

Our First Book

Clive James

THIS YEAR we celebrate the two-hundredth anniversary of the first book to be printed and published in Australia. Though our first book was snappily entitled *New South Wales General Standing Orders Selected from the General Orders Issued by Former Governors*, it is unlikely that very many people were madly excited even at the time, and today the anniversary of its first appearance is scarcely front-page news, although the book contains at least one permanently newsworthy item of information, which I will get to later on.

For now, we need merely note that an all-Australian book is no longer a novelty. Today we are quite accustomed to buying books that were written, printed and published in Australia. If we wished to, we could build a personal library of Australian books and, if we wanted to own them all, we would need a house as big as all of Rupert Murdoch's houses put together. In my own personal library in London, I started an Australian section about twenty years ago. Every time I make a visit home to Australia, I bring an extra, empty hold-all. By the end of the visit, it is full of Australian books, some of them dating back to beyond the time I left for Europe in late 1961. They were the Australian books I wasn't reading when I was a student because I was too busy reading British and American ones. I didn't find Australian books so interesting then. Now I do. So back they go to London to be added to my Australian section, which by now is crowding out a whole wall of its own. My apartment is on the sixth floor of a warehouse conversion in the Butler's Wharf area south of Tower Bridge, and I have already been advised by the mortgage surveyors that if I add many more books to my library the day must inevitably come when the beams under the floor will give way and my whole apartment will collapse into the apartment below, which will in turn collapse into the apartment below that, and so on until about fifty people are wedged into the underground car park with plenty to read while they await rescue.

The book that tips the balance could well be the *Collected Poems 1961–2002* of Les Murray, which our splendidly independent publisher Duffy & Snellgrove brought out this year. It is a big book, just as its author is a big man. When I squeeze it into the Australian poetry shelves in my apartment, it might be just enough to crack the creaking beams. It would be a fitting way to go. My dying thought as I descend, however, might well be the opposite. In the days when I was young and healthy, I never saw myself as a bookish person, just as Australia didn't see itself as a bookish

nation. In fact it already was, but the fact had not yet become clear, and even today it has still not become as clear as it ought to be. If I have a single aim in this essay, it is to try to bring that fact further into the light. But I would not have the aim if I had not begun in darkness, at a time when I saw myself as an athlete, in a nation of athletes.

There are good reasons for our being more immediately excited by physical prowess than by spiritual refinement. Our children want to play in the sun or run to the surf more than they want to sit down to study, and we want them to want that. When we say, 'He's always got his nose in a book', we might say it proudly, but even today we are usually a bit worried about the 'always'. When I was young, 'He's always got his nose in a book' was a confession of desperation about one's own son's physical constitution and an accusation of weirdness about someone else's. 'She's always got her nose in a book' was less troublesome. Reading was, after all, women's business. Heroes were men, and men did things. If, occasionally, they wrote things, it was because they had done them first. The excitement was in the doing: the excitement was in the action. There was, there always had been, and there still is, something to that emphasis. Finally, it's the life of the mind that counts, and all other forms of life must lead to that: after all, the mind is the last thing we will have, if we are lucky. But I would be the last to deny that, in the sentence *mens sana in corpore sano*, it's the *corpore sano* that has the first appeal. Certainly, it was the way I felt when I was still in fighting trim, and I want you to know that it was only by an accident of fate that I did not become an Australian sporting hero, a successor to Murray Rose or Lew Hoad, a precursor of Ian Thorpe or Lleyton Hewitt.

THE ACCIDENT OF fate was lack of sporting talent, but it took a while for that to become manifest. Growing up in Kogarah, on Botany Bay, I was within easy cycling distance of Ramsgate baths. I would spend the whole weekend at the baths, telling my mother that I had no time to mow the lawn because I was training for the 110-yards freestyle. In those days, the races were still measured in yards instead of metres, Australia not yet having separated itself from all the other English-speaking nations, including the USA, by converting its measurement system in order to make it easier for the Japanese and Germans to sell us cars. Unbeknownst to my mother, when I was at Ramsgate baths, I rarely completed the full 110-yards freestyle. What I completed was the five-yards freestyle. I was among the first of

my generation to perfect the tumble turn. I mean among the first of my generation of amphibian dabblers, the boys who hung around the pool and occasionally dived in, but didn't do much of all that swimming from one end to the other for hours at a stretch that the serious swimmers did. But my tumble turn was almost as convincing as theirs. Unfortunately, instead of employing my tumble turn to increase my speed over a given number of laps, I employed it to impress girls. For this, five yards of freestyle was all that I deemed necessary. Starting five yards from the end of the pool, I would execute a tumble turn, swim another five yards in the opposite direction, and stop, trying to look as if I had been engaged in polishing a minor technical point in my otherwise impeccable tumble turn.

One of the girls actually was impressed. Her name was Alison and she looked very beautiful in a Speedo. Eventually, I found that it was easier to go on impressing Alison by escorting her to the sandpit for a long discussion of my future as a swimming star, a discussion in which, you will not be surprised to hear, I did most of the talking. But her eyes shone, and that was all that counted, even if they shone with the porcelain glaze of boredom. The full story of what happened in the sandpit can be read in my book *Unreliable Memoirs* (1980), and I won't bother you with a précis of it now. The book is still available in most good bookshops and some bad ones, and if you want to consult the original manuscript you can find it in the archives of my kind host for this address, the State Library of New South Wales. Turn to the paragraph about what happened in the sandpit, and you can see that the page is stained with tears of happiness. Sufficient to say now that almost nothing happened in the water, and that the results of my intensive training were finally revealed to my mother at the Boys' Brigade swimming carnival at Drummoyne, in which I did indeed complete the 110-yards freestyle, but only after all the other competitors had left the pool. Let me assure you, however, that, hard though it might be to believe, I had the physique, I had the

strength, and I even had the ambition. What I did not have was the true desire, except the desire for Alison, which was a different matter. Sitting beside my mother, Alison was at the Boys' Brigade swimming carnival, too, and I never saw her again.

It was a similar story with my tennis. In the private schools of Australia, and the so-called public schools of England, there has always been a certain type of boy who, when he says 'my cricket' or 'my rugby', really means it. He is in possession of his manly sport: you can tell by the thickness of his neck and the cinema credits embroidered on his blazer pocket. When I referred to 'my tennis', it was with less justification, but it can't be denied that, until the age of about eleven, I was a hot prospect. My ability to sustain a long rally was already attracting attention. Every day of the school holidays, I sustained the rally against the back wall of

our house, my only available opponent, and the attention I attracted was that of Mrs Thorpe, who lived next door. Of delicate sensibility, she had been advised by her physicians to get plenty of sleep during the day. While I was sustaining a long rally, her head would appear suddenly over the back fence, teeth bared in a snarl and her eyeballs resembling little pink windmills. When she pointed out to my mother that sleep was made impossi-

ble by my ability to sustain a long rally, I was forbidden to practise. But when my mother was out, the lure of Wimbledon was too strong, and once again I was out in the yard hitting my tennis ball against the back wall a few thousand times while I dreamed of beating Pancho Gonzalez and Mrs Thorpe dreamed of beating me to death. I knew I was behaving badly, but I couldn't stop. Fame beckoned. I had seen Lew Hoad in the newsreels, and I wanted to be him.

Incidentally, when Thomas Mann was writing his last book in California, the expanded version of that marvellous novel *The Confessions of Felix Krull*, he had a photograph on his desk to provide inspiration for the portrait he was creating of an irresistibly attractive young adolescent male. Remember

you heard this here first, because no reputable scholar or commentator has yet spotted it: that photograph was of Lew Hoad. I offer this item of information for any PhD student who might be contemplating a thesis about the influence of Australian tennis players on the modern German novel. Anyway, I knew how Mann must have felt, although, in my case, the longings aroused by Hoad's freckled, jug-eared and shyly smiling dial were rather different. I merely wanted to be an Aussie tennis player victorious at Wimbledon. The back wall was my gateway to glory. But I later found that the skills acquired did not necessarily transfer to an actual tennis court, where the opponent was more mobile than a brick wall.

The dream, however, has never died, and even today I can't resist giving Lleyton Hewitt my advice. Since the advice is delivered to the television set, he probably doesn't hear it directly, but thought-waves can be powerful. I'm fairly sure that my advice was the reason he eventually abandoned his habit of wearing his peaked cap backwards at all times, even in bed. As science has now established, wearing a peaked cap backwards is the universal sign of the international idiot. No matter how handsome, no young male tennis player looks good that way, and Lleyton looked worse than most, especially when seen in close-up with his fist in the air, pulling the intestines out of an imaginary opponent while he yelled silent abuse at his girlfriend in the grandstand, a tirade which apparently meant that he was doing well instead of badly. More recently, he has still been yelling the silent abuse, but the cap is no longer always in evidence. When it is, it still tends to go on backwards, and I still tend to shout at the television set, my face contorted in a way, I am told, that bears a disturbing resemblance to the way Lleyton looks while disputing a line call. The best way of putting it is that he and I have a problem and we are both working on it. But the problem would not be there if I were not still, in my secret heart, an Australian sporting hero and man of action.

THE DREAM OF being a man of action can be a fruitful dream for a man of letters to have. Hemingway had it, and among the results were 'The Snows of Kilimanjaro' and *Death in the Afternoon*. Hemingway, in real life, was a great reader, but he played his bookishness down, because he wanted to be thought of as a great hunter. The far less physical Aldous Huxley, in an essay called 'Foreheads Villainous Low', tried to point out that Hemingway had overdone the he-man effect, and that the strain of pretending not to be an intellectual was doing Hemingway's prose no good. In response, Hemingway tried to point out that Huxley was a wimp. Hemingway's side of the argument got more support from the intellectuals than you might expect. Even among intellectuals, in fact especially among intellectuals, the idea is apt to linger that action comes first. Hamlet was an intellectual, and traced the roots of his fatal inaction to too much thinking. He pronounced the verdict upon himself: by

pondering too closely on the event, he was sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought. Fortinbras, who would assume the throne that Hamlet forfeited by dithering too long, prided himself on not being similarly afflicted. The idea that too many ideas will bind the muscles is an idea that comes with the capacity to have any ideas at all. Creativity is filtered through the intellect, but it has its wellspring in the primary drives that made us chase and kill wild animals long before we thought of writing anything on their cured skins.

Hence the tendency of any revolutionary movement in thought or the arts to declare war on museums, libraries and books themselves. The Futurists were only one of the twentieth-century avant-garde movements that proclaimed the desirability of smashing up the museums and burning down the libraries. This intoxicating notion wasn't even new with them. George Bernard Shaw, in the preface to his play *Caesar and Cleopatra*, had already said that he thought it a blessing for human history that the library of Alexandria had been burned down. Actually, there were two main libraries in Alexandria, but he conflated them for dramatic purposes, principally to provide indirect lighting. When the leaping flames lit the faces of Caesar and Cleopatra, it spelled the end of the old Egyptian civilisation, but Shaw quite liked the idea of old civilisations ending because he thought that their accumulated fustian wisdom got in the way of founding a new one, the socialist civilisation that would bring justice to all. And, though our historical imaginations don't usually go back much beyond the burning of the library in Alexandria, it was by no means the first time that a civilisation had died with its books.

THE FIRST LIBRARIES were palace archives, and they had all vanished with the palaces. Three thousand years before Christ, Syria and Babylon stored their records on clay tablets and catalogued them for reference. Thirteen hundred years before Christ, in the Kingdom of Hattusas, tablets were catalogued by title and author. Ozymandias founded a library, but Shelley doesn't mention it in his poem: the library was under the sand that stretched far away, and we know that now because a few of the tablets were dug up again. In Assyria, Ashurbanipal had his own library of 1500 books, but, presumably, other people were allowed to consult them, because many of the tablets that still survive carry warnings against late return. Nowadays, if we bring a library book back late, we get fined. We have to imagine what the penalties were like then, because a tablet spelling out the punishments for bringing a book back late has never been found. We can presume that the penalties were drastic, especially in Babylon, which is nowadays called Iraq. We can assume that some distant ancestor of Saddam Hussein was sitting at the front desk, wielding his date-stamp like a weapon of mass destruction. But despite the care put into preserving the books against depredation, all those libraries vanished with the civilisations that gave rise to them.

And already you can hear a warning bell to presage a heavy theme: that they had libraries was what made them civilisations. No library, no civilisation. No civilisation, no library.

The library as we know it now came in with the Greeks, mainly because the stone or clay tablet had given way to a technological advance: papyrus. A papyrus roll could be reproduced with some ease. It still took time, because it still had to be done by hand, but the rolls could be copied, and therefore bought and sold. Because they could be bought and sold, the papyrus rolls were available for private collection. The private library, as opposed to the palace library, took over as the model, and one of the things I want to propose is that the private library and the palace library, or call it the state library, have, or should have, an indissoluble connection. Aristotle's enormous personal library was the model for the library of Alexandria. Somewhere around 300 BC, the Greek king of Egypt, Ptolemy Philadelphus, built the complex of libraries we call the Alexandria library, which copied every book in the world it could get its hands on and stole the originals if necessary. Any ship docking in Alexandria had its books confiscated as the price of tying up to a bollard. The Library of Alexandria had almost half a million rolls in it at the time Caesar watched it burn. He preferred to occupy himself with Cleopatra than fight the fire: roughly similar activities, as Mark Antony later testified. But Caesar had got the idea, and he commissioned a great library of Greek and Latin books to be built in Rome. He didn't live to see it open and beget its children.

Augustus built two libraries, the Octavian and the Palatine. They both burned, but the one on the Palatine was replaced by, of all people, Tiberius, otherwise a legend for destructive tyranny: an anomaly we might have to examine. As late as the fourth century AD, the Roman Empire, by then far into its decline, held at least twenty-eight libraries in the capital city alone, most of them attached to that popular gathering point for the leisured class: the baths. If Ramsgate baths had had a library next door, I might have got the right idea much earlier, but let that pass for the moment, because we should consider what Shaw was saying. He was saying that no library had ever guaranteed the continuity of a civilisation. What was more, the very impulse to accumulate scholarship might have got in the way of the necessary political action that would have kept that civilisation fresh. It's a seductive notion. Not even Shaw was the first to have it. He was only echoing Schopenhauer's attractive idea that knowledge is better gained from life than from books. Who can doubt it?

Well, in fact they all did. Deep down, under the image-breaking rhetoric, they all knew that their bright idea was merely an emphasis. Schopenhauer was a learned man who wanted his books published. If Shaw had really been certain that too many books got in the way of true learning, he would not have wanted his own books published. In real life, he was so keen on their being published that he insisted on supervis-

ing their production, taking fanatical care over their appearance, specifying everything from the typeface to the width of the margins. Nor were the Futurists, Dadaists and all those other furiously doodling advocates of starting again with a clean slate fundamentally averse to getting their books into circulation. Their books looked like nobody else's books, but they were still books. All the early twentieth-century cultural revolutionaries who sounded off against the stifling weight of a public library were at heart unfailingly keen to get their own books into it. They just thought it was a pity that all those other books were there already, silting up the shelves. The writers who thought libraries were choking them with the past, but still wanted their own books to be part of the future, were like the painters and graphic artists who thought, or said they thought, that museums were a dead weight. Translating thought to deed, Apollinaire swiped some small, portable *objets d'art* from the Louvre and Picasso kept them for a while at the back of his studio. But Picasso wasn't quite as confident as Apollinaire that the museums should be dispersed. Born as a canny operator as well as a great artist, perhaps Picasso already had a suspicion that some of his own pictures were heading for that very destination, and that their presence in an official collection would help to raise the price he could charge private owners for whatever he turned out next. There is also evidence that Picasso feared the cops might come and ask him awkward questions about some of his ornaments.

Apollinaire, of course, feared the cops wouldn't come: he wanted to breathe defiance, to enjoy the thrill of his fine idea brought to life. Far into the twentieth century, the fine idea kept cropping up that the most equitable way for museums and libraries to serve the common people would be to distribute their contents at random while turning the buildings into meeting halls. As late as the 1960s, in the flush of student activism, the young rhetoricians of the Western universities — most of whom gave living proof that they were barely capable of organising toilet facilities for the mass meetings they addressed — loudly proposed that freedom would be furthered if established institutions were to be dismantled. But a large part of what they said had already been discredited. Indeed, if further proof was necessary, their programme was being discredited at that very time, because their proposed Cultural Revolution of the West was taking for its model the Cultural Revolution in the East: the one in China. As Jung Chang's magnificent and terrifying book *Wild Swans* was eventually to make clear, China's Cultural Revolution was an obscenely vindictive blood bath, just one more hideous instalment of Mao's war against his own people.

TO BE FAIR to our young freedom fighters in the 1960s, information on the tragedy in China was hard to come by at the time, especially if your ears were stopped because your mouth was permanently wide open. But the

truth wasn't hard to guess. The evidence was already in, from previous totalitarian adventures in the twentieth century, that the future dreamed of by the Futurists, should it actually arrive, would have an awful resemblance to historical house-cleanings going back at least as far as Tamburlaine and his famous wall of skulls, lime and living men.

In the first twelve years of the Soviet Union, the Russian avant-garde artists were allowed to live and even to flourish. But they were already realising that there was a price to be paid for a state endorsement of their new start. Suddenly feeling not quite so young as they once had, they found themselves confronted by screaming adolescent Komsomols who had been sent to visit the art schools in order to impose an official programme called Proletkult, which seemed to be based on the preposterous notion that the avant-garde was itself part of the stifling past and should be swept away in the name of an even newer new art dedicated to nothing except furthering the aims of social revolution as defined by the Party. The result was a forecast of an all-too-typical twentieth-century picture. Experienced artists and intellectuals who had merely advocated the virtues of destruction were horrified to find themselves taken literally by vociferous but clueless post-pubescent junior agitators all wearing the same mass-produced peaked cap. Their only virtue was that they rarely wore the cap backwards. In 1929 the Commissar for Education, Lunacharsky, having been reprogrammed by Stalin, cracked down on the avant-garde artists he had previously encouraged, and their dream officially became a nightmare. Most of them realised that it already had. For some of them the crackdown might even have come as a relief: at least they were merely going to be interrogated, tortured and shot, instead of harangued by a posse of confident teenage dolts. (Forty years later, in the Chinese Cultural Revolution, some of the survivors found that to be the worst thing: being surrounded by dogmatic young thugs shaking their fists as they screamed excerpts from the aesthetic wisdom of Madame Mao.)

What had happened to Russia happened to Germany when the Nazis came in, and this time the world found out straightaway, because the Nazis took pictures: moving pictures. The burning of the books in the Operplatz in Berlin is one of the abiding images of the twentieth century. The sole virtue of the Nazis was that they infallibly discredited their own ideas from the moment they put them into action, and made sure the world realised it by boasting about their atrocities as if they were accomplishments. Immediately, it became obvious that Heinrich Heine had been right when he predicted that any régime that burned books would soon burn people. Some of the people scheduled to be burned managed to leave early and take their books with them, thus removing many of the best private libraries from the purview of the Gestapo, who were great readers in their way, although they were always great hunters first. As Victor Klemperer tells us in

his marvellous two-volume diary, the Gestapo were always very interested in what books you had on your shelves. The result was a house-cleaning, but here already the anomaly comes in that we noticed in the case of Tiberius. Not even the Nazis succeeded in destroying everything.

Admittedly, they were short of time. The Thousand Year Reich was fated to last only twelve years. But they didn't realise that. And we are forced to conclude that the main reason they didn't obliterate every book that they hadn't written themselves was because they had a weird urge to preserve the printed evidence that the culture they were busy annihilating had once existed. In Poland in 1942, in the ghetto of the town called Drohobycz, the great writer Bruno Schulz met his death when a Gestapo officer called Karl Günther shot him in the head. But, until that moment, Schulz had been employed in the category of Necessary Jew, because he knew something about books, and the Nazis were busy cataloguing their literary loot before sending it back to Germany to be incorporated into some weird and wonderful library of superseded, decadent cultures. Adolf Eichmann himself, who took pride in his expertise on the Jewish culture whose living representatives he had been deputed to annihilate, was some kind of collector of Jewish manuscripts, which he enjoyed pottering about with almost as much as he enjoyed rewriting the timetables so that all the trains ran to Auschwitz.

Goebbels, who had a literary background and some pretensions as a novelist, kept an important private library. After the war, Goebbels's personal assistant, an ex-journalist called Wilfred von Oven, got away safely to Argentina, where he published, in two volumes, an unintentionally comic masterpiece called *Mit Goebbels bis zum Ende* — With Goebbels to the End. Two years ago, I found a copy in Henschel's great second-hand bookshop in Buenos Aires. When I sat down in a café in the Avenida Corrientes to begin reading my new treasure, fascinating facts leaped from the yellowed pages. Did you know that Goebbels gave up smoking the day after D-Day? Neither did I. Apparently, he had figured out that the time to give up smoking is when you are on a psychological high, and he was feeling good because he sincerely thought that with the Allied armies actually present in Europe it would be easier to reach a political arrangement with them, presumably because they were closer to hand. Whatever the wisdom of that, he took up smoking again twelve days later. But another fact is even more fascinating. Goebbels also, says von Oven, started reordering his library. As the end approached and the Russians were almost within shelling distance of the Operplatz where his sinister team of student myrmidons had once scornfully read passages aloud from the books he had ordered to be burned, the Reichsminister decided that his library of classic German literature should be cleansed of Nazi texts. The bookburner started burning his own stuff, but only so that the stuff he had secretly known to be better all along could

keep its own company undisturbed by ideological junk. And even the Great Helmsman Chairman Mao, the biggest enemy of Chinese written culture since the mad First Emperor of the Ch'in burned the classical texts; even Chairman Mao, who encouraged the notion that his own Little Red Book of platitudes was the only book that a Red Guard in a peaked cap need ever read; even Chairman Mao kept a personal collection of classic poetry in his library in Beijing.

Mao's personal library was called the Library of Chrysanthemum Fragrance. I often think of it while sitting in my own library, the Library of Cheap Cigar Fragrance. I think of it because of the supreme evidence it provides that even a beast can have a feeling for books, and that the feeling must come from somewhere very deep in the psyche. The apparently self-contradictory phenomenon of the barbarian bookworm had a precedent not just in Tiberius but in the long history of the Christian theocracies, whose virulence we ought to remember, now that we are worried about another kind of theocracy, and wondering what to do about it. Not just the Catholic Church but the Protestant churches that later competed against it had a solid tradition of burning both books and people. You can't fault either wing on that one: Calvin was as lethal as Torquemada, a fact I once got into trouble for pointing out to the minister of Kogarah Presbyterian church when he carpented me for giving my Sunday School class a lecture on free love. But there was something about our theocracies — let us call them ours out of an acknowledgment of the past, if not out of pride — that demanded a special library be kept of the books on the *index expurgatorium*, even if only the most thoroughly accredited theological adepts were issued with a library card. Tamburlaine, Attila the Hun and Genghis Khan, all of whom simply destroyed everything, were not running theocracies. They didn't think they were creating anything except destruction. They had their descendants in the twentieth century, especially in the late twentieth century. Pol Pot wanted everything to do with the mind destroyed. At the peak of his cold-blooded dementia, he required the persecution, torture and death of anyone who wore glasses. But he was not an ideologist in the sense that Stalin and Hitler were. Though both godless men, they were also theocrats: they had ideas in their heads. The ideas were totalitarian ideas, but one of them was the idea that some sort of memory should be maintained of the liberal ideas that had been superseded.

This quirk on the part of the great hunters, the man hunters, can only be explained with reference to a deep instinct in which some sort of scholarly pretension is bound up with the urge to pure action. One important consequence, in the case of the Soviet Union, was that the KGB kept a copy of its number-one enemy book, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. When Yuri Andropov was head of the KGB, he had the copy copied and circulated to his top echelon of staff, and the results were part of what seems unlikely even in retrospect: the élite of the oppressors somehow allowed the transforma-

tion of the régime that they had previously preserved by exterminating, without hesitation, everyone who showed signs of opposing it. The oppressors retained the power to go on doing so, but they had lost the desire; and that deep instinct to become informed about actions, instead of merely to perform them, had somehow helped them to lose it.

WITH THESE CONSIDERATIONS in mind, it is time to go back fifty years again to the young would-be swimming champion and tennis ace, and talk about *his* deep instincts. Another of my athletic ambitions was for running. Heavily under the influence of a classic photograph of the great Australian sprinter Hector Hogan leaving the starting blocks in Helsinki, I would practise my start on the strip of lawn in front of our house. One of the secrets of Hogan's electrifying speed out of the blocks was the way he kept his head down until he was upright. I would practise keeping my head down. It was probably the main reason I ran at full speed into the lower branch of our box-gum tree. The branch caught me across the forehead and practically ended my future literary career right there. The impact was probably the main reason why some of my metaphors still come out mixed. It didn't do my sprinting career much good either, but that would have been threatened anyway by my attendance at Sydney Technical High School, where quite a few of the boys could run faster than I could. One of them, the future international rugby star Reg Gasnier, could run twice as fast as I could while he was carrying a football, and probably could have done so while carrying a refrigerator. But I was fast enough on my feet to get to Kogarah's little lending library in a matter of minutes so that I could take out yet another armful of detective novels by Ellery Queen and Erle Stanley Gardner.

Once a week in the early evening, I scooted up the hill to the library to change my maximum allowed number of books for the same number of new ones, or sometimes the same ones if I wanted to read them again. Walking slowly home in the reverse trajectory, I would already be deep into the first book of the batch before I got to the front gate, which I would open without looking, sometimes surprising myself when I encountered Mrs Thorpe setting out the empty milk bottles. I had no method for surreptitiously marking the books I had already read, so there was always a chance of getting the same book again anyway, and not realising until I had started to read it. Later on in London, I worked briefly and disastrously at the front desk of one of the Lambeth lending libraries, where I encountered little old ladies who solved this problem by making a personal mark in each book they had read. One woman drew a little square at the bottom of page 98 of any book she had finished reading. Another drew a little circle in the right-hand margin of page 123. There were always a few little old ladies who tremulously asked the classic question 'Have I read this one?'; but the rest of them had skills of

encipherment that they might previously have employed at Bletchley Park. On the whole, the little old ladies were smarter than I had been back in Kogarah. I just took pot luck.

I was more careful about the books I bought rather than borrowed. Each of them, I believed, was an individual work of art in every aspect, and especially in regard to its cover. I collected every book by Leslie Charteris featuring his greatest creation, the Saint. I preferred the Pan paperbacks to those published by Hodder & Stoughton, because the Pan cover paintings were glossier, often showing the Saint in black tie supported on either side by a glamorous female with a shrink-wrapped décolletage: a foretaste of the James Bond film posters in later times. On the floor of my room I would arrange side by side my complete set of Biggles books in the green dustcovers that showed the aeronautical hero posed in his flying suit against a green sky. The effect, I now realise, presaged the methods of Andy Warhol by twenty years, although my mother was less impressed on the aesthetic level than I was. Nevertheless, I am sure it was not deliberately that she trod on my precious copy of *Biggles Flies East*, irreparably coarsening the hero's fine-drawn features. She just forgot to look down when she came in to make my bed, a task I had excused myself from on the grounds of my intellectual commitments. Previously I had excused myself on the grounds of my sporting commitments: swimming training etc.

One instinct had transcended another. Books had started to become my life: not out of a reasonable assessment of what life should be, but out of an unquestioned impulse. It was just another kind of love: I doted on a book as if it were the contents of a girl's Speedo. As I brushed a linen spine with my fingertips, there was undoubtedly a libidinous element, and Freud would not be surprised to hear that it still haunts me. Even today, I find a woman reading a book an arousing spectacle, especially if I wrote it. At my age, there isn't much left to be aroused, but there it is: or rather, there it isn't. Alison, by the way, was a bit of a reader. Admittedly, it took her all summer to read a single issue of *Women's Weekly*, but that made her all the more satisfactory to look at, because her lips moved when she read. I accumulated books with the assiduity of Don Giovanni accumulating conquests, with the difference that I did not discard them. My room turned into the germ of the personal library I own today, the one preparing itself for the descent into the car park.

At any size, however, the personal library has a drawback inseparable from its advantage. What goes into it is all to your taste, and there is a tendency to be disdainful of what stays out. For this reason, all the personal libraries in the world can provide no adequate substitute for a public library that takes everything. But I didn't know that at the time, and I conceived early on a suspicion of big public libraries that in some respects lingers to this day. At Sydney University, I would visit Fisher Library only because my girlfriend was a librarian working in the basement. When my second-year History

essay on the first Lord Halifax necessitated research in the Mitchell Library downtown, I took one look at the thousands of books on display in the reading room and retreated immediately to the Botanical Gardens for a smoke. Rothman's king size in a flip-top box had just arrived in Australia, and I developed an elaborately casual way of flipping the top to extract the contents one by one.

My bronchial cough deepened on every visit to the Mitchell. When I consulted the catalogue, there was something about the Dewey Decimal system that scared me into paralysis, and, in the rare case when I had an actual book by or about Lord Halifax in my hands, the absence of a dustcover somehow sealed it shut. No picture of Biggles or the Saint, just a standard binding disfigured by numbers on the spine. Glumly I would enter the title in my bibliography, as if noting the title were somehow the same as having read the book. It was presumptuous of me to be disappointed when I read the marker's comment written at the end of my essay. 'You express yourself quite well, but your trouble in this case is that you have nothing to express, a deficiency you might have repaired if you had actually consulted the books listed in your surprisingly full bibliography. The three marks I am giving you out of the possible ten are for your style.' I quote the marker's comment from memory, but I am pretty sure I've got it right. My three out of ten for a History essay stuck with me like a scar.

It should have been two out of ten. In the year before I sailed for Europe, I spent a lot of time with Sydney's notorious Downtown Push. The Push was a hotbed of libertarian ideology, centred on the principle that the best way to rebel against bourgeois society was to crash its parties and seduce its young women, the more respectable the better. One of the parties the Push crashed was in Bellevue Hill, at that time the very pinnacle of genteel luxury. The parents of the house were away in Europe, whence they had come as refugees before the war. The daughter of the house was still resisting the attentions of the Push leaders, but she was naively keen to prove to them that she understood their anger at the spectacle of a house that had been paid for with money that had actually been earned. The Push operated on the assumption that money was legitimate only if borrowed or won at the racecourse. The Push also believed that the best place to stub out a cigarette was on the carpet, grinding it well in with the heel. As the daughter of the house frantically circulated amongst the hubbub trying to pick up the butts before they set the stippled Wilton on fire, I wandered drunkenly into a room identifiable as a library by the number of books present, although only their shape and size told me for certain what they were. They were all in European languages, none of which I could read. All I got was an impression of beauty and complexity, of a mystery speaking in tongues. I took one of the books down. The author was Thomas Mann's brother Heinrich. The date on the title page was 1932,

the year before Hell broke loose: that much, at least, I knew. But the date was all I could read, so I put it back. What I was looking at, as I backed slowly out of the room, was a monument to what I didn't know. Perhaps one out of ten would have been a more appropriate mark.

AND SO, almost perfectly clueless about what the world outside Australia had recently been like, I sailed away to see it. In the course of forty years, I have learned to read some of those languages, just for the books. Journalists sometimes kindly call me a linguist, but the harsh fact is that I have barely mastered English. Of any other language I can read, I can speak barely enough to stay out of gaol. But reading I can do. Reading, it turned out, would be my adventure, my only field as a man of action. I would never win at Wimbledon, take out the Gold Medal for the Olympics 100-metres freestyle, cover prodigious distances in training for the mile, like John Landy. But I have covered prodigious distances in my own mind, and all the more prodigious because I was starting from zero, and there was nothing special about my mind. If I had been as clever as Les Murray, I might have done it all without leaving Kogarah, and might have been there to help stop the local council turning its pretty railway station into a neo-brutalist combination of a flak tower and a U-boat pen. But I was dense, with the impervious density which youth often has when it grows up surrounded by blessings. Having grown up in Australia, I had failed to understand it. I had thought the whole world was like that: safe, sure, fair. What I read in the other languages showed me that the world was far otherwise. And, finally, what I read about Australia, in my own language, showed me that Australia, too, was an historical event far more complicated than I had allowed myself to believe. The nation that Donald Horne called the lucky country wasn't just lucky. I have a lasting admiration for Donald Horne's books — I own them all — but in one way he was too successful. His central tenet, that his homeland was a lucky strike consistently mismanaged by second-rate politicians, caught on as a dogmatic aid to national self-doubt. As I read on through our recent and gratifyingly rich heritage of commentary and memoir, it became clearer to me all the time that we hadn't become a prosperous and reasonably equable democracy by the accidental dispensation of benevolent nature and a favourable geographical position. The country had been built, by clever people. Our constitution itself was the work of people who had studied history. They were readers of newspapers and periodicals, they were eternal students in the best sense, they were bookish people. They had built a bookish nation. But, as so often has been the case with Australia's consciousness of itself, the problem was to realise it.

When I covered the Sydney Olympics for the London *Independent*, I tried to point out that Australia's alleged lack of national self-confidence had never been anything more

serious than a lack of self-awareness, and that the supposed need to take the final step towards political maturity was an unintended insult to the countless victims in those purportedly mature nations which had somehow succeeded in going mad. Some of the victims who survived had come to Australia and helped to diversify and expand its culture — and that, undoubtedly, *was* a move towards maturity — but they would not have been able to help with our cultural maturity if the political maturity had not been there to welcome them. The result has been a nation which, even while some of its commentators were eloquently worried about its identity crisis, already had an identity unmatched in the world's eyes; a nation which has by now become, in my view, uniquely placed to exercise an international influence in a world where influence is becoming steadily more important than power. What I would like to suggest now is that we might mark our position in the world by building a new and potentially resonant symbol: and, at this point, you might decide that I have gone mad myself.

I never went back to the house in Bellevue Hill. I doubt I could have found it, and if I had, the man of the house might have asked me awkward questions about what happened to his carpet. I imagine his beautiful library was broken up when he died and the dealers sent the pearls of his collection back to Europe to be sold on. But, over the years, I have built a personal library something like his, collecting the books in all the world's cities where the refugees went, and where I later went to make films. I have one of my pearls here, and I'm sure he had a copy of it too. It's the book that the nineteenth-century Prussian scholar Ferdinand Gregorovius wrote about his travels in Italy. I bought the book from a dealer in Staten Island, New York, in 1983. An inscription on the title page says it once belonged to Anna Liebmann. Either she or one of her children must have got away to safety, and probably the next generation sold her books because they wanted nothing to do with the old language. You can't blame them, because the language is German. *Wanderjahre in Italien*. It's a book of astonishing elegance, and all the more astonishing because it was produced to be sold at a low price to a large public. There is no publication date, but, from my other books in the same series, I would guess that it was printed in about 1922. The publishing house was Wolfgang Jess Verlag, of Dresden. Apart from its books, scattered throughout the world, no trace of that house now exists. It was already gone before the firestorm. The Gestapo, remember, were great readers.

I wish my library were all treasures, but it isn't. After it crashes into the car park, only a part of it will be worth keeping. But I can think of other Australian collectors whose personal libraries are so selective, and yet so comprehensive in particular fields of interest, that they are cultural treasure-houses in themselves. Barry Humphries is only one example. He is a man of great learning, and one day, when he is studied as an Australian genius, the students would benefit by

having access to his books. When Voltaire died, Catherine the Great of Russia, who had known him and now missed him, bought his library and installed it in the Hermitage; and later on, under Tsar Nicholas I, Pushkin was kept in line by the threat of not being allowed to read in Voltaire's library. The personal library had become a public benefit. In modern times, the Americans were first to act on this principle. All students of Evelyn Waugh must eventually travel to Austin, Texas, because that is where his library is, preserved intact. We could copy the Americans in this even if we don't want to copy them in anything else. We don't want the McDonald's University of Hamburger Science, although we might conceivably want McDonald's if we want to feed the kids in a hurry. We might also want the libraries of some of our most learned cultural and scientific figures all gathered into one place, each individual library in its own house. You could call it a Monofunction Polis, if you think the Multifunction Polis deserves to be remembered. I see it as a kind of library city, dedicated to the study of books as artefacts as well as for their contents.

What you would be getting would be all the best books not just of Australia, but of the world entire, because our best creative minds have always ranged widely in their reading: if they ever called Australia insular, it was because they themselves were not. To keep the books beautiful, to preserve them from the defacement that comes with preservation, some way might be devised of numbering them invisibly, the numbers to be scanned with a pair of special glasses issued by the graduate student at the front desk, who would be performing curatorial duties as part of his or her PhD. To work, study and live for a time in the library city would be a prize for the new intellectual élite, an élite not to be feared in a country which, after all, consists entirely of élites. The expense would be large, but probably not as large as the total amount expended already on the task of transferring the contents of books to microfilm in the name of preservation, a preservation that not only seems to entail the destruction of the actual books, but is also based on a misconception. The paper of modern books does not deteriorate, a fact explored by Nicholson Baker in his witty treatise *Double Fold*, although we really don't need him to tell us when we have beside us a copy of *Mit Goebbels bis zum Ende*. It was printed on the lowest quality of paper ever made, but its every ludicrous sentence is still legible, even as the margins crumble. And, if we look at the thin but creamy paper of *Wanderjahre in Italien*, we can see immediately that it will disintegrate at about the same time as Kogarah railway station in its modern form.

It wouldn't matter where this library city was actually situated. I suppose there would be the usual fight between Sydney and Melbourne so that it would end up in Canberra. In my own daydreams, it is somewhere near the ocean, so that the lucky student who had qualified to read there could take

a break to go swimming in the way I once took a break to go smoking. Perhaps part of the library city could be an Islamic library, so that Muslim scholars from all over the world who are brave enough to go on building a secular body of commentary and criticism to set beside the sacred texts could congregate there in relative safety from the pressure that will inevitably be brought to bear against them by zealots who share their faith but think it can be protected only by remaining unquestioned. The first target of fundamentalist Islam is liberal Islam, and in no country in the world is Islam more likely to become liberal than here; so that puts Australia right in the centre of the action. Such a library would be a provocation. There would be dangers, but there is always danger in learning. Pursued far enough, it shakes every faith except its faith in itself. I think personal libraries can contribute to a greater library, just as the State Library of NSW is blessed by the nearness of Mitchell's library; but I think so only because the greater library is a collectivity that supersedes the individual; almost the only kind of collectivity that does. Somewhere in the book that we shut out of our own collection might be the fact that would alter our own orthodoxy, and it is part of a nation's true maturity to make sure that the awkward book is available somewhere. Which brings me back, at long last, to our first book.

One of the orthodoxies many of us share is that the Europeans came to this country in order to commit robbery with violence against the native population. Well, let's look at an early page of the Governor's standing orders:

It is His Excellency's positive injunction to the settlers and others who have fire-arms, that they do not wantonly fire at, or take the lives of any of the Natives; as such an act would be considered a deliberate Murder, and subject the offender to such punishment, as, if proved, the Law might direct to be inflicted.

The robbery happened, alas, and so did the violence; but it wasn't the first intention. We blundered into it, and, on that issue, it might be said that we have been blundering ever since. But something got built, and it was something wonderful; and we would be playing false to our young people who died in Bali if we were to go on saying that Australia is a selfish provocation to the less fortunate world. Australia is the hope of the less fortunate world, principally because of the example we provide that thoughtfulness and justice and tolerance don't just fall out of the air like the sunlight, but are the fruit of a continuous critical interchange, which could never have been had without the books. It was always true, and now it's time to say so.

(This essay was first delivered by Clive James in November 2002 as the State Library of New South Wales's inaugural David Scott Mitchell Lecture at the Sydney Town Hall and also at the State Library of Victoria.)