

THE AUSTRALIAN TRADITION

Studies in a Colonial Culture

by A. A. PHILLIPS



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PREFACE

THIS book consists of a collection of occasional writings which seem to me relevant to the theme suggested by my title. Although most of the sections consist of extended studies of specific subjects, two book-reviews—making up Section VIII—are included, because they contain material bearing on the book's central theme.

Most of these studies originally appeared in the pages of *Meanjin*, to the Editor of which I am grateful both for permission to reprint them, and for the opportunity which his review gave me to write about, and therefore to think about, the problems of our literature. Thanks are also due to the Editor of *Overland* in which "The Democratic Theme" appeared, and to the publishers of *Taking Stock* (F. W. Cheshire, 1953), from my contribution to which I have lifted several passages.

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Where bright blossoms are scentless
And songless bright birds.²

THE FAMILY RELATIONSHIP

AUSTRALIA is an English colony. Its cultural pattern is based on that fact of history or, more precisely, on that pair of facts. Direct English inheritance determines the general design of our living and much of its detail, ranging from our enthusiasm about cricket to our indifference to the admirable wines which we produce. But the fact of our colonialism has a pervasive psychological influence, setting up a relationship as intimate and uneasy as that between an adolescent and his parent. That influence has been nowhere stronger than in our literature—naturally enough, since all art is grounded in tradition, and of all the arts literature is most ruled by national influences. French impressionism could teach Australian painters how to see and render their country's light; we can, partly at least, escape the faith and morals of Milton and draw our inspiration from such alien sources as Christ or Karl Marx; but the writer cannot be free who speaks the tongue that Shakespeare spoke, for his art is the art of words, and his words draw their life from the accretive traditions which have alone created them.

This umbilical connection, incident to our colonial situation, has affected each stage of our literary development, although it has affected each stage differently.

For the first hundred years of our history, such Australian writing as sporadically appeared was a literature of emigrants nostalgically trying to sing their own songs in a strange land. Gordon suggests something of the tone of the Australian life of his time in the easy canter of his rhythms and in his preoccupation with horses; and he could produce the first resounding platitude of the Australian doctrine of Mateship-cum-independence.¹ But even Gordon could write of Australia as a land

¹ Life is mostly froth and bubble
Two things stand like stone—
Kindness in another's trouble,

Courage in your own—"Ye Wearie Wayfarer", fitte 8.

Yet in the poem containing this monstrous piece of insensitivity, Gordon conveyed well enough those aspects of the landscape which an immigrant might be expected to feel—the inhuman largeness and the touch of terror.

More startling is the emigrant quality of the writing of even the Australian-born. Kendall writes of September in Australia in these terms:

September, the maid with the swift, silver feet!
She glides and she graces
The valleys of coolness, the slopes of the heat,
With her blossomy traces;
Sweet month, with a mouth that is made of a rose,
She lightens and lingers
In spots where the harp of the evening glows,
Attuned by her fingers.

A stock English spring, deftly turned out according to the best Romantic specifications; even the rose is there, blandly transported to forests where she had never bloomed. And yet you can hardly blame Kendall. To be a poet at all, he had to have the capacity to get drunk on words—English words. Once he had surrendered to that intoxication, he was powerless to escape the tradition of their use.³

Every now and then a writer felt something wrong about this surrender. George Essex Evans, striking the recurrent note of prophecy in Australian writing, declares:

Not as the song of other lands
Her songs shall be.⁴

² From "A Dedication".

³ There is one Australian quality in this stanza, in Kendall's use of the pronunciation ev-c-ning. Our writers often thus adopt a variation from "standard" English which is due not to their own enunciation but to an uncertainty of what English practice is.

⁴ From "An Australian Symphony".

But he does nothing effective about it. A few lines later he is writing of the "sun-kissed plain". It is the English sun that kisses; the harsh, direct stroke of the Australian light does not dally with the amatory preliminaries. Ask the Mallee housewife, bent over her outdoor wash-trough.

The prose-writers of the first century were naturally less affected by this verbal hypnotism, but their values are as obstinately emigrant and are sometimes tainted by an anti-Australian snobbism. It is perhaps misleading to include Henry Kingsley in any catalogue of Australian writers. He wrote in England for Englishmen; when he chose Australia as a subject for his novels, it was because the literary sales-value of exotic experience was the sole nugget he had brought back from his colonial venture. The one real point of sympathy he had with the country was an enthusiasm for the charm of the landscape—an enthusiasm which was seldom shared by the Australian-born of his own or the succeeding generation.

Despite his essentially touristic view of the country, certain facets of Australian life do emerge, with an unexpected vitality, in his pages. One hardly expects to meet, in the work of an observer who had left Australia before 1860, such a portrait as this:

One of those long-legged, slab-sided, lean, sunburnt, cabbage-tree-hatted lads, of whom Captain Brentwood kept always, say half-a-dozen and the Major four or five (I should fancy, no relation to one another, and yet so exactly alike, that Captain Brentwood never called them by their right names by any chance); lads who were employed about the stable and the paddock, always in some way with the horses; one of those representatives of the rising Australian generation, I say, looked in, and without announcing himself, or touching his hat (an Australian never touches his hat if he is a free man, because the prisoners are forced to), came up to Jim across the drawing-room, as quiet and self-possessed as if he was quite used to good society, and, putting a letter in his hand, said merely "Miss Alice", and relapsed into silence, amusing himself by looking round Mrs Buckley's drawing-room, the like of which he had never seen before. . . .

The lad—I always call that sort of an individual a lad; there is no other word for them, though they are of all ages, from sixteen to twenty—the lad, I say, was so taken up with the contemplation of a blown-glass pressepapier on the table, that Jim had to say, "Hallo there, John!"

The lad turned round, and asked in a perfectly easy manner, "What the deuce is this thing for, now?"

"That," said Jim, "is the button of a Chinese Mandarin's hat, who was killed at the battle of Waterloo in the United States by Major Buckley."

"Is it now," said the lad, quite contented. "It's very pretty; may I take it up?"

"Of course you may," said Jim. "Now, what's the foal like?"

"Rather leggy, I should say," he returned. "Is there any answer?"

Jim wrote a few lines with a pencil on half his sister's note, and gave it him. He put it in the lining of his hat, and had got as far as the door, when he turned again. He looked wistfully towards the table where the pressepapier was lying. It was too much for him. He came back and took it up again. What he wanted with it, or what he would have done with it if he had got it, I cannot conceive, but it had taken his simple fancy more, probably, than an emerald of the same size would have done. At last he put it to his eye.

"Why, darn my cabbage-tree," he said, "if you can't see through it! He wouldn't sell it, I suppose, now?"

Jim pursed his lips and shook his head, as though to say that such an idea was not to be entertained, and the lad, with a sigh, laid it down and departed.⁵

There he is, already out of the chrysalis—the Dinkum Aussie in person, physique, casualness, assurance, horseyness, and all. There, too, is an early expression of the Conflict of Manners between Englishman and Australian. Kingsley, of course, does not see it in that light. For him, the Englishman—of the right class—has manners, and the Currency Lad has none. The young cub who thinks it amusing to take a rise out of the ignorance of the uneducated, is one of the Goodies of Kingsley's book; there is no hint that his creator disapproves of him, or that the Currency Lad, whose name his employer cannot be

⁵ *Geoffrey Hamlyn* (Hallcraft edition 1952), p. 313.

bothered remembering, might have some salty comments to make when he is back in the stables with his own kind.

The distance of Kingsley from Australian ideas is well illustrated by a later speech of Sam Buckley's:

"Think of you and I [*sic*] taking the place we are entitled to by birth and education, in the splendid society of that noble island. Don't let me hear all that balderdash about the founding of new empires. Empires take too long in growing for me.

"What honours, what society, has this little colony to give, compared to those that open to a fourth-rate gentleman in England? I want to be a real Englishman, not half a one. I want to throw in my lot heart and hand with the greatest nation in the world. I don't want to be young Sam Buckley of Baroona. I want to be the Buckley of Clere. Is not that a noble ambition?"

"My whole soul goes with you, Sam," said Alice. "My whole heart and soul. Let us consult, and see how this is to be done."⁶

It is a shame to be unmoved by so much nobility of sentiment; but an irreverent Australian can hardly forbear quoting further:

"This is the way the thing stands," said Sam. "The house and park at Clere were sold by my father for £12,000 to a brewer. Since then, this brewer, a most excellent fellow by all accounts, has bought back, acre by acre, nearly half the old original property as it existed in my great-grandfather's time. . . . We should have to pay very highly for it, but consider what a position we should buy with it. The county would receive us with open arms. That is all I know at present."

"A noble idea," said Alice.

Rolf Boldrewood, twenty years later, saw the relationship of the two countries in very different terms. He shared Kingsley's faith in the virtues and civilising powers of a landed gentry; but he had lived from childhood in Australia, and his patriotic prejudices often invert the values of Kingsley. The hero

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 431.

of *A Sydney-Side Saxon*, for example, is an English agricultural labourer's son who has seen his decent and industrious father brought to the workhouse through no fault of his own. The lad determines that he will not submit to the narrow injustice which is all England offers him. So he migrates to Australia, where his vigour and capacity for hard work soon make him the founder of a pastoral dynasty.

The Conflict of Manners, too, is very differently adjudicated when Boldrewood is the referee. In *Robbery Under Arms* Dick Marston is visited in jail by Ada Falkland, the squatter's daughter whom he has twice rescued (once from death, once from worse than death). She is accompanied by her fiancé, an English baronet. On parting Ada offers the condemned man her hand:

Sir George, or whatever his name was, didn't seem to fancy it overmuch, for he said—

"You colonists are strange people. Our friend here may think himself highly favoured."

Miss Falkland turned towards him and held up her head, looking like a queen, as she was, and says she—⁷

What she says is unfortunately cast in the improbably eloquent rhetoric proper to a heroine of Victorian fiction; but she certainly gives the baronet a proper dressing-down, and we are left in no doubt which code of manners has Boldrewood's sympathy. By a happily illustrative coincidence, this time it is the English lordling's name which is not worth remembering.

Although Boldrewood admirably reflects the developing Australian rebellion against conventional English values, he has not entirely escaped the hypnotic influence of English literary custom. It appears most clearly in his style. Here is the opening paragraph of *Robbery Under Arms*:

My name's Dick Marston, Sydney-side native. I'm twenty-nine years old, six feet in my stocking soles, and thirteen stone weight. Pretty strong and active with it, so they say. I don't want to blow—

⁷ World's Classics edition, p. 630.

not here, any road—but it takes a good man to put me on my back, or stand up to me with the gloves, or the naked mauleys. I can ride anything—anything that ever was lapped in horsehide—swim like a musk-duck, and track like a Myall blackfellow. Most things that a man can do I'm up to it, and that's all about it. As I lift myself now I can feel the muscle swell on my arm like a cricket ball, in spite of the—well, in spite of everything.

In many respects that is first-rate narrative writing. It has dash and freshness; it uses colloquialism without the touch of affectation which so easily affects the educated writer condescending to its employment. And yet, as the voice of Dick Marston, the bush-bred youngster, it does not ring true. The pace is wrong; the colonial drawl is not there, and its absence subtly falsifies the tone of Marston's portrayal. You can feel twelve thousand miles of difference as soon as you set Boldrewood's mere correctness of colloquial diction against a passage of Furphy, who hears and feels the inner quality of bush-speech:

"I was havin' a look at the ships; an' there was a bloke standin' on one of them, seemin'ly in charge; an' I ast this feller, in a sort of matter-of-fact way, whether the ship was holler all the ways down, for convenience o' stowin' things, or whether she was logged up solid at the bottom to give her stidiment when the wind was blowin' all o' one side; an' this cove he told me to come on board if I liked, an' look down the catchway."⁸

Observe that when Furphy is writing of Fred Pritchard, of English breeding, the pace of the dialogue comes much closer to that of Boldrewood's intended Australian:

"No, Mr Bruce, I didn't. Perhaps I should have done so; but, deuce take me, I couldn't. They were my game. I had taken the mail-contract just in the hope of meeting with some adventure of this kind. I was full of devilment in those days. If I hadn't kept myself usefully employed, I'd have been the terror of the country. . . ."⁹

⁸ *The Buln-buln and the Brolga* (Angus & Robertson, 1948), p. 57.

⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 76.

When I first noticed some falsity of tone in the voice of Dick Marston, and diagnosed it as wrong in rhythm, I felt also a sense of recognition which for some time I could not define. Eventually the face and form took shape. It was this:

Now the cause of my leaving Tiverton School, and the way of it, were as follows. On the twenty-ninth day of November, in the year of our Lord 1673, the very day when I was twelve years old, and had spent all my substance in sweet-meats, with which I made treat to the little boys, till the large boys ran in and took them, we came out of school at five o'clock, as the rule is upon Tuesday. According to custom, we drove the day-boys in brave rout down the causeway, from the school-porch even to the gate where Cop has his dwelling and duty.¹⁰

There are differences between the two styles, but the similarity of pace is unmistakable. I am not suggesting any direct influence of Blackmore upon Boldrewood. The truth is, that Boldrewood was writing within the convention of the English romantic novel of adventure; he has unconsciously caught the breezing rhythm at which most writers of that school aimed; and it has falsified by a shade his evocation of Dick Marston.

A similar infection from English cultural sources sometimes weakens his subject-matter. Starlight, for example, the aristocrat-gone-wrong, who yet retains a magic authority of personality, is a piece of romantic nonsense; he has entered Boldrewood's mind, not through the channel of experience, but from the accepted conventions of saddle-and-spur fiction (aided, perhaps, by the popular legend of Captain Moonlight). Robert Louis Stevenson in *The Master of Ballantrae* might bring off such a piece of romanticising; but Boldrewood's humbler—and soldier—skill was for telling the truth that he knew.

To point out these strayings from a novelist's effectiveness is not to condemn Boldrewood. The strength and truth of many of his portraits—the Marstons, for instance—and of his less romantic scenes remain unchallengeable. His weaknesses are due to a contradiction which only a stronger creative

¹⁰ *Lorna Doone*, opening of Chapter 2.

power than his could have mastered. On the one hand he was moved by that naturalism which seems inherent in the Australian approach to fiction. On the other hand he needed a form into which to cast his work, and he had to go to English sources to find it. The adventure-romance seemed to provide a convention well suited to the nature of his material, judged by its plot and setting rather than by its tone. In fact, that convention was alien to the "dinkum" element which gave Boldrewood's work its real value. That work failed to achieve a consistent strength partly because Boldrewood lacked originality of mind and a mature set of values—but partly because he dressed his Australian ideas in imported suits, off the peg, which restricted their freedom of movement. He can scarcely be blamed for succumbing to a difficulty to which a derivative literature is inevitably exposed.

The writers of the nineties were swung past this temptation to imitate by the assertiveness of their rebellion against English values. They were too confident that they represented the chosen people not to find their own voice and their own way of doing a job. Hence Lawson and Furphy achieved revolutions in technique no less striking than the freshness of their subject-matter, and their boldly Australian sense of values.

Their colonial revolt, however, appears less happy when it is directly expressed. There is a swaggering truculence about it which suggests a doubt behind the front of confidence. Their vitality is not that of the unbroken brumby, but of the colt who has grown tired of servitude and who is determined to kick over the traces.

This adolescent strain frequently leads them into falsity of observation, and sometimes into an almost comic injustice. Furphy, for example, is usually precise in both his feeling for character and in an ear for characteristic turns of speech which rivals Alan Marshall's; but when an Englishman is speaking, Furphy cannot even hear him accurately. Here is the voice of Willoughby, the remittance-man, as Furphy's offensively Australian bias distorts it:

"But—pardon me—if you are a native of Victoria, you can form no conception of what England is. Among the upper middle classes—to which I belonged—the money-making proclivity is held in very low esteem, I assure you. Our solicitude is to make ourselves mutually agreeable; and the natural result is a grace and refinement which"—¹¹

at which point Mosey, blasphemously, and understandably interrupts.

When he is concerned with the Conflict of Manners, Furphy shows the same impatient inability to observe accurately, or with reasonable fairness, on a subject which flicks his colonial sensitivities. In the encounter with Folkestone, the English aristocrat visiting Runnymede, Furphy begins by scoring two effective points for the Australian view of mannerliness:

On my interposing, he placed a gold-mounted glass in his eye, and, with a degree of rudeness which I have never seen equalled in a navvies' camp, stared straight in my face till I had done speaking. Then the lens dropped from his eye, and he turned to his companion.

"Who is this person, Montgomery?" he asked.

The squatter looked plainly displeased. He was as proud as his guest, but in a different way. Folkestone, being a gentleman *per se*, was distinguished from the ordinary image of God by caste and culture; and to these he added a fatal self-consciousness. Don't take me as saying that caste and culture could possibly have made him a boor; take me as saying that these had been powerless to avert the misfortune. He was a gentleman by the grace of God and the flunkeyism of man. Montgomery was also a gentleman, but only by virtue of his position. So that, for instance, Priestley's personal facsimile, appearing as a well-to-do squatter, would have been received on equal terms by Montgomery; whereas, Folkestone's disdain would have been scarcely lessened. The relative manliness of the two types of gentleman is a question which each student will judge according to his own fallen nature.¹²

But soon the raw exasperation, which so often afflicts the

¹¹ *Such is Life* (Angus & Robertson edition), p. 43.

¹² *Op. cit.*, p. 298.

Australian of the period when he is confronted by an upper-class Englishman, gets the better of his judgment, and he indulges in a flutter of prejudiced nonsense:

"I will thump this fellow, Montgomery," said he [Folkestone], and he certainly meant it. Priestley was a man of nine stone.

By your favour, once more, and only once. The Englishman proper is the pugilist of the world. The Australian or American maxima may be as brutal, or even more so, but the average efficiency in smiting with the fist of wickedness is, beyond all question, on the English side. "English fair-play" is a fine expression. It justifies the bashing of the puny draper's assistant by the big, hairy blacksmith; and this to the perfect satisfaction of both parties, if they are worthy of the name of Englishman. Also, the English gentleman may take off his coat to the potsherd of the earth; and so excellent is his discrimination that the combat will surely end even as your novelist describes; simply because no worshipper can make headway against his god, when the divinity hits back. At the same time, no insubordinate Englishman, named Crooked-Nose Yorkey, and made in proportion, ever did, or ever will, suffer manual mauling at the hands of an English gentleman—or any other gentleman, for that matter. What a fool the gentleman would be! No; Crooked-Nose Yorkey is always given in charge; and it takes three policemen to run him in.¹³

Lawson is subject to the same loss of his normal humane good-sense when the Union Jack flaps in his eyes. In "A Sketch of Mateship" Jim and Bill are returning to Bourke from a shearing job. Jim, being the better talker of the two, is sent ahead to sell a horse for Bill. He succeeds in getting the goodish price of £8:

"I could 'a' got ten quid, if I'd 'a' waited."

"Well, it's no use cryin'. Eight quid is good enough. Did you get the stuff?"

"Oh, yes. They parted all right. If I hadn't been such a dam' fool an' rushed it, there was a feller that would have given ten quid for that mare."

¹³ *Op. cit.*, p. 300.

"Well, don't break yer back about it," said Bill. "Eight is good enough."

"Yes. But I could 'a' got ten," said Jim, languidly, putting his hand in his pocket.

Pause. Bill sat waiting for him to hand the money over; but Jim withdrew his hand empty, stretched, and said:

"Ah, well, Bill, I done it in. Lend us a couple o' notes."

Jim had been drinking and gambling all night and had lost the eight pounds as well as his own money.

Bill didn't explode. What was the use? He should have known that Jim wasn't to be trusted with money in town. It was he who had been the fool. He sighed and lent Jim a pound, and they went in to have a drink.¹⁴

But, for once, Lawson is not content to rest on the artistically right ending. He spoils a first-rate little sketch by adding a moralistic paragraph:

Now it strikes me that if this had happened in a civilised country (like England) Bill would have had Jim arrested and jailed for larceny as a bailee, or embezzlement, or whatever it was. And would Bill or Jim or the world have been any the better for it?

There the exasperated injustice is rendered worse by the touch of self-righteousness. It was reasonable to assert and exemplify Mateship as a creed which had acquired a special intensity under the conditions of Australian living; it was absurdly unreasonable to assume that the Englishman knew nothing of its elements. Incidentally it was very poor practice of the religion which Lawson was preaching.

The writers of the nineties, by the confident independence of their choice of matter and of their technique, show that the Australian community had largely escaped from the inhibitions of the colonial situation; but the high pitch and the exaggerations, when these writers are attacking the English, suggest a crack in the confidence, and the inner persistence of the colonial complex.

¹⁴ In *Send Round the Hat*.

With the turn of the century, the pendulum of colonialism swung swiftly back. An awkward doubt, bred of the colonial habit of comparison, began to nag at the literate Australian mind. This rumbustious nationalism, was it, after all, *only* parochialism? It was a withering suspicion. Before its chill breath writers began to scuttle to the shelter of imitativeness.

This is not, of course, a wholly just interpretation. The writers of the 1900s were probably right when they felt the need for a change in the modes of Australian writing. Most of them were poets; and the established form of poetry during the nineties had been the bush-ballad. It had its own vitality, and it expressed certain traits in the evolving Australian character; but it was too often "popular" in the worse sense. Neither its rhythms nor its ideas made any demand on the reader's concentration or came from any depth of individuality in the writer. As the Australian nation groped towards maturity, it needed some instrument of expression of wider range and deeper tone. But, by the way they met this need, the poets of the 1900s demonstrated the fatal temptations of the colonial situation.

In every literature's growth, there comes a stage when a primitive vigour must be refined to serve more sophisticated purposes. Receiving, perhaps, some inspiration from a foreign source, a new generation starts a fresh development; but it is a development, a new phase in a continuous process of growth. The Australian poets of the 1900s turned their backs squarely on their local predecessors; they felt the insufficiency of Australian writing by contrast with the work of the great English poets, so that it seemed natural to plunge back into the English tradition, and to ignore the Australian. Often they refused to admit that such a thing as Australian poetry could exist. Poetry was poetry, a universal product of the human mind, which presumably nourished itself by the contemplation of the individual navel. Half an hour's honest consideration of the history of any culture would have convinced them of the falsity of that theory, but they were in no mood for objective caution. Exasperation with the truculence of the colonial

revolt, and the rawness of its poetic expression, dominated their attitude. They turned back to the refined veal of the parental table—which was hard upon the deserted swine.

This counter-revolution had its uses. It asserted the importance of standards, and perhaps did something to increase Australian cultural self-respect. But writers of the quality of Brennan, McCrae, Neilson and Baylebridge might have been forming and refining an Australian poetic style, instead of retreating into the jaded tradition of English romanticism, which had, indeed, come near to strangling English poetry before the poets of the new century struggled out of its grip.

Since the ill effects of this imitativeness have sometimes been denied, it is perhaps worth looking at its results in the work of McCrae and Brennan, two poets in whose work it is apparent. Each had richness of talent and strength of personality, each might be expected to speak with a strongly individual voice, and each falls short of his potential achievement—that statement remains true despite the fact that Brennan's actual achievement is probably higher than that of any other Australian poet. Consider this passage from McCrae's "Poetae et Reges":

To be a poet is to stand
Upon the dais and right hand
Of warlike Caesar. Gods and kings
Were but the very dust of things,
Did not old Homer (and his crew
Of lesser measure) grandly strew
Their fitful progress with the bays
Of deathless triumph-songs of praise.

No one, I imagine, would deny that this is a very poor piece of writing. The question is why a poet of McCrae's quality was content to let it stand. The answer, I believe, lies in the fact that its diction belongs to a hallowed tradition. McCrae's sense of the sanctification of the language has smothered in him that power of objective self-criticism which can alone steel a poet to the necessary savage intensity of scratching-out.

There are less debatable results, too, which follow from McCrae's choice of an alien imagery. In the "Song of the Witless Boy", he writes:

My darling on a cloudy steed
Rode in December, and, indeed,
Her glances shone
Yellow like lightning up above,
But never hotter than my love.

Now if reader and writer are to create a poem between them, from the hints and joggings of the imagination which is all the poet can set down, there must be large assumptions of a common field of experience as a starting-point. When an Australian reader approaches an Australian writer, he will naturally expect a shared background. When he meets the word "December", he will assume that it stands for the Australian December. In this case, the phrase "mumping priests" in the preceding stanza probably tells him immediately to cancel that assumption; but the process of cancellation must partly numb his imaginative responsiveness. It may be objected that a similar adjustment must be made when an Australian reads an English poem; but in that case, his mind is prepared for such adjustment before he begins to read, and there is no disturbing hang on a moment of ambiguity.

Moreover, McCrae's use of European imagery here is not consistent. To see the passage as an integrated whole, it is necessary to envisage a December (i.e. winter) thunder-storm—or, at least, lightning-flash. That is a natural enough phenomenon to the Australian mind; but it is a destructively freakish image in an English setting. The intrusion of an Australian habit of thought into his European imagery has destroyed the consistence of McCrae's picture.

This is not an isolated slip; it happens frequently in McCrae's poetry. For example, "Fantasy" begins:

I love to lie under the lemon
That grows by the fountain . . .

Let us pass over the improbability of choosing a lemon-tree under which to lie and look at the stars—a poet is entitled to some licence in achieving so melodically charming a line. The point with which I am concerned is that this is intended to suggest a Mediterranean garden. Yet later in the poem we read

They climb the steep sides of the chasm,
And rush through the thicket
That chokes up the pathways that lead to
My green garden wicket.

A wicket-gate into an Italian garden (which is incidentally surrounded by a hedge)? Centaurs charging an English garden? What is it we are being asked to see? Certainly McCrae is writing fantasy, and his garden is not meant to exist anywhere outside the realm of the imagination; but myth, no less than realism, demands a unity of reference behind it.

No English writer, of a visualising power equal to McCrae's, would have fallen into this confusion; for to him the English and Italian scenes would be separated by the vast difference between Home and Not Home. The Australian, seeing them both enveloped by the mist of a charming exoticism, loses a fine edge of distinction.

It is perhaps worth quoting one more example of this blurring of McCrae's visualization, since it happens that Brennan has made the same error. In "Kalendar", McCrae writes:

Full eagerly new-awakened Spring
Upholds within his kirtle spread,
The seeds of life that he shall fling,
So man, and failing world, be fed.

For this is he (the very wight)
Who fills the nest, or, where the plough
Goes sliding in, doth plant delight,
And quicken leaves on ev'ry bough.

Brennan, in "The Wanderer", says:

After sowing, comes the short-lived summer's warmth.

Nowhere in the Mediterranean or Western Europe are the main food-crops sown in spring. The image is quite unreal. Because they refused to draw their imagery from the native harvest of the eye, since that would have revealed their provincial environment, they have revealed a provincial ignorance.

Brennan's imagery does not often suffer from the same defects as McCrae's. Landscape is for him usually employed as a concreting symbol of intellectual conceptions. For that reason it does not need a clear localisation. He can mix in "The Wanderer" images drawn from the landscape about his Sydney home with deciduous forests, without any destructive effect on his metaphysical purpose. It is rather the influence of the imitative tendency on his diction which explains the incompleteness of his success.

For, despite the impressiveness of his achievement, Brennan is not a fully successful writer. Popularity is a poor measuring-stick for poetry; but a fully successful writer does not stay out of print for a quarter of a century. As we read Brennan, we admire, we respect—but, somehow, we do not kindle. Reader and writer do not quicken together to the moment of truth.

The cause of this failure lies, I believe, in a defect of style, small in itself but destructive in its effect. Brennan's poetry has two voices, unhappily mated. One has a charged incisiveness and an excitingly individual inflection—that is the voice we hear most frequently in his work; but every now and then, he raises to his lips the trumpet of romantic traditionalism—and blares flat. These moments are not frequent; but unhappily they often occur at the point of poetic climax.

Consider, for example, the forthright opening movement of "I said, This misery must end":

I said, This misery must end:
Shall I, that am a man and know
that sky and wind are yet my friend,

sit huddled under any blow?
So speaking left the dismal room
and stept into the mother-night
where the few stars burnt low and bright . . .

That is a fine piece of writing, direct, individually voiced and clean-edged; but I have omitted a line, thereby spoiling the rhythm and rhyme-structure, but, on balance I believe, improving the passage. Brennan wrote:

and stept into the mother-night
all fill'd with sacred quickening gloom
where the few stars burnt low and bright . . .

How badly the line lets down the feeling of the whole. "Fill'd with gloom" is surely not the right phrase; it takes away the sense of spaciousness from the night. If "fill'd" is already a romantic excess, the pleonastic "all fill'd" is much worse. "Sacred" is no doubt intended to convey a conception from the Brennan mystique, but it refuses to achieve that effect. Its staling by traditional usage makes it, for the reader, a mere histrionic gesture.

It is seldom that Brennan's failures are so positively bad as this. More usually they lie in a lessening of the pressure when it needs to be compulsively firm. The "O desolate Eves" section of "The Wanderer", for example, is a key passage on which the impact of the poem as a whole largely depends. It is, in the main, a fine piece of writing. The opening is quiet, yet compelling; it develops with controlled strength towards the climax:

Desperate eves,
when the wind-bitten hills turn'd violet
along their rims, and the earth huddled her heat
within her niggard bosom, and the dead stones
lay battle-strewn before the iron wind
that, blowing from the chill west, made all its way
a loneliness to yield its triumph room;

That is splendidly done. Brennan holds his reader leaning forward in the chair, waiting the moment of revelation; and this follows:

yet in that wind a clamour of trumpets rang,
old trumpets, resolute, stark, undauntable,
singing to battle against the eternal foe . . .

Just when the grip should tighten inexorably, it has relaxed. The image is too jaded to have any power left in it, the epithets are too familiar to arouse us. A mature and original poet is suddenly declaiming like a promising adolescent who has read too much and lived too little. And that is a natural tendency of the submissive phase of colonialism.¹⁵

By way of contrast, let me quote from Louis Esson's "Cradle Song"—a poem which cannot stand against Brennan's best, but which has a certain illustrative value:

Baby, O baby, fain you are for bed,
Magpie to mopoke busy as the bee;
The little red calf's in the snug cow-shed,
An' the little brown bird's in the tree. . . .

Baby, my baby, rest your drowsy head,
The one man that works here, tired you must be.
The little red calf's in the snug cow-shed,
An' the little brown bird's in the tree.

I am not, of course, suggesting that Brennan should have adopted the ingenuous methods of Esson. I want only to draw from it the exemplification of a principle. In that poem, "Magpie to Mopoke" does not quite come off. It loses spontaneity because one can feel Esson deliberately rejecting the tendency to be English, and reaching for an Australian alternative—it is a curious result, indeed, of the colonial dilemma that the choice

¹⁵ It may seem strange to consider Brennan as the continuer of an English tradition, since his poetic methods were so strongly influenced by French symbolism. His diction, however, owes little to this influence. The quotations from McCrae are from *Satyrs and Sunlight* (Lothian, 1911); those from Brennan are from *Poems* (Angus & Robertson, 1913).

of an Australian phrase should seem forced! On the other hand "the one man that works here" is admirable; the sense in it of a living tradition of language gives it warmth and tenderness. It is not because the phrase happens to be colloquial; it is rather something of the quality of the people who use it coming through with the phrase. The particular failure of the imitative poets lies more in the loss of this livingness than in any positive faults which can be revealed by analysis.

Brennan's English contemporaries were faced by the same danger as he from the suffocating influence of the tradition of romantic diction. Poets such as Hardy, the Masefield of the early lyrics, even the traditionalist Bridges—men of no greater vitality of mind than Brennan—escaped that danger by moving with their community's changing habits of speech. Brennan, cutting himself off from that freshening influence, was more exposed to the temptations of tradition—or, to put the point more accurately, was less able to perceive with precision the point at which tradition ossifies into convention.

If McCrae and Brennan were aware—I doubt if they were—of any sacrifice in their avoidance of Australian speech and settings, they could be pardoned for thinking it too trivial to be set against their gains. After all the content of an educated Australian's mind—including the language which gives it form—differs very little from that of any other comparable Anglo-Saxon's. The bulk of it will be drawn from English tradition. The differences will appear only in the choice of an image here and there, the occasional turn of an inflection or flavouring of a phrase. Yet, on such slight tinctures much of the individuality and livingness of a poet's speech may depend.

Despite the tendency to imitative submission in this period, it produced one of the best studies of the Anglo-Australian tension, in Henry Handel Richardson's *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. That subject is only incidental to the book's real theme, which is held closely to the single purpose upon which H.H.R. has directed her resolute imagination—the discovery and the revelation of the meaning of her father's life. It is not

even quite true to say that the conflicting values of English and Australian life were an essential part of Mahony's struggle; for as H.H.R. sees it, that phase of his conflict is no more than a symbol of the final truth about him—the inability of his spirit to be at home in the world of men. But, as a symbol, H.H.R. had to present that conflict, and she has seen it with the steady gaze which—almost without the aid of other qualities—made her a great novelist. The conflict is echoed in the relationship between Richard and Mary, representing the English and Australian temperaments respectively—to be more precise, Mahony is Anglo-Irish, a temperament more nearly Antipodean to the Australian. Incidentally, H.H.R. presents one of the best epitomes of the Conflict of Manners, in the incident of the supper-party, prepared by Mary with so ingenuous a generosity, and rejected as ostentatious by the chilly Devon snobs.¹⁶

The conflict is admirably presented for the purposes of H.H.R.'s book; from the point of view of the social historian it has a maiming incompleteness. The Australian temperament is seen too exclusively in terms of good-nature, expansiveness, materialism and vulgarity. The more virile prides of the spirit, the loyalty to the simplicities of the heart, and the ironic realism—qualities which Lawson understood so well—do not enter the picture. The English figures are presented even more superficially. It would have destroyed the balance of the book to have shown them more fully, since this conflict is not the real theme of the book.

H.H.R.'s personal attitude to the problem can be felt in her fiction, but is not there declared; for she held firmly to a continental conception of the novelist's duty of objectivity. In her own person, she was an early victim of a twentieth century disease—the cultural cringe of the Australian intellectual, an effect of the Anglo-Australian tension so important that I shall reserve it for treatment in a separate essay. Its effect on H.H.R., however, needs discussion here.

¹⁶ p. 466 of the 1930 Omnibus edition.

In her autobiography, *Myself When Young*, she reports that when she found herself stuck in a passage of *Richard Mahony* which would not come right, she remarked to her husband "I don't know I'm sure how I ever came to write *Maurice Guest*—a poor ignorant little colonial like me".¹⁷

Our sympathies go out to her, pathetic victim of the Cringe. For, observe, the H.H.R. who had written *Maurice Guest* was not the raw girl encompassed by the limitations of the Kilmore Post Office and of a Philistine mother. She had already behind her the years in Munich and a day-to-day communion with a husband who was steeped in the traditions of European literature. Her cultural experience was probably richer than that of such contemporary novelists as Wells and Bennett. It was primarily the simple damnation of being Australian which made her feel limited. Yet, if the evidence is fairly examined, it becomes clear that H.H.R.'s Australian background was rather richer in cultural influences than the dingy shop-cum-stuffy housekeeper's room-cum sordid Grammar School which incubated Wells, or than the Five Towns of the 1880s.

It is impossible to estimate accurately the effect of these inhibitions on H.H.R.'s writing, and it is perhaps unwise to conjecture. Yet a contrast suggests itself too tempting to be ignored. Lawson and Furphy rode on the crest of Australian assertiveness. They were completely free, consciously at least, from the temptation to cringe; and they achieved forms and styles of a marked freshness, originality and vigour. H.H.R. was personally intimidated by her sense of colonial inferiority; and her style is flat, characterless, and even crude. There has probably never been a writer of equal imaginative stature who has handled words so poorly, save in a few passages where an exceptional kindling of mind has warmed her into spontaneity.

Perhaps the simple explanation is that H.H.R. lacked some natural gift which customarily accompanies the power of imaginative creation. The suggestion that her awkwardness with words springs from her cultural inhibitions is the merest

¹⁷ *Myself When Young* (Heinemann), p. 62.

guess. And yet—her worst fault is her habit of wallowing in cliché. It is surely the short-coming most likely to be found in a mind which distrusts its own authority.

The submissive reaction lasted well into the twenties, although the contrary tendency—never quiescent—was strengthening. The colonial relationship is one of the main themes of Martin Boyd's *The Montforts*, a typical novel of the period. Unfortunately that novel is too immature to analyse the problem with sureness. Boyd was, at that time, not certain enough of the meaning of his own experiences to impose a firm pattern of values on his theme. Moreover he had too weak a grasp of Australian life and Australian history to set his family-saga surely in its social setting. There are suggestions that he was an extreme sufferer from the Cringe. When he wants to illustrate the protective attitude of the family towards his hero, he says:

He had hardly seen, and never had any contact with, the Australian larrikin from the crowded low-lying flats of Collingwood.

The choice of example to illustrate his point is, in itself, betraying; even more significant is the way the word "Australian" has crept into the sentence. No one, writing of some over-cherished scion of Mayfair, would say "He had never come in contact with the English roughs who inhabit the East End". He would say simply "the roughs" and leave their nationality to be assumed.

That sentence of Boyd's suggests a contrast not altogether irrelevant to my theme. Boyd used it to explain why his hero went to England to enlist, instead of joining the A.I.F. The contemporary *Bulletin* commented on this habit among the young men of some upper-crust families in a snatch of parody:

I didn't raise my boy to be a soldier
To charge with local riff-raff on the foe.
If fighting must be done
My boy shall bear a gun
With the naicest sort of soldier, dontcher-know.

Despite its limitations, *The Montforts* does throw some light on the colonial problem. There is the significant picture of an able and publicly active family floating uneasily on the surface of Australian life, neither fully accepted nor fully accepting. The source of this failure—impoverishing both to the family and to Australian society—lay in its inability finally to relinquish the kind of ambitions nourished by Kingsley's Sam Buckley.

There is also Boyd's contemporary portrait of the urban Australian intellectual thirsting for the cultural opportunities of Europe. The pendulum had indeed swung far. The assertiveness of the nineties had been based on the conviction that Australian life had a freedom and an expansiveness in which the spirit of man was liberated. For Boyd's educated townsman of the twenties, the voyage to England was the way to freedom. It represented escape from the provincial narrowness of Australian society. That view accurately charts a strong current in the Australian life of the period. It was in part, of course, a mere snobbery; it was sometimes due to a failure to distinguish between sophistication and maturity; but it partly expressed an inescapable truth.

The tendency was not entirely new in Australian experience. *My Brilliant Career* implies it, and it is rendered explicit in *Cockatoos*,¹⁸ for which book Brent of Bin Bin borrowed Miles Franklin's heroine. But this current of inverted homesickness was intensified by the urbanisation of Australian society, and by the growth of an intelligentsia.

Inevitably this tendency increased the short-coming which had caused it. Often the people who could most have enriched Australian intellectual life were the people who fled from its poverty. Australian writing lost by voluntary exile Henry Handel Richardson, Miles Franklin (during the most vigorous years of her life), Christine Stead, W. J. Turner, Jack and Philip Lindsay. The loss worked both ways. On the one hand, none of these writers quite attained equilibrium once he or she

¹⁸ *Cockatoos* (Angus & Robertson) was published in 1954, written in 1927, and is set in the nineties.

had lost the feel of native soil beneath the feet—as some of them have since admitted. On the other hand, Australian writing was robbed of a leaven of venturesome minds. Our literature of the last forty years might look very different if there were added to it the books these writers might have produced in Australia, and the influence upon others of their talk, their enthusiasms, and their rebellions.

During the 1930s the pendulum swung back towards the extreme of national assertiveness. The new attitude was first asserted with effective explicitness by P. R. Stephensen in his book *The Foundations of Culture in Australia*, and then developed by the Jindyworobak movement with proseletysing ardour. Its attitude might be described as Neo-Ninetyism with certain important modifications and additions.

The Jindyworobaks did not cock snooks at England (a significant change), admitting the value of our English inheritance, and asking only that we should avoid a stultifying imitation. It is less happily significant that, forty years after Lawson, they should have been pressed by a need to revive a conscious literary nationalism. It is indicative of the persisting strength of the submissive tendency that this should demand to be declared in manifestoes. It was also weakening in effect, for the national quality of a literature should be a flavour pervading its ingredients, not a spice from a packet stirred in by the cook.

Probably the strongest virtue of the Jindyworobak theories was the recognition of the technical problems of a derivative literature, and the consequent rebellion against the alien symbolisms and the borrowed imagery used by the poets of the 1900s. The Jindyworobaks demanded that the language of the poet should be dictated by what he sees with his own eyes, not by what his ancestors saw elsewhere. Again one is struck by the strangeness of the need to assert so obvious a principle.

A tenet of the Jindyworobaks which would have surprised—and shocked—the writers of the nineties was the suggestion that Australians should draw inspiration from the culture of

the aboriginal as the cohabitant of our physical environment. There is an unconvincing flavour of German mysticism in this suggestion, which ignores the immensity of the European influence even upon our physical environment. The very grass upon our plains was unknown in Alcheringa.

The greatest interest of the suggestion lies in a change from the attitude of the nineties which it emphasises. Primarily the idea was an off-shoot from the stirring of national conscience over the white maltreatment of our predecessors in the land, but it was partly inspired by the Jindyworobak idea that we should draw inspiration from some influence held to emanate from the Land. We and the aboriginal, they held, were both touched by the same Genius of Place, and were thus cultural brothers under the skin. It was an ingenious attempt to evade the dilemma of our colonial situation, but it ignored the facts too blatantly to be convincing.

It does, however, truthfully record a changing attitude towards our physical environment. It expresses a feeling of the period that the Australian spirit was rooted in a land no less than in a people. If the men of the nineties had felt this influence, they had felt it very differently. The land was still mainly for them a hostile force; if they drew a strength from it, it lay mainly in the confidence springing from the sense of victory over an unrelenting foe, rather than in any feeling of affectionate unity with the soil.

The creative achievement of the Jindyworobaks has not been very impressive. Moreover, in their earlier years, they were curiously prone to ignore the fact that their aims had already been achieved by their immediate predecessors. Katharine Pritchard, Vance Palmer, Frank Davison and Frank Wilmot in the early thirties had virtually established a new school of Australian nationalism. The tradition of Lawson and Furphy lives consciously in their work, but it has far less adolescent braggadocio than that of their progenitors. With these writers, to be Australian is no longer a self-consciously rebellious gesture. They feel no need to run a ferocious bayonet into a straw-pack-

This copy of
 the 1930s
 that led to his
 argument

ed dummy labelled "Englishman". To be Australian had at last become almost a natural achievement.

An Australian way of writing English was also beginning to establish itself. Katharine Prichard and Davison write a rough-hewn prose, in the Dinkum tradition with a touch of slap-dash-ery (though Davison's style grew more refined as he developed); each has an undercurrent of lyricism which admirably expresses the maturing relationship between the Australian and his land. Frank Wilmot solved the more difficult problem of achieving a poetic style which was characteristically Australian—more difficult because the weight of tradition necessarily rests heavier on the shoulders of the poet. Since the poet speaks within the limits of a convention, he must be intimidatingly aware of the long line of predecessors who have created his craft.

Wilmot was a sensitive and eager reader of English poetry, but, like Furphy, he retained an obstinate originality. His work is uneven, slap-dash, sometimes downright bad; but at its worst it is real, it never ceases to be poetry—and you cannot read ten lines of it without feeling that an Australian is speaking.

Slap-dash—the word suggests a difficulty typical of the whole problem of a colonial culture. Much of our writing is rough and untidy. The cultivated Australian with a pride in his country—the qualification is important—finds this distressing. With the inhibiting colonial habit of comparison, he wishes that his writers did not thus expose themselves to the disdain of the European. But when an Australian writer attempts a polished precision, the Australian reader is no happier—the baby mysteriously vanishes with the bath-water.

The trouble, of course, lies in the fact that the Australian character is slap-dash. It can no more be expressed through a nice precision than a Lawson yarn can be effectively read aloud in a Cambridge accent. Our cultivated patriot wants to feel the slap-dash character behind the work, for he knows that it is an Australian reality and it has its place in his affections. And yet, does not any literary work owe an allegiance

to universal standards? Oughtn't it to be precise? Only if he can break clear of his colonial inhibitions will he realise that the dilemma has no serious importance. After all, there was once a slap-dash lad from Stratford over whom Ben Jonson shook his learned head.

Frank Wilmot's achievement of an effective Australian style did not come easily to him—indeed he did not satisfactorily fulfil it until the production of "Melbourne Odes" in 1934. Yet he had been convinced of the need for it at least twelve years before. Some time before 1924 he had written:

A gleam of real independence, a flash of inherent light, some national tone in our word-music—little things like these will count for more than the enormous odes of affected nobility written in the calm of a borrowed security. Let us be Australian. I do not know what that is—excepting that it is not the Australian verse of today.¹⁰

The conclusion of that passage indicates one of the difficulties of the Australian writer who was not content to be colonially submissive. It is not easy to achieve a style when you do not know what it is. Luckily Wilmot at least knew what it was not, for he adds:

Australia today has . . . a method of expression subtle enough to evade the snare of the usual "local colourist".

A recognisably Australian style is apparent in Wilmot's earlier work; but at that stage he could not free himself from the duty of submission which had been enjoined on his generation. It appears in his frequent decline into romantic cliché; for the imitative poet, working in a language which is not quite his own, is the easy victim of the habit of cliché. He lacks the tact of familiarity, warning him when a phrase is too softened by over-usage to strike sparks from the reader's mind. Wilmot's failing is not quite the same as those of McCrae and Brennan, but it springs from a similar source.

¹⁰ Furnley Maurice, *Romance* (1924), p. 25.

His final achievement of a fresh and individual style in "Melbourne Odes" was ironically assisted by a foreign influence. It was based on his studies of the Americans of the type of Vachel Lindsay and Carl Sandburg. He does not imitate them, indeed an ocean of difference separates his unemphatic ironic drawl from their brash declamation; but their example gave him the confidence to break free from the staled romantic traditionalism which had penned in the minds of our earlier writers. The work of the Americans, too, probably encouraged him to resist the established belief that poetry must be solemn if it is to be properly dignified; and it is in the touch of his humour that Wilmot most effectively reveals his individuality and his Australian temperament.

Since Wilmot is the most Australian in style of our poets, it will perhaps be fitting to take from his work an example of the complexity of the colonial writer's problem. Consider these lines from the "Ode on the Victorian Market Recollected in Tranquillity":

Packed with babies and Brussels sprouts,
It's a rickety pram for a woman to shove—
But tell me, lady, whereabouts
Is the long leisure of love?

That passage cannot be fully received by an Englishman unfamiliar with Australia. It will not convey the right ironic affectionateness if it is read with the precisely enunciated consonants and the bleated diphthongs of educated English speech; it needs the close-lipped flat drawl of the Australian.

That, however, is not the whole story. The phrase "the long leisure of love" is a parody of the Swinburnian style and view of life; and part of the ironic point of the passage lies in the intrusion of its romantic cream-puffery into the bread-and-butter situation. The passage has not been fully read unless the point of style is recognised. Its full relishing, then, demands from the reader a curious ambivalence—he must be well versed in a tradition of English poetry, and he must hear that poetry

in an accent which would seem to an Englishman a wanton misrepresentation.

In more recent years, the pendulum of colonialism has lost its old violence of swing. Our poets today seldom feel the need to be exotics. Their diction generally springs from the natural habit of thought of the educated Australian; when their minds grope for an image, they are more likely to bring up something they have seen than something they have merely read about. On the other hand they no longer indulge in the forced choices of the "local colourist". The prose-writers, too, are less truculent in their Australianism. In one respect, indeed, the whirligig of time has brought in a curious revenge. The conventional writer, without the force of mind which finds an individual utterance, once took refuge, if he was an Australian, in the colonial submission to English modes—usually a generation out of date. His modern counterpart is more likely to nestle for comfort into the tradition of Lawson and Furphy, following it slavishly without developing it into a relevance to contemporary social circumstance.

On the whole we have progressed markedly during the last generation towards the goal of being ourselves without fuss or shame. The swing between submission and assertiveness has lost its extremism; but the final conquest of the colonial problem has not yet been achieved. We still sometimes swagger unconvincingly in our moments of rebellion; we still sometimes cast envious glances over our shoulders at the superior maturity of the English. We are still not quite sure whether to be proud or ashamed of ourselves. For the writer, these national uncertainties are accentuated by his use of a language which has been shaped by men whose eyes saw not what his eyes see.

Behind these problems lies a more formidable difficulty. This discussion has so far ignored one respect in which the retreat to England—which is often a retreat to Western Europe—is a probably necessary movement of the artist's mind. The Australian temperament is essentially pragmatic—a quality

which is sometimes mistaken for materialism. In truth the Australian does not ignore spiritual values provided they are plain, direct and assessable. His limitation lies in an obstinate bondage to the positive, a preference for the sum with an answer verifiable in the back pages of the book. He turns aside, scornfully and yet timidly, from the glories and terrors of the incertitudes, from the exaltations of the mysteries. Such a conception as André Gide's *Return of the Prodigal* is scarcely imaginable as the product of an Australian mind. Consequently we escape that cooling and thinning of humanity which afflicts the Gide type, but we cannot achieve Gide's kind of depth and reverberation. Yet the incertitudes and the mysteries, the excitement of the sum which never comes out, are the food and wine of the artist, whatever his country. Sometimes the Australian writer, in his need to identify himself with the spirit of his countrymen, has accepted the pragmatism, and has shut his art within walls without windows. Sometimes, in his artist's need for the incertitudes, he has turned back to the more congenial European tradition, and has thereby lost contact with the life which it is his task to interpret and to develop. Only when the contour-smoothing erosions of time have reconciled us to the acceptance of mystery will the colonial dilemma be finally solved.²⁰

²⁰ Since this passage was written, Patrick White, in *The Tree of Man*, has succeeded in reconciling a sympathetic interpretation of Australian life with a keen feeling for the spiritual mysteries.

CULTURE AND CANBERRA

I CHOSE that title, quite innocently, because it seemed to indicate my theme accurately, succinctly and alliteratively. Looking at it again, I realise that it must mislead the reader. He will inevitably expect a satiric diatribe at the expense of our democratic leaders. The linking of such traditionally incompatible conceptions must suggest an ironic intention.

Partly, of course, that is due to the traditional qualities of government, but only partly. "Culture and Westminster", "Culture and Washington", "Culture and Oslo"—there is nothing necessarily incongruous about such matings; but "Culture and Canberra"—it sounds as comically improbable as Flossie and the Archbishop, as wishful thinking as King Cophetua and the Beggarmaid.

kinship? That is probably, today, an unjust view. During the last ten years there has been a notable improvement in the sense of cultural responsibility of our political leaders. The National University has been developed fruitfully, there have been the beginnings of a recognition that the State owes some support to the theatre, and the Commonwealth Literary Fund is beginning to achieve a wider sense of its functions. Moreover, the party leaders have shown a welcome firmness and sense of democratic principle in supporting the actions of the Fund's advisors against the attacks of witch-hunting critics.

Such activity has been, however, sporadic, largely dependent on individual enthusiasms, and lacking in constructive planning. It has been too limited in its scope to shake the public assumptions built up during the long period of governmental indifference to culture; and it is of prime importance, not merely that Canberra should care about our culture, but that its active interest should be publicly recognised. At this moment in our history, an imaginatively conceived programme of communal help to culture might enlist behind it the pro-

pulsion of popular pride. For, in this period, it is the signs of evolving national maturity which most readily awaken national pride; and a quickening of cultural activity is readily recognised as a symbol of maturity.

It is true, as I have suggested, that there is some degree of incongruity between government in its nature, and artistic culture—the type with which I am concerned in this discussion. The very publicness of public life jars with the necessary privacy and individualism of art. The administration of the massive modern state has its inevitable rigidities, its shufflings of papers in triplicate; cultural organisation needs a delicate flexibility. Administration must deal largely with quantities, it must have its rule-of-thumb standards of measurement; culture must be qualitatively estimated, it cannot be submitted to the discipline of the yard-stick.

But such disabilities must be overcome if our national life is not to wither before it has fully flowered. A country cannot achieve nationhood until it has achieved articulateness. We talk glibly enough of the "Australian way of life"—indeed we are beginning to be glib about how glib that phrase is. How can we know what it means, whether indeed it means anything, until it is vigorously and coherently expounded? And who can expound it, who can make us intelligently aware of our own meaning, our basic unities, the direction of our movement, so well as the writer, the painter, the musician? Henry Lawson did not invent the idea of *Mateship*; but that idea became solidier, more apprehensible, when he had set it down in firm print. Australians had begun to find a sense of kinship with the landscape, replacing the old immigrant fear of its strangeness, before Streeton and Heysen expressed the growing pride and acceptance in terms of paint; but once they had forcefully declared it, the acceptance was finally ratified. Each stage in our national development needs this ratification by expression. Canberra itself cannot confidently know what it stands for, until the "unacknowledged legislators" have made it manifest.

These truisms do not in themselves constitute a case for pub-

lic aid to culture. Other countries have achieved a vigorous artistic life without benefit of government. The Australian situation, however, is one of peculiar difficulty. Two conditions in particular fetter our artistic development—our lack of isolation and our smallness of population.

① It is more fashionable to complain of our isolation than of our lack of it, and it is true that distance from world centres imposes grave disadvantages; but, in another sense, the lack of isolation inevitable to a young colonial off-shoot of a nation with a strong cultural tradition, seems to me a much graver disability. Our artists work in the intimidating shadow of the giant Anglo-Saxon communities. They are exposed to comparisons too unreasonable to be stimulating, tempted always to imitation, instead of the wise acceptance of "influences", edged towards either an inhibiting humility or the raucous bravado of the consciously inferior. It is far harder to be unaffectedly Australian than, let us say, to be honestly Peruvian—the Spanish tradition gives background, but it does not overwhelm.

② But it is the smallness of the audience which is the most crippling handicap to the artist. It starves him of two essentials—a wide critical response to his work and bread-and-butter. In any Anglo-Saxon community cultural institutions have a tough enough battle. London with four million inhabitants and the centripetal pull of its primacy, could for years support only one theatre consistently devoted to the classics of English drama—the Old Vic; and even that one theatre had to fight a long battle against the threat of bankruptcy. The good repertory theatres were mainly financed by rich enthusiasts—and their lives were seldom long. The intelligent weeklies came similarly into existence through the backing of patrons who were prepared to lose money in a cause they cared about—and few, very few, of those papers survived to become self-supporting. It was the Briton's anxiety about his bowels, rather than his enthusiasm for music, which made London opera financially possible. Consider the size of our audience compared with that of the English, allow for the lesser opportunity here to find rich patrons of the arts than in the England of pre-war days, and

estimate our chances of maintaining without public assistance the cultural institutions which could barely achieve subsistence there. A successful English intellectual weekly, catering for the whole English-speaking world, can sell about 20,000 copies; a *pro rata* Australian circulation would barely keep the office in typewriter ribbons.

Add to this difficulty the handicap of lack of isolation. Let us imagine a Norwegian citizen who is in the habit of buying about fifty books a year. It is a fair assumption that about thirty of them would be works by Norwegian authors; ten might be translations, ten might be foreign works which our Norwegian prefers to read in the original. Now suppose an Australian prepared to spend as much upon his library. If fifteen of his fifty books are Australian, he will be showing an exceptional responsiveness to the literature of his country. How well could a lively and competent Australian theatre compete against the best of Hollywood and Elstree, with their command of financial resources, their choice of talent restricted only by their discernment in its selection?

It is due neither to accident nor to some subtle psychological influence that painting has been our most successful art. It is the result of the simple bread-and-butter facts that the painter is less exposed to oversea competition and less affected by the smallness of his public, since one purchaser per picture is the natural rule of his trade. Looking at the plain daunting realities of the situation, it is not surprising that Australian writers, composers, and even actors have been tempted to cry for protective tariffs or quotas. Such drugs would, of course, do us no good at all; no one in his senses wants that type of cultural isolation. But we must have some assistance to help us overcome the peculiar difficulties which obstruct the development of an Australian culture; and the most probably successful type of assistance is the spending of public money on the encouragement of publicly necessary production which unaided private enterprise can hardly hope to supply.

Such government action would have more than a practical value. It would be a declaration of faith, an assertion in the

most convincing of forms—money—that we regard the artist as a person who matters. It would “ratify by expression” belief that the development of an Australian culture is one of our aims as a nation. The English solution of the problem of financing the artist has been to use the wealthy patron—though that method is becoming no longer viable and is yielding to a use of public aid which is more consistent with the theory of the Welfare State. Surely it is in keeping with what we still claim as our national ideals that we should elevate the People to the role of Patron of the Arts.

Admittedly, there are dangers against which we must take proper precautions. Pauperisation of the artist will do neither him nor us any good. The discipline of the individual garret has a good deal to recommend it. The toughness of the struggle can prove, to the artist as well as to his audience, the sincerity and glow of his convictions; and what is true of the individual is even more true of the institution or group—the theatre, the journal of ideas, or the atelier. The group has to find the sense of fellowship which gives it driving force, enthusiasm must be strained of its early yeastiness, the silly quarrelsomeness characteristic of the artistic must be tamed by the awareness of external adversaries to be overthrown by collective effort.

But the struggle must not continue too long or too hopelessly. In time the acidity of defeat will erode enthusiasm; the Sisyphean toil becomes a killing monotony; and the temptation to compromise with commercialism becomes irresistible. The moment comes when it seems as if the enterprise must perish altogether unless it lowers artistic standards to meet articulate public demand. Compromise seems clearly better than extinction; and, given his inch, Mammon inevitably takes his ell.

It is at this stage, when an individual or institution has proved an artistic worth and staying-power, but cannot achieve financial stability, that government aid might most effectively be applied. There will, of course, be exceptions to this rule. Some undertakings of unusual character may have to be nursed into existence—no private group could hope to build an opera

company, for instance, to the stage of valuable achievement. But I believe the general rule should hold that government aid should be given to the enterprise that has proved its worth. The exceptions should have to prove their exceptionalness. Rugged individualism can thus be made to co-exist with public aid.

The dangers inherent in the bureaucratic system may be more difficult to overcome. For reasons which I have already suggested, I believe that, if government aid to culture is administered “through the usual channels”, it will prove a sheer waste of public funds—not because the civil servant and the politician are necessarily fools, but because the machinery through which they work are unsuited to the purpose. Control by a committee representative of cultural interests seems to me no more hopeful. Nine times out of ten representative committees simply footle about. They take refuge in compromise, or they are befogged by log-rolling competitions, jealousies and clique-wars.

I believe the most hopeful approach would be first to find a director with knowledge, a sense of values, courage and judgment, and then to equip him with the incentives of responsibility and freedom. If a government grant is to be used purposively, with a sense of coherent planning, there must be drive behind its administration. One of the most effective of all propelling forces in administration is the sense of pride in individual professional achievement. We are unlikely to find a better motive power than the unfettered functioning of that spirit. Of course the director would need the co-operation of other minds to ensure variety of contacts, to modify his purely personal predilections, and to sharpen his ideas by discussion. Such assistance might take the form of a small commission or of an advisory representative committee; but the director should feel that it is essentially his job, and his alone, to make the government cultural grant achieve a clearly conceived plan. A wise Cabinet might impose no more than three conditions on his handling of the job—that he satisfies the legitimate demands of the Public Auditor; that he provides his responsible

minister with effective answers to Questions in the House; and that, at the end of five years, he should be able to show an overseas expert, called in to report, some useful results, and a clear promise of more.

Of course, there is the danger that we might get the wrong man, but the risk is probably worth taking. There is far graver risk of failure if we rely on the whims of ignorant ministers, the routine of a government department, or the fuddling of a representative committee. Reliance on the well-chosen director with responsibility has worked in other public enterprises; it is a system particularly well-suited to such delicate work as this.

That public aid to culture can achieve results, we already know. We have only to compare the state of music in Australia today with its condition before the establishment of the Broadcasting Commission. Despite the errors, the delaying influence of a massive routine organisation, the occasional flaccidity of grip, the concrete achievement is unmistakeable—and the sceptic who refused to believe that there was any widespread demand for good music in Australia has been decisively answered. At least as much could be done, at as low a financial cost, for literature, the documentary film, ballet, and journalism of ideas—to name only the most obvious fields of action. A form of prestige, and a claim on the gratitude of posterity, can be won by the first ministry which has the gumption to seize its opportunity. All we need is the right man, equipped with the necessary freedom of action, and provided with a spoonful from the ocean of taxation—and the superior person who sniffs at our cultural aspirations might be answered within a generation.