AXEL POIGNANT (1906–86) was born in England of Anglo-Swedish descent and emigrated to Australia in 1926, later returning to live in England. He was perhaps best known for his studies of the people and landscapes of Australia, including his famous image, The Swagman. In 1947 he was awarded a gold medal for photography from the City of Newcastle. The National Library’s Pictorial Collection contains approximately 1500 of his photographs, the subjects of which include indigenous Australians from Arnhem Land, taken in the 1950s, and Australian artists and personalities. In 1982 the Art Gallery of New South Wales held a retrospective of 107 of Poignant’s photographs (1922–1980), including some of his work for The Times and The Guardian in London. In 1996, with the assistance of the Library’s Morris West Trust Fund, the National Library published Encounter at Nagalarramba, written by his wife and professional colleague, the anthropologist Roslyn Poignant. This book made use of more than 200 of Axel Poignant’s photographs taken at Nagalarramba, near the present-day township of Maningrida in Arnhem Land. In addition to the photographs, the Library also holds many of Axel Poignant’s papers in its Manuscripts Collection, including exhibition catalogues, research material, film strips and miscellaneous other cuttings, drafts and correspondence, along with material relating to Roslyn Poignant’s own research and writings.

Patrick White and his cat
Tom Jones c. 1956
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Contributors

Dennis Altman is Professor of Politics at La Trobe University. The most recent of his many books is Global Sex (2001).

Richard Bell, a freelance editor and writer, wrote his Ph.D on Patrick White’s fiction at the University of Melbourne.

Russell Blackford is co-author, with Van Ikin and Sean McMullen, of Strange Constellations: A History of Australian Science Fiction (1999).

Neal Blewett has been an academic, a politician and a diplomat. He is the author of A Cabinet Diary (1999).

Alison Broinowski is a Visiting Fellow in the Faculty of Asian Studies at ANU.

Edmund Campion is found at the Catholic Institute of Sydney.

John Carroll is Reader in Sociology at La Trobe University. His latest book is The Western Dreaming (2001).

Jim Davidson is Professor of History at Victoria University of Technology. His essay ‘Land of the Long Black Cloud’ appeared in the March issue of ABR.

Kerryn Goldsworthy, a former editor of ABR, has a monthly column in the Adelaide Review.

Peter Goldsworthy and Richard Mills’s opera Batavia, premiered by Opera Australia in Melbourne in 2001, will have Sydney and Perth seasons in 2004.


Kate Guest is studying journalism at RMIT, Melbourne.

Gideon Haigh is the author of numerous books on sport and business.

Barry Hill’s most recent book is The Inland Sea (2001). He is currently writing a history of Queenscliff for the Borough and MUP.

Clive James, poet, essayist, novelist, memoirist and critic, is a regular contributor to ABR.

Jill Kitson presents Book Talk and Lingua Franca on Radio National each Saturday.

Neil Levy is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics, University of Melbourne. His book Moral Relativism will be published later this year.

Virginia Lowe has lectured in English and children’s literature.

Natalya Lusty works as a researcher in the Department of Gender Studies at the University of Sydney and teaches part-time at the University of Western Sydney.

David McCooy has written widely on Australian poetry and autobiography. He lectures at Deakin University (Geelong).

Peter Menkhorst is a zoologist and the author, most recently, of A Field Guide to the Mammals of Australia (2001).

Patrice Newell is the author of The Olive Grove.

Tamas Pataki, a philosopher, is an Honorary Fellow at Deakin University.

Dorothy Porter is a poet, novelist and librettist living in Melbourne.

Peter Porter’s newest book of poetry is Max Is Missing (2001). His celebrated essay on Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath (ABR, August 2001) is still available from ABR.

Libby Robin is an environmental historian with the Centre for Research and Environmental Studies, ANU. Her latest book is The Flight of the Emu (2001).

Tom Rosenthal, a publisher, art critic and writer, lives in London. His latest book, Sidney Nolan, was reviewed in the April issue. His writings about Patrick White for this magazine go back to the 1960s.

Lynette Russell holds the recently created Chair of Indigenous Studies at Monash University. Her two new books are reviewed in this issue.

Peter Ryan is the author of Fear Drive My Feet (1959). Tony Macdougall (under his Clarion imprint) published Lines of Fire, a collection of Ryan’s journalism.


Stephanie Trigg teaches medieval and medievalist literature at the University of Melbourne.

Susan Varga’s books include Heddy and Me (1994).

Anna Yeatman teaches in the Department of Sociology at Macquarie University.
July 2002 being Christina Stead’s centennial month, various tributes and events are planned. Graeme Powell, of the National Library of Australia, reminisces, in this month’s ‘National News’, about a lunch with Stead in 1975. Anne Pender (author of a new study of Stead as satirist, and currently at the Menzies Centre for Australian Studies in London) is organising a special Stead session during the British Australian Studies Association (August 30 to September 1). In the August issue of ABR, Professor Margaret Harris, our La Trobe University Essayist, will write about Stead’s love letters.

The Mildura and Wentworth Arts Festival, famous for its intimacy and culinary pleasures, happens again this year — a few months later than usual (August 1 to 4). Guests will include David Malouf, Les Murray, Jennifer Strauss and Chris Wallace-Crabbe.

Bob Carr will discuss his new book, Thoughtlines, at Gleebooks on June 6. Neal Blewett will review it in the next issue of ABR.

ASAL members and other students of Australian writing are heading off to Cairns this year, at the beginning of July. Highlights of the ASAL Conference will include a Christina Stead day. Talks will include the Dorothy Green Lecture, by Delys Bird, and the Colin Roderick Lecture, by Peter Rose.

Here’s another prize to add to the cabinet of hopes: the Westfield/Waverley Library Award for Literature. Works of fiction and non-fiction are eligible for the inaugural prize, which is worth $15,000. Entries close on July 12; details are available from the Library; (02) 9386 7777. Details of the much older Wesley Michel Wright Prize in Poetry are similarly advertised in this issue.

International honours continue to rain on Australian writers. On June 14, Peter Porter, conveniently close, will head off to Buckingham Palace to receive the Queen’s Gold Medal for Poetry, becoming the fourth Australian to receive this prestigious award. Two new poems by the Brisbane-born poet appear in this issue. Peter Porter will return to Australia for the Melbourne Writers’ Festival in late August. Meanwhile, Robert Dessaix has been awarded the Chevalier dans l’Ordre des Arts et Lettres by the French Minister for Culture, Catherine Tasca, for his contribution to the ‘rayonnement de la culture en France et dans le monde’.

ABR has long benefited from a range of editorial volunteers. Anyone with book-keeping experience wishing to help the magazine should contact the Office Manager, Dianne Schallmeiner, on (03) 9429 6700.
Pat Jalland replies to Marian Quartly

Dear Editor,

This reply to Marian Quartly’s review (ABR, May 2002) of my book, Australian Ways of Death, is the first time I have responded to a review of any of my six books over a twenty-year period. The review is incorrect in its statement that my ‘sympathy for the voices of the past does not extend to the illiterate’; the review is also inconsistent, since it earlier notes that I draw on ‘a wider range of sources and listen to less literate voices’ than in my last book, Death in the Victorian Family (OUP, 1996). About half of my chapters draw on sources of value for the working classes, the poor and the destitute, including police records, friendly society records, destitute asylum records, royal commission reports, records of lonely graves, soldiers’ records from the Great War, bush ballads, poetry and paintings, shipboard diaries and newspapers. For example, the New South Wales government inquiry into destitute asylum abuses in 1886–87 allows us to recapture the voices of some of the helpless poor through the oral testimonies of about 160 witnesses, including numerous courageous inmates, some of them blind, paralysed or very old. And the police records bring us the partial stories of many illiterate and marginal people, including old men (and a few women) who sought to remain independent, despite poverty and unemployment.

The review is also incorrect in stating that I do ‘not explain this culture of neglect’ of the old, infirm and dying in some of the worst destitute asylums in the former convict colonies. The reasons are given at some length in Chapter 11, including a different demographic pattern from that in Britain, with an ageing population of immigrants and former convicts without family support networks. Moreover, the British stigma against ‘undeserving’ paupers applied equally in the Australian colonies, but there were additional prejudices in a young and utilitarian society against paupers who had once been convicts, and against frail, debilitated old people.

The review misunderstands the general argument of my book and overstates the role of the bush, which isn’t examined until Chapter 13 (out of sixteen chapters). I make no suggestion, for example, that ‘the awfulness of the asylums could be traced to a hostile bush environment’, as the review suggests. The review does not mention the benign aspects of experiences of bush deaths explored in the book, including the cultural role of the bush grave in establishing a sense of individual belonging to the Australian land; or the bushmen in Lawson’s story who were willing to participate in a stranger’s funeral, ‘dancing jigs, drinking, sky-larking’; or those balladeers who sought hope after death in the beauty and regeneration of nature, rather than in a Christian heaven. The Great War is also absent from the review, though I argue that it marked a major turning point in practices and attitudes relating to death.

I fully recognise that Aboriginal experiences of death constitute a vitally important subject that needs more research by experts in the histories of indigenous peoples. The focus of my own book is different, but I devote two sections to indigenous ways of death. I emphasise in my Introduction that ‘the Aboriginal culture of death over forty thousand years and more was as rich and complex as the Europeans’. I point readers to a substantial scholarship by anthropologists such as A.P. Elkin and Ronald and Catherine Berndt, in a complex field of study complementary to my own; their research required them to live amongst particular Aboriginal groups in the bush for long periods. The reviewer’s claim that ‘Jalland does not follow recent historians in discovering that white Australia has a black past’ is incorrect. In the second section, relating to indigenous peoples, and entitled ‘Aboriginal deaths on the frontier: “The great Australian silence”’, I refer to the conclusions of historians such as Henry Reynolds and Lyndall Ryan on frontier conflict. No reader can fail to understand my position: ‘The heroic bush and pioneer legends combined with selective memories to erase the death and dispossession of the Aboriginal people from many Australian history books, with denial or trivialisation of the extent of their slaughter.’

I trust that readers will not be misdirected by the ABR review and will evaluate this pioneering book on its actual merits.

Pat Jalland, Canberra, ACT

Christopher Heathcote replies to Daniel Thomas

Dear Editor,

Daniel Thomas is not pleased with the essay I have added to the new edition of Australian Painting 1788–2000 (ABR, April 2002). Having loudly complained that, amidst other recent stylistic movements, my contribution considers graffiti, which he suggests is just not worthy of treatment as serious art, he advises your readers not to buy the book.

Am I surprised? No. Daniel dismissed the project before I had written a word.

My memory immediately jumps back to March 2001 and a small dinner in a Melbourne restaurant given for Daniel and the art dealer Joseph Brown, which was attended by several gallery directors, curators and art-scene folk. Late in the evening, Daniel asked me what I was currently working on. I explained that I was researching a new section for an updated edition of Australian Painting. The others around the table were enthusiastic, but Daniel, with a weary tone of
LETTERS

voice, said that he thought the book should cease to be published altogether, and told me that my energies would be better spent on other works.

I find it hard to fathom why Daniel agreed to review the book, given that he had so clearly prejudged it. If literary criticism was like the legal profession, I would have grounds here to have a mistrial declared and his judgment overturned. But authors have no right of appeal if their work is unfairly convicted by a most partisan adjudicator.

Christopher Heathcote, Keilor Plains, Vic.

Limericks in the parlour
Dear Editor,
The limerick is sometimes said to be the English language’s one original contribution to poetic form. That its name is taken from a city in Ireland is significant in itself; it’s possible that the limerick may even be an Irish elaboration of a medieval French form. Which may be why Gary Simes (ABR, May 2002) traces it to ‘Sumer is y-cumen in’, though this seems no more than a prosodic coincidence. His assertion that ‘we do not know why the limerick is so called’ needs to be debated, too.

Limerick is the anglicised rendition of the Gaelic Irish Luimneach, meaning ‘a bare patch of ground’, in the sense both of the open land by the Shannon River and also any vulnerable or unprotected piece of countryside. The city always needed men who could defend it, and its fortress in the late Middle Ages was about the largest in Ireland. Irish soldiers fighting in the interminable French wars of religion returned to their homeland with this poetic word trick buzzing in their heads. It became a party game in the houses of pre-Union Ireland. Each person would take a turn making up a verse about someone else in the room, responding to the chorus invitation: ‘Who will come up to Limerick?’ Whether these were in French, Irish, English or a mixture of all three, we will never know, since the first printed inventions came slowly.

As Simes rightly says, the person who helped turn the limerick into an international pursuit was Edward Lear. Lear’s poems reside, though, in the parlour of Victorian respectability. A further definition of the limerick became something like: the respectable ones aren’t good and the good ones aren’t respectable. Certainly, by the end of the nineteenth century, its reputation for indecency was well-established. Limerick City, with its reputation for being the most pious and hypersensitive in all Ireland, must look askance at its association with an infamously satiric and bawdy versicle.

Philip Harvey, Macleod, Vic.

Pearls before swine
Dear Editor,
Mary Eagle’s review article ‘Binary Love’ (ABR, April 2002) dismisses Traudi Allen’s study of contemporary art, Cross-currents in Contemporary Australian Art, despite the fact that it includes a very good chapter entitled ‘Portraits in Prayer: Eastern Philosophies in Australian Art’ and an illuminating discussion of the art of Godfrey Miller and of Yvonne Audette. Eagle, in her review, ignores Allen’s discussion of the metaphysical depth of the art of such artists as Geoffrey Goldie and Domenico de Clario, whose performance Seven-ness Sub-Lunar (1995) demonstrated how, ‘in Hindu and Buddhist understanding, the pointless, repetitive life is transformed by yogic techniques, including meditation on the chakras, to become one lived rather as a spiral, in which modifications in behaviour move the soul forward’ (Cross-currents, p. 143).

Eagle’s review is an example of the type of criticism that caused Harold Stewart to leave Australia, and Anne Dangar, discussing Australia in a letter to Grace Crowley, to state: ‘any natural refinement or artistic behaviour is casting pearls before swine.’

Michael Denholm, Hobart, Tas.
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