

A Big Boutique

Clive James

Peter Craven (ed.)

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AFTER ONLY FOUR ANNUAL VOLUMES, *The Best Australian Essays* has reached the point where the law of increasing expectations begins to kick in. By now the series has done so much that we want it to do everything. Speaking as an Australian who lives offshore, I would be well pleased if each volume could contain, on every major issue, a pair of essays best presenting the two most prominent opposing views. This would give me some assurance that I was hearing both sides of the national discussion on each point, despite my being deprived of access to many of the publications in which essays, under one disguise or another, nowadays originate. (I leave aside the probability that most Australians living in Australia are deprived of access, too, the time having long passed when any one person could take in all the relevant print.) But the editor, Peter Craven, could easily point out that my wish is a pipedream.

Even in the USA, where the First Amendment theoretically rules, nobody now believes that everyone should be heard: that awkward ideal has now been replaced by a more realistic one, the town meeting at which the moderator merely ensures that everything worth hearing is said — an object which dictates that not everyone gets a say. Craven could add that he is not running a town meeting, either. He is selecting for quality, and a criterion of quality automatically limits variety. There might be some views worth hearing, but nobody has written them down with sufficient skill for the essay to rank as literature. At the risk of putting words into Craven's mouth, I would suggest that *he* would suggest that the compiling of an annual literary anthology — a showcase for the essay as an art form in which Australians excel — is his first object, and that if I want to plug into the complete national discussion I should keep Googling until I attain omniscience. He's running a boutique, not a

shopping mall. It's a big boutique, but selectivity is still the selling feature.

That being accepted, what wealth is here: so much that there is little point in complaining about what is absent. In the 2001 volume, I thoroughly enjoyed Richard Hall's assault on Keith Windschuttle's view of Aboriginal history, but I was still at the stage of thinking that an essay by Windschuttle should have been in there, too. Windschuttle, however, best advances his arguments in book form, rather than through the essay. His *The Killing of History* is an important book about the disastrous effect of Cultural Studies on the proper study of history, and his *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* is at the very least considerable, or so many people would not have rushed to consider it. For my own comfort, I would like to believe that his argument against

the use of the genocide concept — when it comes to the crimes committed against the Aboriginals — is a necessary correction to a vocal but slipshod consensus. On the other hand, Richard Hall the hard-nosed foot-slogger was undoubtedly right to point out the dangers of a scholar's trusting the reliability of official reports. As well as being right about that, he could *write*. 'The revisionist historians have dug themselves into their trenches and want to stay there.' Launched with the economical accuracy of an old-time brawler, Hall's sentences hit home. If you

had only his essay to go on, you would think there was a good case for regarding the behaviour of modern Australia towards its Aboriginals as being in grim parallel to the behaviour of modern Turkey towards its Armenians. Make way for the Pilger vision of the irredeemably racist land in the south. But now, in this year's volume, we have Noel Pearson's essay 'The Need for Intolerance'. After duly praising Paul Keating's legacy on Aboriginal policy, Pearson enters his caveat.

Federal Labor is dominated by what I call the progressivist intellectual middle stratum. They have played a role in achieving recognition of Aboriginal people's property rights, but I contend that the prejudice, social theories and thinking habits of left-leaning, liberal-minded people make them unable to do anything further for Aboriginal people by attacking our real disadvantage factors. The only answer to the epidemics of substance abuse that devastate our communities is organised intolerance of abusive behaviour.

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This is not impeccable prose. Pearson was never trained in the punchy, unadorned directness of Hall's hot-metal hinterland. Those 'disadvantage factors' sound like sociology, and academic sociology at that. But, taken as a whole, the piece is a powerful example of how a book review (in this case, of Don Watson's monograph on Keating) can be a good way for an essay to begin its life. The piece gets you right into the true centre of the national debate, by reminding you that on this point the national debate is a local branch of an international debate, the one about whether, beyond a certain point of restitution, welfare can ameliorate injustice without furthering it. And just because it is Pearson talking, the argument against the genocide concept is given useful reinforcement. It is unlikely that any Armenian has ever addressed a Turkish audience in the same way, *per media* an annual collection called *Best Turkish Essays*. So, however bad the past was, the present must be in better shape, must it not? I put the point as a rhetorical question because I have been mentally fighting a court case ever since *Rabbit-proof Fence* was premiered in London. After the screening, I tried to reassure a hovering television news camera that things had come on a bit in recent years. An Australian woman overheard me. 'How can you say such things after seeing a film like that?' She proved impervious to the argument that the film was set in the past, and could scarcely have been made if the present were not different. The concept was too subtle for her to grasp. It turned out that she was a lawyer. She can attack me as often as she likes, but I hope to God that she never defends me.

John Button's fond reminiscence of John Gorton, 'A Knockabout Bloke', continues the good work of adding nuance to Australia's political past. After Paul Hasluck and 'Diamond' Jim McClelland, we are no longer surprised that there should be politicians who know how to write for the page as well as they shout from the stump or characterise the Right Honourable Member for Woopwoop as a galah. But once again, subsequent riches make it hard to imagine the initial poverty. Donald Horne, when he personally inaugurated the modern tradition of wide-ranging political commentary with his book *The Lucky Country* in 1964, took it for granted that Australia's politicians had always been a second-rate, semi-articulate bunch at best. There was reason even at the time to think that he had misstated the case. Whatever Menzies' prose style lacked, it wasn't a literate background, and right back at the beginning of the federated nation stood Alfred Deakin, one of the most learned public men of his time. But Horne was pretty much correct about the confinement of the political mind to politics itself, as if the practical business of running for office and keeping it could have no general resonance in the surrounding culture. Written in a fruitful retirement, the example of McClelland's newspaper column was enough to show that things needn't be that way, and now here we have Button bringing out Gorton's complexity — and by extension the complexity of the interchange between the parties and the factions — in a review of Ian Hancock's study of Gorton that adds a lot to the book. In calling such a review by its right name, an essay, and in

placing it where we can all see it, this collection is doing exactly the kind of work that it should be doing. Whether it should be doing more is reduced to a side issue.

Apart from the politicians and activists, the political commentators are present and, where appropriate, incorrect. Mungo MacCallum celebrates Gorton, too, with an enchantingly tasteless account of his funeral. 'For sensitive organisations such as the Mafia, or even the Labor Party, it might have seemed a bit uncouth.' Just how uncouth MacCallum is might seem to be in question, but in fact he operates in a tradition that stretches back to Alfred Kerr in Berlin in the 1890s. On a bad night in the theatre, Kerr would review the audience. Showing a similar gift for facing the wrong way at the illuminating moment, Mungo, louche bearer of a laurelled surname, brings out the all too human in the all too political. If only there were room, we could probably stand a bit more of that approach. After four annual volumes, Patrick Cooke still has not turned up, yet I can think of at least a dozen of his *Bulletin* columns that went through a current political contretemps like an angle grinder through balsa. I suppose there are better reasons for shutting out Bob Ellis. It could be said that his elephantine compendia of bits and pieces, far from subverting the conventions of reasoned discourse, are intent on their final destruction. But all his books are in my shelves beside me as I write this, and I have followed his personal saga with guilty fascination. The guilt comes from the way he has never been tempted to clean up his act, whereas the rest of us who started off with him at Sydney University in the late 1950s have been glad enough to be gazetted as official Establishment figures. Somehow he saw a cold future on the way, and refused to join it. It was instructive, however, that when politicians in Canberra suffered from aching conscience in the night, they would join him.

Craven might say that his time for the no-hopers is limited by the abundance of the distinguished. Aply representing the big-name commentators on the wing of what Pearson would like to call the progressivist intellectual middle stratum — I wish he would call it something snappier, but I can't think of a better name either — Robert Manne is here to spell out the blatant iniquity of the Howard government's policy towards asylum seekers. Those of us who were puzzled at the time that the iniquity was not quite blatant enough to inspire Kim Beazley's Opposition to notably different policies might still be puzzled now, but there can be no doubt about the forcefulness with which Manne puts the case. The bloggers might pounce on his position for what they think to be its reflexive assumptions, but they find it less easy to mock his style. Margo Kingston, absent this time, has always been a softer target in that regard. In the 2000 volume, her essay 'Hansonism Then and Now' yielded a paragraph that sharply pointed up the dangers she runs by letting her notions of the self-evident rule her syntax. I marked its first two sentences with an exclamation mark in the margin.

Howard's downgrading of our commitment to United Nations human rights treaties feeds off the widespread feeling in the

bush that one-world-government is the ruin of us all. It is intellectually dishonest and destructive of our established identity as a tolerant nation and a world leader on promoting international human rights standards.

On first reading, the 'It' at the start of the second sentence seems to refer to the one-world government. On second reading, it seems more likely to be connected with Howard's downgrading of our commitment. But a second reading is a big thing for a writer to ask for, and it should never be asked for on grounds of sense alone. Making sense straight away should be the first aim, and the more so the more your argument aspires to nuance. Paul Sheehan is probably our best example of how to do it properly. Before the referendum, I thought the bestseller status of his book *Among the Barbarians* was an important checking move in the rush to republicanism of the progressivist intellectual middle stratum. (What the hell are we going to call it, us on the old social-democratic left who don't want to be forcibly enlisted on the Darwinian right? And what are we going to call ourselves?) By bringing out in detail Australia's rich debt to the colonial past, Sheehan made the visions of those who repudiated it look crass. He did this so well that I thought he was against the republican programme himself, and I was quite surprised, when I met him during the Sydney Olympics, to discover that he was for it. Discovering that, I realised on the spot that a republic might indeed be on the way, because, when a line of thought achieves the capacity to generate and contain criticism of its own weaknesses, it begins to be strong. In sharp contrast to Kingston's piece, Sheehan's 'The Parties Are Over' in the 2000 volume remains an enduringly effective example of the constructively subversive essay, buttressing a position by taking account of its attendant difficulties. In the latest volume, Sheehan is talking about something other than politics: 'Miracle at Bert's' deals with a magic water that sounds as if it might confer eternal life. I would be in the market for a crate of it, if only to buy more time in which to read Sheehan. I don't agree with him about the course that Australia's future will necessarily take, but I wouldn't want an Australian future without writers like him in it. Luckily, that prospect is no longer in view.

I have confined this notice to politics because it is the field in which I have most needed instruction, and the *Best Australian Essays* series has done a lot to provide it. When my generation of expatriates went sailing to adventure, most

of us believed that what we were leaving behind was a political backwater. In fact, it was one of the most highly developed liberal democracies on earth, a fitting framework for the cultural expansion that has since made it the envy of nations many times its size. Part of the cultural expansion has been the discursive writing devoted to an explanation of how the liberal democracy developed in the first place. The landmark books made an obvious difference. Paul Kelly, for example, wrote a shelf of them, and, although I have never been able to agree with the general drift of his opinions, I would have to admit that a good part of the detail in my own contrary opinions I got from him. Behind the books, however, lurks a less obvious determining factor: the proliferation of the essay. Up until World War II, the Australian essay was best exemplified by Walter Murdoch, whose belletrist treatment of a set theme would have been no surprise to Sir Roger de Coverley. The war correspondents, with the omnivorously curious Alan Moorehead to the fore, made the breakthrough that adapted journalism to complex subjects. Postwar, and in a multiplicity of genres, the essay made its exponential advance to the wealth of commentary we enjoy now, and enjoy all the more because the commentators are often commentating on each other. I didn't have to wait for Watson's book on Keating before I realised that I had made a bad mistake in belittling Keating's capacity to improve his mind, if not his language. Essays from various hands convinced me that his sensitivity to culture went far beyond his covetous admiration for an ormolu clock or a teak table.

I still think it a pity — and a pity for his beloved country, not just for himself — that he got his vision of Australia's modern history from people who got theirs from Manning Clark. But I won't be guilty again of abetting a view of Keating that leaves out an essential nuance.

The word 'nuance' is worth repeating because it is not just an attribute of the essay, it is the essay's reason for being: the essential characteristic that separates a mere performance from a real contribution. In this volume, the essays on culture *tout court* are mostly as subtle and illuminating as we have come to expect, spoiled for choice as we now are. To take one for the many, Helen Garner's piece on journalism, called simply 'I', demonstrates all over again why her presence among the essayists so precisely echoes the presence of the late Gwen Harwood among the poets: the responsible intellectual instrument of a feminist who has loved men, her scrupulous reasoning is always looking for

the weak point in her own position and accepting it as a further opportunity. Peter Porter's memories of his reading when young in Queensland add up to a valuable example of what is becoming a characteristic expatriate theme: the mental journey home into the old Australian school system that taught its pupils to parse a sentence. That prescriptive training was the real secret behind the Australian expatriate wave of world conquest, and is the real secret behind Peter Conrad's inclusion in this volume, even though he is only writing about Britney Spears, and dwells on the subject of the pop diva's all-American boobs without a single mention of Kylie's all-Aussie behind. Craven wasn't going to miss out on a piece as well written as that.

The same poser will probably emerge in the next volume, when the editor will have to choose between a home-grown piece about Charles Conder — there was a fine one, by Angus Trumble, in the March issue of this magazine — and the stunning *tour de force* Barry Humphries turned in for the *TLS*. As a *prostateur*, it should hardly need saying, Humphries is talented to the point of genius, but he would be less able to prove it if he had not once, long ago, been obliged to sit still at a scarred desk and prove that he knew how a relative clause worked before he was given an early mark. Just as a living culture will attach itself only to a functional democratic structure, so the nuances will attach themselves only to a grammatical framework. There can be no real freedom without its underlying discipline. These volumes — and what an elegantly hefty set they make, all lined up — are encouraging evidence that the real freedom has somehow been preserved, despite the enthusiastically misdirected egalitarianism of the (wait for it) progressivist intellectual middle stratum. Strangely dedicated to assaulting the very idea of élitism in a nation of which to be a citizen is already to be a member of an élite, it is a stratum whose members, as I have already grown sick of saying, need a more portable name. In his book *L'Imparfait du présent*, Alain Finkielkraut thought of one. He called them the negligent vigilantes. I might pinch that for my next essay, if Noel Pearson doesn't pinch it first.