\) Once the silence was broken, in the decade following *Bobbin Up* she published numerous poems and stories, many of them going against the grain of those socialist realist dogmas. But she did not, in fact, leave the Party until 1968. What happened in those intervening years that led her finally to renounce her membership, but also enabled her to write again, and prepared her to produce the extraordinary plays and poetry that flowed from her pen during the 1970s?

I am interested in Hewett’s transition from a Communist writer in the 1960s to a poet and dramatist recognised (though not always self-identified) as a feminist in the 1970s. This article considers the work she produced in the 1960s in its political and intellectual contexts, and so traces the paths she took towards the achievement of her controversial play of 1971, *The Chapel Perilous*.\(^2\) The play’s heroine, **Sally Banner**, is a social rebel who refuses to bow to the authority figures that loom over her life. She is a bold seeker after intensities of sexual experience, with male and female lovers, and she is a poet, who needs to “answer to her blood direct” and “walk naked through the world.” As a woman, these needs and desires can only bring her trouble. She horrifies her parents and teachers, suffers rejection and disillusionment with her lovers, and the loss of her children. As the play’s title suggests, she is on a quest, like the knight seeking the Chapel Perilous,\(^3\) confronting her own weaknesses as well as external dangers. Seeking to escape the shadow of annihilation, she wants to believe in love and poetry. When these fail her, she throws herself into the Communist Party and its dream of a free and equal world.
The parallels with events in Hewett’s own early life are evident, and were widely recognised at the time. Yet the play’s historical significance was also seized upon: it was “then and now understood as a watershed moment for second-wave feminism in the theatre, and a play that undid and made new the possibilities for a feminine subjectivity in an Australian imaginary.”

Hewett’s own accounts of her transition from Communism vary. In *Wild Card*, an account of her life up until the late 1950s, when she wrote *Bobbin Up*, she creates a romantic narrative of a sexual and political rebel who always went to extremes, projecting a self that might readily cross over from communism to feminism. Yet her comment quoted above, and others, about having been “silenced” by the Party suggest a deep split between her younger and her older self, and a sudden liberation from the constraints of dogma. Only the opening chapter of a second intended volume of her autobiography, “The Empty Room,” was completed before her death, and so we have to work to imagine how she made the transition. It may not have been as dramatic and sudden as all that, however, given the ideological currents flowing around the rebirth of her career as a writer in the 1960s.

**The Political Context: Communist Intellectuals and the New Left**

In that excerpt from “The Empty Room,” which she published in 2000, Hewett recalled how the success of *Bobbin Up* brought her into contact for the first time with a whole community of Marxist writers and intellectuals. She paid tribute to “all the old icons of the left who once came to celebrate the launch of a first novel by a young woman of thirty-five” when she visited Melbourne to publicise the book. These “icons” included Stephen Murray-Smith, Ian Turner, Brian Fitzpatrick, David Martin, John Morrison, Alan Marshall and Aileen Palmer. She had spent her life from the late 1940s to the late 1950s believing that being a writer and being a Communist activist were incompatible. Now, she wrote, “I began to feel culturally deprived,” for “a whole period of Australia’s literary life had come of age while I, enclosed in my proletarian gulag, had hardly been aware of it.”

By 1958, when Hewett met these “icons of the left” in Melbourne, many of them were renegade Communists, having left the Party after Russia crushed the Hungarian uprising, and Kruschev attacked Stalin’s crimes and the “cult of personality” surrounding the former leader. Ian Turner, then secretary to the Australasian Book Society, was expelled, and *Overland* editor Stephen Murray-Smith left in sympathy. Aileen Palmer was still a member but her sister Helen had been expelled for publishing her magazine, *Outlook*, without the Party’s permission. By contrast, among
the “proletarian gulag” that Hewett inhabited in Sydney only Frank Hardy appears in her memories of the period as a Communist intellectual, one who encouraged her to write, and who at times criticised the Party line, especially on cultural matters. However he did not turn in his Party card in the late 1950s, and nor did Dorothy Hewett.

What Hewett did do, however, was just as momentous for her: she revolutionised her personal and intellectual life. She left the home she had shared in Sydney with fellow Communist Les Flood, scene of the “terrible struggle to survive” that she describes in the second half of *Wild Card*, and took their three sons with her back to Perth. Her family helped her to settle there, and she returned to the University of Western Australia to complete the degree she had abandoned in 1942. She met up again with Merv Lilley, whom she had first encountered on the triumphant visit to Melbourne when *Bobbin Up* was published. They married and had two daughters. In 1965 Dorothy was appointed to a teaching position in the English Department where she remained until the family left Perth for Sydney in 1973.

At first she had no contact with the local Communist Party in Perth (from which she had made a “scandalous departure” ten years before). Her new love was also a writer and a Communist, though the Party disapproved of him as a bit of an anarchist.8 His apostasy evidently suited Dorothy very well: she was no longer constrained to prove herself as a perfect cadre, although her loyalty to the idea of socialism remained. She read voraciously, mostly literature but also Marxist cultural theory. Ian Syson, who found some of her unpublished essays of this period, concludes that the Communist Party of Australia was eventually “not Marxist enough for Hewett, and this was revealed to her in its attitude towards cultural matters”9. Before going on to consider how her ideas developed during the 1960s, we should consider the broader political climate.

Communist parties in the West underwent significant changes in the 1960s. They were affected by the movement now known as the New Left, when many intellectuals left the Party but maintained an allegiance to Marxist ideas, returning to the founding texts to undertake their own readings of Marx, and other writers long outlawed by the Party, such as Trotsky and Gramsci. This loose alliance of non-Party Marxists and left-wing social democrats was represented in Australia by *Outlook*, Helen Palmer’s journal, and the later-established *Arena*.10 With the New Left came the possibility of distancing the socialist project from Soviet Communism. Within Communist parties the Sino-Soviet split produced conflicts of loyalty, and some national parties began to move away from Moscow’s stranglehold on their
policies. In many places a process of reconstruction began, which acceler-
ated after 1968, the year of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia to crush
the “Prague Spring” liberalisation, and also the year of the “events of May”
in France that announced a new kind of Left activism independent of the
Communist Party. By the end of the 1960s there were many more Marxists
outside the Communist parties than in them.

In Australia, a split in 1963 resulted in the formation of a breakaway pro-
China CPA (Marxist-Leninist). The Communist Party of Australia’s gradual
assertion of independence from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union
dramatically intensified in 1968, when the leadership’s pro-Dubcek stance
led to a strong condemnation of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.
This aroused the hostility of a previously silent opposition within the
Party, and eventually resulted in a split in 1971 between the Communist
Party of Australia which was in the process of reforming along New Left
lines and a pro-Soviet Socialist Party of Australia. While this reconstruction
was initially driven by the desire to develop a Party more responsive to
Australian conditions, interested in the Italian model of socialist pluralism
and even a parliamentary presence for the Communist Party, it was soon
swept up into the broader social and political radicalisation that marked
Australia after 1965. The anti-Vietnam war movement, student radicalism,
a revived struggle for Aboriginal rights and the new Women’s Liberation
Movement, together transformed political opposition into an extra-
parliamentary force to be reckoned with. Communist activists of various
hues were a presence in all these movements, despite the majority of their
participants’ lack of interest in working-class politics and suspicion of any
kind of organisation as “Stalinist”.

The anti-war and anti-conscription movement made leftist politics
more populist than they had been since World War II, with a strong
emphasis on grass-roots organisation as well as the international scope
required by its anti-imperialism. In terms of political traditions, the early
Women’s Liberation Movement in Australia grew out of the radical student
movement and opposition to the war in Vietnam, and had earlier links with
union – and extra-union – activism for equal pay. It was at times aligned
with the extra-parliamentary Left, the Communist Party and Trotskyist
groups. Because of these links between the political Left and Women’s
Liberation, in the early 1970s the meanings of “Marxist” and “feminist” in
Australia were far from incompatible. This has a particular bearing on later
analyses of Hewett’s work, which have been described by Nicole Moore
as “a critical scramble for Hewett as either feminist or Marxist, and never
both, a stalemate that resulted in the separation of Hewett’s work into two parts: that completed before 1968, when she left the Party, and work done after that”.14

The Women’s Liberation Movement also grew out of a decade of fierce debates about censorship, particularly of sexual matters, and initially it had strong links with the sexual liberation movement of that time. This meant that the sexual freedom practised by Hewett’s dramatic heroines like Sally Banner of *The Chapel Perilous* was readily greeted as a forerunner of Women’s Liberation, whatever her creator might have intended. It was ironic that this work by an ex-Communist who had rejected any idea of writing a thesis-play was seen as a statement of women’s liberation, but on sex and marriage Hewett’s views were easily unconventional enough to qualify. She told an interviewer in 1969 that marriage can be an escape from the real world for young women, that sex without love is fine, and indeed “if you’ve been a promiscuous girl you’re more likely to have a happy marriage”.15 Such a public statement from a Communist Party member would have been unthinkable ten years earlier.

Despite this radicalisation both within and outside of the Communist Party, the events of 1968 spelled the end of her long commitment to the Party for Dorothy Hewett. On 30 May she wrote to her friend David Martin in Melbourne: “My disillusionment with the world of politics grows deeper while I sense that your feelings David are undergoing some sort of mellowing”. In a reference to the events of May in Paris, she writes: “A profound pessimism informs everything I think and yet the young are marching and cheering all over Europe. Have I at last grown old ... is it as Yeats says ‘Who would have thought that the heart grows old?’” It seems that her “years of Utopian idealism and tender belief” have withered and “I am now as clear eyed and cynical as the 20 year olds I teach every day”. She thinks “the Czechs or some of them seem to be the hope of the socialist world”.16 The timing of this letter, between the May uprisings and the Soviet invasion of Prague in August of that year, suggests that the crushing of Czech hopes was the final straw for her.

By that time she had redefined herself as a writer first and foremost, and it seems that she was less interested in the possibilities of developing socialism outside the Soviet model than in the role of writers and the Party’s benighted attitudes to cultural matters. Besides, the Party no longer offered the only possible home in a hostile world, as anti-establishment ideas gained popular appeal. Over the ten years between 1958 and 1968, the world changed radically, as did the writer.
The Intellectual Context of Hewett’s Writing in the 1960s

Together with Merv Lilley, Hewett produced a collection of poetry, *What about the People?* (1963), which included many poems and songs of social protest, drawing on older folk ballad traditions. Folk music linked them to a more populist version of socialist struggle that rejoiced in its connection with older rural traditions, discarding Party prescriptions for writing about the urban proletariat. So too did the stories Hewett published during the 1960s in *Overland* and other magazines: these had mostly rural settings and drew on the Lawsonian tradition of Australian fiction. A clue to her thinking at the time comes from her review of *Australasian Poetry 1959*, where she saw “a clear pattern of myth-making,” of reaching “inwards to explore and discover ... the abiding meaning” of events and places in “that frighteningly empty Australian landscape”. This kind of myth-making in poetry goes back to Lawson and Gilmore, she wrote—and clearly it had great appeal for her, as she would demonstrate in poems about her own family such as “Legend of the Green Country”.

Another move to free herself from the prescription that the urban working class was the only proper subject of socialist literature was to forge imaginative links with socialist writers elsewhere. One poem in this book, “My Party,” is a roll-call of writers associated with Communism, but outside of Russia. It is as if Hewett were trying to conjure up a heroic world-wide communism that she could still call home. The opening words are especially poignant in this respect:

I am not alone ... in the beating of my heart  
Are the songs of Lumumba, the poems of Neruda.  
Brecht’s lost children wander through the Polish snow,  
‘The Rail Splitters Awake’ in my heart each morning,  
With Nazrim Hikmet I have seen beautiful days  
And my Party is the Party of Aragon.  
I have loved all beautiful things,  
Flowers and music and Robeson’s songs,  
Seeger’s guitar and Woody Guthrie singing,  
The Tennessee Valley blooming under his lips... .

This poem was omitted from the *Collected Poems* published in 1994, yet it is a crucial clue as to what kept her commitment going during the 1960s. She would make another visit to Russia in 1965, a deeply disillusioning experience which is reflected in the long poem, “The Hidden Journey”. In this poem, published close to the moment of her resignation from the
Party, the roll-call is of Russian writers who have been persecuted, some of them executed, by the Soviet regime. It is heroism in a different key.

Two previously unpublished essays from the 1960s show Hewett addressing literary issues that preoccupied her.22 “The Times They are a’Changin” is concerned with the obsolescence of *The Realist Writer* as a separatist publication which attempts “to impose a left sectarian point of view”. While Realist Writers groups and the journal had provided a crucial sense of “identity” and “purpose,” at the same time they became “closed shops” that resulted in “dogmatism” and “kicks and bouquets delivered with embarrassing self-confidence.” She urges “young progressive writers” to join various writers’ groups, to seek help from “some sympathetic older writer” and eventually to send their work “into the market place, to all the journals … and to take part in the struggle of ideas.” Citing recent issues of *Overland* and *Meanjin*, she notes: “Never has there been such a ferment of anti-establishment ideas.” She lists her own connections with “broad writers’ groups in Perth,” and activities including fund-raising for students charged with burning their draft cards.23 Anticipating charges from her comrades of biting the hand that once fed her, she ends this article with a call to question the concept of the Realist Writer “as we are questioning so many ideas the left once thought axiomatic.”

The title “Eat Bread and Salt and Speak the Truth” quotes a Russian proverb, which she uses to argue that both political analysis and creative imagination are needed – the first without the second is like bread without salt. She opens with a key quotation from Jack Beasley’s study of Katharine Susannah Prichard: the creation of the revolutionary hero will only be possible “when full expression can be given to imagination, to the emotional faculties.” She accuses realist writers of being afraid to “free their characters to question, suffer and grow,” adding “the taboos against sex operate strongly in this context.” She concludes:

Static characters, soberside Communists, the hero who becomes a flat, non-hero, fear of sex, love, conflict and death, the shrinking away from unpalatable truths, distrust of symbolic language, the smoothing out of contradictions; all these seem to me to be the symptoms of a fatal division between the head and the heart; intuitive imaginative understanding, and broad, honest, intellectual analysis. We have to free ourselves to both think and feel deeply.

These were indeed the qualities of the poetry and drama she would go on to produce, with prominent themes of sex, love, conflict and death, explored in symbolic language.
Letters to fellow Communist David Martin during this period illustrate how she grappled with such issues. She had abandoned “complexity and individualism” in the hope of “the communion with all men,” she wrote, but still her poetry is rejected. Although it is meant to be read aloud, and to work by accumulation “not from paring down,” it attracts “remarks like romanticism and not enough originality of metaphor or triteness of thought or too loose” from someone like *Meanjin* editor Clem Christesen. Hewett blames “our terrible modern mistrust of romanticism” which is really a “terrible mistrust of emotion, of feeling, of faith in life,” something both Left and Right have in common.24 Her first solo book of poetry, *Windmill Country* (published by *Overland* in 1968) was a reassertion of this faith in romanticism as a style and a stance. In it she added to the ballads a number of overtly autobiographical poems.

In another letter to Martin she refers to having finished a three-act play: “It is a rather odd play, in that I’ve tried to use realism plus symbolism a la O’Casey, which is all that really interests me now.”25 She worries that it may not be a successful marriage perhaps because of “the hangovers of the naturalistic style.”26 She is ready now to abandon the “crime of naturalism” for which she had been criticised by comrades who disliked *Bobbin Up*, but not the attention to sexual matters that they particularly objected to.27 The distinction between realism and naturalism that she had in mind is evident in her 1960 article about Kylie Tennant. She praises *The Battlers* as the best thing Tennant ever wrote, comparing it with Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* for its “romantic realism.” By this Hewett means a “juxtaposition of lyrical romanticism with a kind of hardheaded laconic realism of speech and characterisation,” which enabled Tennant to create heroines out of “battling” men and women. This description could equally well apply to Hewett’s style in *Bobbin Up*, which was by no means orthodox socialist realism. Yet when she goes on to charge that Tennant later allowed herself to be sidelined, as Steinbeck also was, by “the grotesque and the bizarre, the rejects of society,” we can hear a clear echo of the Party line. This is classic 1950s Communist Party scorn for the kind of “naturalism” that took “society’s outcasts” as its subject: socialist heroes must be made out of the respectable working class, not the lumpenproletariat.28

Realism, too, would have to be jettisoned before Hewett found her theatrical metier, but not yet. In the meantime she was investigating literary theory. In 1961 she wrote a long letter to Jack Beasley about the need to create “the revolutionary hero or heroine,” where she castigates herself for missing this opportunity with Nell Mooney, the Communist cadre in *Bobbin Up*. Nell “thrust herself out of the body of the book and
began to take on something of the lineaments of ‘a heroine,’” and if her creator had let Nell have her own way she could have given the novel its “poetic and revolutionary centre.” Hewett has been reading Lukacs, probably *Studies in European Realism*, and believes the fragmented form she used in her novel prevented this from happening: “There is something capitalist in this very mode of presentation …, the fleeting glimpse rather than the built up subtly analysed character (Gorki, Tolstoy, Balzac).”29 Hewett is getting ready to create dramatic heroes, but perhaps Lukacs’ requirements for realism delayed the development of her distinctive theatrical style, where protagonists are not “built up and subtly analysed” as characters but are larger than life figures, presented through fragmented time frames and a range of non-verbal theatrical devices.

**Making a Spectacle in the Theatre**

Hewett’s return to university meant that she could read English, Australian and American literature to her heart’s content. She mentions becoming “obsessed with Fitzgerald, Faulkner and Hemingway.” Her letters to David Martin tell of investigating a number of Australian topics for a Masters thesis, at one point “the split between realism and symbolism” in Randolph Stow, at another Vance Palmer’s novels.30 In the end she seems to have taken Katharine Susannah Prichard’s advice to give up the thesis as it “will not advance you as a writer.”31 She devoted her time instead to working on a play, which would become *This Old Man Came Rolling Home*. It was at this point in her life that Hewett turned seriously to writing for the theatre. When *This Old Man* was produced in Sydney in 1968, even though it was not conventionally realist, a famous Sydney critic was heard to exclaim as he left, “Old, old, old. Call me a taxi.” Stung, Hewett began to read “all sorts of new playwrights, Europeans in particular” – Brecht, Beckett, Artaud, Orton, Bond, as well as Wedekind and other expressionists.32

Theatre was a difficult milieu for a woman dramatist. In a 1980 article about women and writing, she pointed to a long tradition of female stereotypes in theatre, and no tradition of female playwrights to speak of.33 Yet at the time she was writing *The Chapel Perilous*, her third play, Hewett did not consider such feminist perspectives: rather, she was concerned with the problem of writing plays in Australia.34 The attempt to do so is “a peculiar form of masochism,” she claimed at the time. In this 1970 article she mulled over the problems of establishing an Australian drama that could without self-consciousness leave behind “the sentimental bloke and the roaring nineties.” At that time the “new wave” of Australian theatre was only just emerging – the Australian Performing Group in Melbourne and
the Nimrod Theatre in Sydney - and in Perth she felt especially isolated: “This is the greatest problem for any Australian dramatist ... where can he work, who can he work with?” She was also concerned with problems of form: neither a tragic nor a comic view of existence would do. The “black comedy” of her new play, The Chapel Perilous, was “the only way I know anymore of dealing with emotions and circumstances which are too painful to allow any other kind of discipline but ironic laughter.”

She records in this early piece that she had been encouraged by her old friend from university days, then lecturer in Drama, Philip Parsons, who insisted that she “had the sort of imagination that created plays.” It had been Parsons’ idea to incorporate the New Fortune theatre into the new University of Western Australia Arts building and, as Hewett later recorded, she was inspired by the three-tiered Elizabethan style of this theatre with its large platform stage. It recalled the theatre of Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, and also Brecht’s boxing ring. This was, for her, “the great uncluttered room of the imagination, the empty room with no curtains to go thump at the end of each act, little or no props, just an empty space inhabited by bodies and words.” Theatre in such a space could be free to mix music, dance and song with words, puppets with players, comedy with tragedy, farce and burlesque. These directions she explored in a series of plays: 1969 Mrs Porter and the Angel, 1971 The Chapel Perilous, 1972 Bon bons and Roses for Dolly, 1974 Catspaw [a rock musical], 1974 Joan [a rock opera], 1974 The Tatty Hollow Story, 1976 The Golden Oldies, 1978 Pandora’s Cross, 1979 The Man from Mukinupin, and so on through the 1980s.

Philip Parsons would continue to be her most important support in the theatre, giving feedback on her drafts, arranging readings and full productions of her plays, and publishing them in the Currency Press list that he set up in the early 1970s with his wife Katherine Brisbane. These two friends were her crucial link with the theatre world in Sydney, and Aarne Neeme, another of Parsons’ protégés, would direct some of the most satisfying productions of her plays, including the inaugural Chapel Perilous in Perth. As Dorothy wrote to Philip in 1971: “Just as well the Parsons believe I’m a playwright or I should cease to believe I exist at all. I think I’ll go back to writing novels. This is a mug’s game.” Little did she know at the time that The Chapel Perilous, which had premiered in January that year, would rapidly achieve productions in Melbourne, Brisbane and Sydney as well, and be published in Currency Press’s first list, in 1972. It was a huge success, and made a lasting impact on Australian theatre. It takes pride of place among the seven plays reprinted in the 1997 book Australian Women’s Drama: Texts and Feminisms, as a founding text of Australian feminist drama.
**The Chapel Perilous and the Moment of Women’s Liberation**

Thus it was that in January 1971 at the New Fortune Theatre at the University of Western Australia, a flamboyant figure made her first appearance on the stage: Sally Banner, heroine of *The Chapel Perilous*. “Wearing her hair ‘like armour’ [she] storms her way to a place in the Australian imagination,” an “incandescent heroine,” wrote Sylvia Lawson.40 In a Prologue and two acts, the play covers Sally’s life from schoolgirl to woman in her 60s. Its visual and musical elements evoke the passing of time from World War II through the Cold War to the late 1960s “make love not war” era, in a kaleidoscopic presentation of political events and ideas, popular songs and dances. Sally interacts with a series of lovers and power figures (represented on stage as giant puppets), while a chorus offers the outsiders’ view of her quest, where she so often flounders: “Poor Sally, she never made it,” they sing. There is a repeated contrast between Sally’s romantic view of her destiny, her lovers’ failure to live up to that view, and society’s disapproval or ridicule. At the end she reaches a kind of apotheosis as she makes a gesture of acceptance that is ambiguous enough to be readable as a bow of defeat. Her almost-final words are often quoted: “I had a tremendous world in my head, and more than three quarters of it will be buried with me.”

Critics quickly recognised that Sally was a figure of her time, whether they admired or disapproved of the way she was presented and what she represented. Leonard Radic, theatre critic in the Melbourne *Age*, recognised Sally’s historic importance: the play is “highly evocative, highly personal,” but it goes beyond the autobiographical. It speaks for her generation and later ones too, “a kind of secular Pilgrim’s Progress.” Sally is “both a rebel and an early women’s liberationist” but (he seems relieved to note) Dorothy Hewett “resists the temptation to glorify Sally’s attempts at emancipation.”41

A reviewer wrote of the published play that it was “magnificent in conception,” a personal credo that ends with a question mark. In her view, “the theatre of the 1970s is enriched by this play in many ways: by the character of Sally Banner, by poetry, by the sheer massed effect of vast assembled material, by the play’s orderly transcendence of the limitations of time and space, by the bid of a woman to speak the naked truth.”42 The *National Times* published a full-page article based on an interview with the playwright, where Kevon Kemp praised Hewett for “starting to put together some sort of a definition of the Australian woman... [S]he is set on a big and lonely task – that of building a realistic notion of what it is like to be a strong and questing woman in Australia, and of the difficulties such a role encounters sexually.” *The Chapel Perilous* is a big play, he wrote,
and it “puts modern woman’s problems so directly and freely on stage as to light up the name Hewett along with Greer.” He concluded, with no little patriarchal condescension: “for an enormous population of women it is a work that will make things suddenly and blindingly clear.”

The discursive terms that shape these comments are worth noting – it is not “feminism” but “Women’s Liberation;” and the novelty and boldness of Sally’s quest for sexual freedom, and her desire to speak the truth about her female experience, are the points of interest. This emphasis on Sally’s historical significance has its most eloquent expression in Sylvia Lawson’s Preface to the published play, from which I have already quoted. She makes explicit the difference that “women’s liberation” meant when she writes that: “it is only in an age when emancipation [which meant careers and votes for women] has given place to liberation that the Sally Banners of the world can begin to tell us who they are.” She also took up the implications of the play’s title and drew out its link with the resonant line from Greer’s recently-published *The Female Eunuch*: “It is exactly the element of quest in her sexuality that the female is taught to deny.” Lawson adds:

Dorothy Hewett’s real audacity is that she summons up the whole rich tapestry field of heroes and heroic questing, and by implication insists that a demanding, gifted woman’s confused and confusing experience in the twentieth century can actually be its living equivalent.

Feminist Responses to *The Chapel Perilous*

As Women’s Liberation became “feminism” and developed its own ideologies, feminist critics began to distance themselves somewhat from Sally Banner. Anne Summers, in her 1975 landmark book *Damned Whores and God’s Police*, welcomed *The Chapel Perilous* as the single exception to the rule of the silent/absent woman in contemporary Australian drama. She regarded Sally as ultimately “capitulating to the forces that defeat her,” but read her anguish as a pioneering example of a woman expressing “universal problems” without their sounding “incongruous or pretentious.” Carole Ferrier’s 1976 account of Sally’s significance was more critical: she saw Sally’s problem as a female one, not a “universal” one - the difficulty for women to combine writing, political activism and personal relationships. But she was not impressed by Sally’s exceptionalism, by what she saw as Hewett’s ‘essentially individualist view’ that “collective transformation through revolutionary change” is unlikely. This judgement illustrates the kind of socialist-feminist perspective that was common among 1970s Australian Women’s Liberationists.
Different reservations were expressed by students when I taught this play as a text in the late 1970s and 1980s. For many of them, Sally’s search for fulfilment in romantic heterosexuality, and her susceptibility to men who used and discarded her, were problematic. How could such a woman be a feminist hero? Wasn’t she, rather, complicit with patriarchy? Sally Banner’s dramatic role as hero became implicated in the sociological idea of a role model, which was prevalent at the time. Margaret Williams, in her 1992 monograph on Hewett’s plays, *The Feminine as Subversion*, also reports that such misgivings about Sally were more often voiced by women than written down. In counteracting their objections, Williams makes good use of the then-new feminist emphasis on women’s difference, and of the related recognition that there was no free space outside of patriarchal culture in which to operate: feminists had to work both within and against patriarchy, subverting it at the same time as they sought to create alternative values and practices. *The Feminine as Subversion* argues that “the extreme case is valid... in exploring the frontiers of experience” and that Sally Banner and other Hewett heroines dramatise role-playing as a means for women to explore alternative selves.47

In a major collection of essays on Hewett published in 1994, it was possible to place earlier feminist views in a longer perspective. After her prolific publication of poetry as well as theatre works during the 1970s and 80s, the essentially literary qualities of Hewett’s imagination were by now undeniable. Critics identified her interest in mythologies of the feminine, rather than using a more sociological notion of the ideology of femininity. Considering the five plays Hewett wrote about women in the 1970s, Peter Fitzpatrick noted that whatever her theatre lacked in “ideological soundness,” it was “absolutely committed to the experience of its central women. Moreover, it reflected an increasing concern with those ways of feeling and understanding which have always been defined stereotypically as female; they range from the more socialised kinds of intuitive knowledge to forms of magic.”48 Jennifer Strauss, in one of the first sustained discussions of Hewett’s practice of self-mythologising, pointed out the “engrained masculinity of the literary patterns of ... the archetype” of the questing hero that Hewett tried to adapt to a female protagonist. She added that the incongruity between “woman” and “quest” cannot be altogether resolved by substituting a female figure in a narrative whose structure is essentially unchanged.49 In this collection, too, Susan Lever observed that Hewett’s writing “criss-crosses the lines of feminist approval, so that she may be seen as both radical experimenter and pioneer, and a reactionary romantic individualist.”50 While this observation
captured the openness of Hewett’s text to variant readings, it also alluded to the fact that there was enough diversity in feminism to produce such contrary judgements.

These literary judgments of Sally Banner and *Chapel Perilous* might not have been so polarised if there had been more recognition of the play’s theatricality. Peter Fitzpatrick pointed out that Hewett’s kind of theatre, although it appeared at the same time as the “new wave” of Australian drama, was nevertheless quite distinct, and remains a challenge to any construction of a canon featuring that new wave (which was made up of male playwrights like Williamson, Buzo, Blair, Hibberd and Romeril). “It has never been comfortably clear what level of reality we were confronting in a Hewett play,” he wrote (97). He went on to note that her techniques make her plays especially difficult to analyse as scripts (rather than performances), because musical and visual effects are crucial, and verbally they are rather sparse (98-9): they do not take the more conventional form of “the theatre of meaningful conversation,” like David Williamson’s plays (113). Sally Banner, for example, is “framed” both physically and verbally in the opening sequences, in a way that sets up an initial barrier to audience identification with her, and even though ‘as the action develops the sympathy solicited for her trials and errors make her seem larger than the dramatic world she inhabits,’ (108) the initial framing causes audiences to experience ambivalence about the central character and her manifest confusions. There can be no simple embrace or rejection of Sally for the audience who experiences her in action, in the play’s performance, Fitzpatrick concluded.

Nevertheless, Joanne Tompkins’ feminist analysis of *The Chapel Perilous* as a performance piece rather than a play on the page runs counter to this emphasis on ambiguity.51 Aiming to re-situate the play as one affirming female resistance rather than confirming oppression, she uses details of the original staging at the New Fortune theatre to argue that the play has a strongly feminist conclusion. It ends with Sally’s image in the stained glass window finally being illuminated, so that “Sally has reached the pinnacle of the stage, her likeness towering over the Authority Figures.” (53) Tompkins argues that this symbolises a feminist triumph, at least in terms of reversing the hierarchy of patriarchal authority over the female individual. She sees it as a personal triumph that does not require radical change in the social structures that discriminate against women, and identifies it as “a kind of feminism that belongs to the 1960s and 70s.” (52) Such an individualist liberal feminist stance was not the predominant one in the Women’s Liberation phase of the movement. As I indicated
earlier, in the early 1970s socialist feminism, and an emphasis on sexual liberation, shaped a different climate of ideas. Where social conditions for women were seen as the problem, any individual woman’s rebellion, though heroic, would inevitably be compromised, as in Anne Summers’ reading of Sally’s final gesture.

Nicole Moore’s later reading of the play does not try to name the kind of feminism that the play enacts. Rather, she emphasises its caustic, sardonic edge. She suggests that Sally might be seen as standing at the centre of a “solipsistic wheel” of possibilities which she must choose among, but her choices bring only “suffering, humiliation, chastisement.” The liberal feminist model of choice is thus, in her view, “lambasted as foolish, as illusory.” Yet still Sally haunts the imagination as an image of the complex, contradictory, desiring woman, whose subjectivity is a matter of “re-performance” in multiple subject positions. That *The Chapel Perilous* can be read in such postmodern feminist terms is a tribute to the text’s formal inventiveness as well as its political openness.

**Dorothy Hewett’s Feminism**

As Hewett saw herself, she was always a feminist, and she resented being told by the new feminists of the 1970s that “I wasn’t carrying the flag at the right angle” – in this respect feminism was too like Communism. She had reservations, now, about any kind of political organisation, and its demands on a writer. She is famous for having intoned, at an Adelaide Writers Week forum on women’s writing in 1980: “I fear the habit of the sheltered workshop: its safety and its inevitable, even justifiable, paranoia.” This surely alludes to her experience of the Communist Party as inward-looking, a closed shop, as well as suggesting a frequent objection to separatist tendencies in feminism. Yet even as she questioned the very rationale for the women’s forum, in the next breath she made a claim that many feminists at the time were wary of: “I suspect that there is a definite feminine sensibility, a certain style, diction, rhythm and flow which is supremely female, and has its own rules of logic and syntax which can enrich and extend the language and experience of the tribe.” At the same time she said, “I also know the arguments [in defence of women-only forums]... the constant struggle of women, still, to legitimate their artistic credibility, the limited access to a wide range of male possibilities, the crippling suffocation of the roles imposed upon us.”

In fact, she was active in feminist cultural projects. She participated in Sisters Publishing, the women’s press set up by Hilary McPhee and Diana Gribble, both as a member of the Board and as a contributor to *Journeys,* the
volume of poems by herself, Judith Wright, Rosemary Dobson and Gwen Harwood, edited by Fay Zwicky. A further indication of the kind of feminism she espoused can be seen in her association with the journal *Hecate* from its very beginning in 1975 until her death in 2002, both as contributor and as the subject of others’ attention. *Hecate* was never a separatist journal and always advertised itself as socialist feminist, and this breadth suited Dorothy Hewett well. In 1976 her play, “The Golden Oldies,” had its premiere publication in *Hecate*. The journal also published: in 1977 an interview reproduced from the ABC radio program, the Coming Out Show; in 1979, a piece on “Creating Heroines in Australian plays;” poems on at least three occasions in the early 1980s; an interview in the anthology *Hecate’s Daughters*; and in 1995, the two previously unpublished essays discussed above.

Hewett was a feminist who criticised separatism but favoured a position of permanent opposition; one who proposed a “feminine sensibility” but never attributed moral superiority to her female characters. Embracing contradictions was ever Dorothy Hewett’s style. Her Communist past, and its residue of critical thinking, underpins her capacity to create out of contradictions. In her quest as a writer, her errant path to her own Chapel Perilous, she brought along the best of Marxist thinking as well as her passionate commitment to “free [herself] to both think and feel deeply” and to use all the resources of poetry and theatre in her work. The worst of that earlier experience, the requirement that writers produce ideologically correct work, led her to reject any kind of prescription for artists, and this was a crucial bequest to feminism and women’s writing.

**Notes**

7 “Empty Room,” 8.
8 Hewett to Jack Beasley, 10 Feb 1961. Jack Beasley papers, National Library of Australia [NLA] MS 9266, Series 1 Box 1 Folder 3. The author thanks Kate Lilley, Dorothy Hewett’s literary executor, for permission to quote from unpublished materials in this article.


18 Ian Syson, “It’s my party and I’ll cry if I want to;” Recent Autobiographical Writing by Australian Women Communists, Hecate 22, 2, 1996, 144–53, draws attention to several poems from this book which were omitted from Collected Poems (1994), and quotes “My Party,” noting that it was first published in the Realist Writer (9, 1962: 20).


21 Published in Overland 1967, then in Windmill Country, 1968. In the USSR from the mid-60s, as David Carter notes, “literature played a key role in marking off the new regime from the old” during de-Stalinisation, but “a series of liberalising moves [was] followed by exemplary attacks on writers;” A Career in Writing: Judah Waten and the Cultural Politics of a Literary Career, Toowoomba, Qld: ASAL, 1997, 177–8.

22 Hewett, “Eat Bread and Salt and Speak the truth,” and “The Times they are a’Changin,” with note by Ian Syson, Hecate 21, 2, 1995, 129–36. The first is dated March 1965; internal evidence indicates that the second of these was written in 1966.

23 In this she is recommending her own publishing practice during the 1960s, when she published with the Party’s Realist Writer, with non-aligned Left-wing Overland and Meanjin, and also with non-Left Westerly and Australian Letters.

25 That is, in the style of Irish playwright, Sean O’Casey.
26 Hewett to Martin, 27 July 1964, David Martin Papers.
28 “How beautiful upon the mountains,” Westerly n.3, 1960, 4–7. When, referring to the well-known story of Tennant’s research for The Joyful Condemned (1953), Hewett writes disapprovingly of “highly coloured reportage on the delinquent out to catch the easy-money Yanks, with Kylie roaming the streets disguised as a blonde-wigged prostitute,” can we detect a slight note of regret, or envy?
29 Hewett to Jack Beasley, 10 Feb 1961. Jack Beasley papers, NLA MS 9266, Series 1 Box 1 Folder 3. Studies in European Realism was published in English in 1950.
31 Prichard to Hewett, 16 Jan 1963. Hewett Papers NLA MS 6184, Box 1, folder 1.
34 A redefined cultural nationalism was part of the “New Wave” in Australian theatre; the Australian Performing Group’s motto was: “Make it Australian.”
38 Currency Press Papers NLA MS 8084, Box 21: Hewett Correspondence Folder.
41 “Sally’s cry for understanding,” The Age Friday May 5, 1972, n.p. This and other reviews for which incomplete details are available were consulted in the Clippings file, Hewett Papers NLA MS 6184, Box 32, Folder 11.
43 “Dorothy Hewett writes the roles she would love to play,” National Times Sept 4-9, 1972, 20.
48 “Dorothy Hewett and Contemporary Australian Drama” in Bruce Bennett, ed., Dorothy Hewett: Selected Critical Essays, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1994, 97. Subsequent quotations from this article are indicated by page numbers in parentheses.
49 “Writing the Legend of a Glittering Girl” in Bennett ed., 58.
50 Lever, “Seeking Woman: Dorothy Hewett’s Shifting Genres” in Bennett, ed., 149.
51 “I was a rebel in word and deed’: Dorothy Hewett’s The Chapel Perilous and Contemporary Feminist Writing,” Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada, n. 10, December 1993, 41-56. Subsequent quotations from this article are indicated by page numbers in parentheses.
THE GIVE UP

It was late at night and Josie was visiting again. She and Hans were naked and sweating. We were all in the kitchen. Hans was trying to roll a cigarette, a sleepy third attempt. He sat scratching and rubbing, legs spread on the old wooden chair, tobacco covering both him and the floor. Josie stood uncertainly at the sink wavering and nodding as she made tea, spilling water, milk and sugar everywhere.

“Jesus Josie,” Hans, slit eyed, swaying, “let Tom do it.”

“I’m giving up this shit.” Josie, ignoring him, sugar crunching under foot. “That’s it. I’ve had enough. I mean it this time Hans.”

The room seemed to tilt slightly. I shook my head, trying to steady and clear it.

“Okay then, let’s start now,” Hans emphatic, eyes widening, hand slapping the table.

I laughed out loud, couldn’t help myself. “You,” I said incredulous.

“Fuck off Tom,” croaked Hans. ‘You’re right Josie. This is bullshit, I’ve had it too, let’s do it,” voice rising, cracking slightly. The light intensified.

Josie, suddenly decisive, moved coolly at Hans. “Give us your fit.”

Hans still half awake, perplexed but caught in Josie’s motion, in the growing strangeness, handed Josie the fit. “You know that’s our last one,” he said tentatively.

“Fuck it, fuck this shit, this life.” she spat, grabbing paper and firewood heading for the fireplace the room becoming smaller with her speeding actions.

The smell of burning plastic filled the room. Josie spent now, an apparition, a haggard wraith, wired and rigid, sank shipwrecked to Hans’ knee. A strange triangle, we watched, entranced by the fire.

* * *
I find myself in bed. Scraping sounds awake me. I can hear birds. It must be morning. Entering the kitchen the cracks of light through the windows hurt my eyes, hurt me all over. Josie and Hans still naked are on the floor, fingers splayed, awkward on their hands and knees. Josie’s head and shoulders are lost in the fireplace as I move through the doorway.

“Fuck it,” she curses, ash everywhere, stuck to their sweating bodies, a grey circle.

“It must be here somewhere, fuck it.” Hans’ nose inches from the floorboards, sifting through the ashes, Josie still scraping in the fireplace. “Aaah, Ha!” He leaps up like a child. Josie emerging backwards like some night creature. That feeling in the room again, a slow rotation, the light hardens.

“Down there! In the drawer.” Hans at the sink and yelling now, “in the bottom drawer,” “come on quick! In the bottom one, there!”

He is manic, washing the burnt, melted syringe under the tap and snapping the burnt plastic off, trying to blow through the needle. He slips prodding himself. Blood mixes with the sweat and ash.

“Where is that fucking thing,” he snarls, knowing its close now. Josie empties the drawer onto the floor finds the pipette hands it to him.

“Get me the lighter, quick.” “Don’t worry,” he says to me a quiet aside, winking. “I’ve done this before.” We are caught in a whirlpool room.

Placing the burnt needle in the end of the pipette, Hans lights the gas stove. Josie, anticipating already, has spoon in hand and is onto the mix. Carefully, like a scientist, Hans melts the plastic of the pipette around the needle. He cools it under the tap, tests it in a glass of water, squirts Josie. She squeals, they laugh.

Standing in the light, smeared in ash, sweat and blood, Hans draws up the mix from the spoon. We all hold our breath. He inserts the needle; it’s rough from the fire and tears the vein, drawing blood. I can feel the rush in the back of my throat. Hans draws once more, puts an anxious Josie away. With the bloom of the rose she sags in relief.

We sit on the morning floor, drinking tea. Silence amidst the rhythmic nodding.

“It’ll be summer soon,” says Hans. “We’ll go east, up the coast. I’ve got some friends that live near Byron on the beach. Good food, the sea. We’ll do it there.”

“I look healthy with a tan,” says Josie drowsily.

“Yeah, we’ll do it there,” Hans, staring out the window, at the coming light.
This bay has no class, no sense of style,
of deep white sand that gently curves
around the smooth arc of a cove.

And where one could expect to hear the rhythmic
plash of foam-frilled wave upon the shore,
this heedless surf spills in from every side
to meet in broil and clash of white cap, sea spray,
laughing, brawling, falling finally exhausted on the sand.

It tosses up a thick green seaweed slimy tangle
heaped with shark eggs, fish heads, scraps of rope and wood,
instead of artful undulating lines of tiny shells
that yield a delicate sigh beneath the bather’s foot.

It has no sinuous lines of sandstone carved with thought
to cup, at rest, the swimmer’s weary body,
but a jumbled mass of tumbled rock
that must have struggled lately in from wild sea onto sand.
While over here, this outcrop dark and jagged is a patchwork
cobbled carelessly together from the rocks
that other beaches tossed away.

As the day declines and tide recedes,
it leaves behind white rings of salt upon the rocks
like yesterday’s abandoned teacup left unwashed.

And finally, up where one might imagine stately cypress rows
that offset nicely tufty white-green grasses in the dunes,
these cliff-tops offer only she-oaks blown and ragged, almost bare of needles.

And so we come again to ask forbearance of this beach that has escaped, for now, the ravages of class and style, and ask that we might lightly rest awhile.
ANNE ELVEY

SOMETHING GENTLE ENTERS THE SEA

Something gentle enters the sea and steel
gathers and shots of grey join cloud to swell.

Containers trip on the edge of a world
and fall away beyond the line, when gulls

are gust. But waves deposit a flotsam
of foam frothed like detergent. And wind is

stir. Too salt to imbibe a deep green ale
forms a head and will not dissolve. In chaos

the beach is sand and scuff and weathered home
and houses’ squawl. Anionic, the air

is clear: a dense embrace, the tang of salt.
We are all of us laundered by gale,

a woman, two dogs and me. The dogs’ approach
is not linear. There are only we four

and some gulls when, incessant, a world hangs
from skies that brood upon this scape of kin.
BARELY DRESSED FOR SLEEP

you’d been taken by the undertow.
Your body softly blushing
still.
Your left hand holds
a tissue,
scrunched as a rose.
Nothing cut from a block of sleep
has been done like this.
Woof

dancing in the empyrean

Laika leading us
by her simple bark
so the honour went to a dog
best friend went first
to test the void
big dumb canary
one great coal seam out there

and so
pathos of stars
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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TED SNELL has moved recently from his position at Curtin University as Professor of Contemporary Art and Dean of Art, John Curtin Gallery to the University of Western Australia as Director of its new Cultural Precinct. He has published several books and curated numerous exhibitions, many of which document the visual culture of Western Australia. Ted Snell is also a visual artist and his work is represented in many public and private collections, including the National Gallery of Australia, the Art Gallery of Western Australia and Artbank.

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