

THE 2011 RAY MATHEW LECTURE



Prodigal Daughter

Susan Johnson

Susan Johnson gave the third Ray Mathew Lecture at the National Library of Australia on 23 August 2011.

What an honour it is to be asked to give this lecture. I'm one of those people who believe that libraries are holy places, the receptacle of our communal memories. The fact that the National Library of Australia holds the manuscripts of Christina Stead, the papers of our first Prime Minister Sir Edmund Barton and the deep, warm, captured voice of Charmian Clift in its Oral History recordings — as well as the oral and written histories of thousands of well-known and little known Australians — well, those facts render this place to me a sort of national shrine, as iconic and precious as Uluru or the Great Dividing Range or the Snowy River. I'm especially chuffed to be asked, too, because it means that I'm once again part of the cultural conversation of Australia, after returning last year following ten years in London, where I was effectively living in silence.

I'd like to thank the generous bequest of the Ray Mathew and Eva Kollsman Trust for making this lecture possible and — after reading Kate Jennings' memories of Ray, whom she knew in his last years in New York — I wish I'd also had the chance to chew over the curly subject of expatriation with him. I know that both my lecture predecessors, Kate and Geraldine Brooks, have spoken of their experience of expatriation and what it means to be an Australian living outside Australia, and in particular what it means to be an

Australian artist living outside Australia. I'd like to continue that theme tonight but to expand a little by talking about the topic of the returning artist, and what he or she might find on coming back. Since I've been driving my friends nuts about this subject for the best part of my creative life (I've also lived in Hong Kong and Paris so I've spent a considerable part of my life living elsewhere) it is a great relief to them that this lecture allows me to express my anxieties more formally.

I once had a conversation with the London literary agent Ed Victor – who used to act for Barry Humphries until they had a falling out – who confided that he's never met a race of people other than Russians more agonized about their relationship to their homeland. Somehow one never hears about Canadians agonizing over being Canadian or Americans worried about leaving America but I'd make a bet that 99.9 per cent of expatriate Australians – artists or not – are conflicted about here or there, home or away, everywhere or nowhere. Kate Jennings may be one of the lucky point one per cent who gave up Australian beaches in order to gain another kind of beach – in other words she may be one of that tiny group who has never looked back – but for most Australian expatriates, expatriation is just another word for conflict.

I suggest that some Australians are so troubled by their relationship to Australia partly because of the tyranny of distance, which still exerts an oppressive grip. These days it's unfashionable to say so, but the English-speaking and the European worlds are *still* a long way from Australia, those worlds which bequeathed a literary tradition that is – still – the ground on which anyone writing in English learns to walk. These days there is a general belief that the contemporary world is a global village, and that the digital age has somehow leveled it, the combination of the internet and international flight transforming Sydney into a near-neighbour of Paris and Melbourne into an off-shoot of New York. But anyone who has recently endured those twenty-four hours in planes and in the transit lounges of airports knows that it is not only a single day that still separates Australia from

the rest of the world but also a world of ideas, of textures, of shapes, sensations, sights, smells and experiences. Australian air still smells different from French air, no matter which way you breathe it. Barton or Red Hill or Indooroopilly or Ryde will never be the same as Park Slopes or Wandsworth or rue de la Roquette in their details and particulars. Those twenty-four hours in an airport lounge or in the air inside a long metal tube are not the blink of an eye or the turning of a head: I am sure that anyone in this room will know the meaning of distance, and just how many seconds compose those twenty-four hours if, like me, you boarded a plane in London on an emergency flight to try to reach your dying father and did not know until you got off the plane in Brisbane at the other end if he was alive or not (he was, but some of my other friends on similar journeys have not been so lucky). Planes and emails and Skype have not eliminated the tyranny of distance, but merely shaped it into something even more elusive.

I've titled this lecture *The Prodigal Daughter* because I want to talk about the experiences of a female creative artist returning to the Australia of the early 21st century in the light of Patrick White's celebrated 1958 essay *The Prodigal Son* and in the light of earlier expatriate female artists. In particular I'd like to examine the changes – if any – since those long ago days described in White's essay, those days of meat and three veg and beer instead of wine and tea and no coffee. What has changed since Miles Franklin wrote some thirteen years before White that 'in Australia the writer has ceased to have any of that social notice or esteem which is kept for those who succeed in business or become conspicuous in sport?'¹ White's essay was written specifically in response to an article by the expatriate Melbourne journalist Alistair Kershaw, who left Australia for good in the 1940s to live in France, and who railed against the cult of 'stay-at-homism' and the gutless, envious, enslaved masses who hated expatriates and hung abjectly on to their wretched secure little jobs year after year,

¹ Miles Franklin and George Ashton 'Is the writer involved in the political development of his country?'
Australian Writers Speak 1943

‘inwardly hankering after St Germain and never having quite enough nerve to get further than Eltham’. Kershaw said that one reason certain people such as himself preferred living in France was quite simply because ‘France feels as though it were *meant* to be lived in. Whereas in Australia it was somehow as if one were hanging precariously on a cliff edge, with the Genius Loci stamping on one’s finger tips.’²

Well, answered Patrick White, yes and no. Was there anything preventing him from packing his bags and leaving like so many other artists? Bitterly he had to admit, no: ‘In all directions stretched the Great Australian Emptiness, in which the mind is the least of possessions, in which the rich man is the important man, in which the schoolmaster and the journalist rule what intellectual roost there is, in which beautiful youths and girls stare at life through blind blue eyes, in which human teeth fall like autumn leaves, the buttocks of cars grow hourly glassier, food means cake and steak, muscles prevail, and the march of material ugliness does not raise a quiver from the average nerves’.³

In 2011, fifty-three years later, our teeth might be better and there’s bok choy, sushi and lamb masala on the menu, but what about the muscles, the vacant stare, the material ugliness, the esteem of the businessman or the sportsman and the mind being the least of possessions? Have Arthur Phillips’ worst fears come to pass, that the Cultural Cringe of 1950 transformed itself into the Cultural Strut? Might it now be a kind of cultural treason to desert what we, rightly and proudly, regard as Australia’s rich cultural offerings –Australian books, Australian art, Australian dance, Australian film and music – and might it today be regarded as a better moral choice to stay and contribute rather than leave?

² Alistair Kershaw, *The Last Expatriate* 1958, reprinted in *The Oxford Book of Australian Essays* edited by Imre Salusinszky, Oxford University Press 1997

³ Patrick White, ‘The Prodigal Son’, *Australian Letters* 1958

Twenty-six year old Christina Stead, leaving Sydney aboard the *Oronsay* on a cool March morning in 1928, had no such qualms: she already had a vague but powerful belief that she had a great destiny, and that if she was to fulfill that destiny the only way to do so was by heading to Europe, like all creative Australian women of her day felt obliged to do. Stead counted herself as a 'wanderer...a temporary citizen of a flying village with fiery windows, creaking and crashing across the star-splattered dark'⁴.

For Stead and the other expatriate women writers who came before and after her, including Miles Franklin, Henry Handel Richardson, Charmian Clift, Jessica Anderson, Germaine Greer, Madeleine St John, Katherine Gallagher, Barbara Hanrahan and countless others, Australia was a sort of antechamber to 'real' life and to the 'real' world, far from that many-mansioned house where art lived.

On that March morning Christina Stead was leaving 'this waste and sleepin' land'⁵ and going to that distant dream house, leaving behind her past, her family and that other house built in 1888 named *Boongarre* at 10 Pacific Street, Watson's Bay, Sydney, which was always full of sand from the bare feet of her half-brothers and sisters trooping through, and which was later to be the inspiration for her masterpiece, *The Man Who Loved Children*.

Today, that same house at Watson's Bay is worth more than ten million dollars and its owner, the rich footballer and Socceroo goalkeeper Mark Schwarzer, has just won approval from Woollahra Municipal Council to build a \$2.9 million extension to the unoriginal parts of it, a sort of glass box tacked onto the bit that faces Sydney Harbour. I was one of several writers, including Nikki Gemmel, Charlotte Wood, Alex Miller and America's Jonathan Franzen, who

⁴ Christina Stead 'Another View of the Homestead', *Ocean*

⁵ Christina Stead 'Seven Poor Men of Sydney' 1934

tried to save the house from re-development, by publicizing the threat and by collecting as many signatures as we could for a petition to be delivered to the council. In an open letter, Jonathan Franzen argued that Stead's childhood home should be regarded as 'a literary heritage site of the first order.' The house features on no Australian national literature heritage list because there isn't one.

Now, I would say to you: what exactly is going on, if the 'new' Australia is supposedly peopled by sushi eating, book-reading sophisticates and the rich man is no longer the important man and the Great Australian Emptiness has supposedly been filled with cultural richness? Why isn't there a protected list of properties of great literary heritage to the nation, so that Patrick White's childhood home, Lulworth, in Elizabeth Bay or David Malouf's 12 Edmonstone Street in South Brisbane might have been preserved for everyone, rather than being pulled down (in the case of Malouf's childhood home), turned into an aged care facility (White's Lulworth) or even sold into private hands (the house in Sydney's Centennial Park where White lived with Manoly Lascaris until he died)? If a Federal Government can find a spare \$6.5 million to build a museum in 2008 to acknowledge the centenary of Sir Donald Bradman's birth, if we can cherish and protect Uluru and the Sydney Opera House and Duntroon House in Canberra, why can't we cherish and protect the homes of our writers who helped tell us who we are, who helped to fill the 'immense void' and create completely fresh forms of understanding of this country, just as Patrick White hoped?

In speaking the sacred name of Donald Bradman out loud I don't wish to re-open the hoary old debate about the arts versus sport but to engage in a more nuanced examination about exactly what it is that we value in 21st century Australia. As long ago as 1938 Marjorie Barnard – who also spent some years out of the country – wrote that the future of Australian literature depended on memory and that 'some important part of our self respect is bound up in intelligent

appreciation of our national literature.’⁶ In 2011, how much do we remember?

One of the things I loved most about living in England was its passionate commitment to its literary heritage, and how anyone could drive up to the Yorkshire Moors, into the tiny village of Haworth in West Yorkshire, described by Charlotte Bronte as a ‘strange, uncivilized little place’, and walk into the house where Emily, Charlotte and Anne Bronte lived and died. Within that cramped circumference the Brontes wrote books of poetic radiance, of a magnitude seemingly at odds with the insular world that birthed them.

The Bronte Parsonage Museum's collection of furniture, letters and memorabilia is the largest in the world. Here is the physical evidence of the rich fantasy worlds of the girls, the beginnings of their strange apprenticeship to a created world of mythical heroes and fairytale lovers, and girls who were stronger than fire, disfigurement and death. The museum opens the box from whence the Brontes sprang, revealing just how indivisible their work is from the place where it was created, preserved not just for England or even for Britain, but for the world. When the American poet Sylvia Plath visited, she sketched pictures, noting in her journal: "They touched this, wrote that, wrote here in a house redolent with ghosts."⁷

We are a country in need of its ghosts. We need such places in Australia, some means of remembering, of linking place with imagination, of metaphor to physical reality, some meaningful way of making our own dreams and symbols in the house of art. If Patrick White's essay speaks for anything (and it really should be called an artist's manifesto) then it speaks most deeply to the idea of metaphor,

⁶ Marjorie Barnard, 'Essays in Australian Fiction', *Melbourne University Press in association with Oxford University Press* 1938

⁷ Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath, 1950-1962*, edited by Karen V Kukil, Anchor Books, 2000

of poetry, of memory and dream; it speaks to how the ancient Greeks described music as the study of relationships between invisible, internal, hidden objects inside the human soul.⁸ Our European heritage may be only a couple of hundred years old but if we are to honour it then we must first acknowledge the power of the invisible ideas which made us. Shamefully, we are only now beginning to understand that we must acknowledge the ghosts of our original peoples, those lost and slaughtered souls who are slowly coming back, wraithlike, into our peripheral vision, so that the stories of Alexis Wright and Kim Scott and Tara June Winch and others are coming back to memory, filling in what we have previously only glimpsed from the corner of one eye. As long as there have been people, black and white, there have been stories, first told orally, then written down and passed from hand to hand, for the human impulse towards narrative as a means of shaping experience is instinctual, the need to make art an indivisible part of being human. We must call up our ghosts, including those who helped write us into existence. Remembering can only happen when we take notice.

Where are the blue plaques and open houses of Stella 'Miles' Franklin or the memorials to whatever scattered shreds left to us of Henry Lawson's peripatetic life? What about the childhood home of George Johnston in suburban Melbourne, with its prosthetic limbs of First World War soldiers propped against the wall in the entrance hall? If we want to remember our literary history and impart value to it, then I suggest we must first honour our literary heritage in a more systemized and formal way. Of course, there will be debate about who should be honoured, and problems deciding which authors will be read in a hundred years time and, more particularly, whose homes should be saved (for example, was David Malouf even a published writer when 12 Edmonstone Street was torn down? And when should anyone start talking to Tim Winton about preserving his lounge room?)

⁸ I'm indebted to the Boston Conservatory's Music Director Karl Paulnack's elegant précis of this philosophy and for his celebrated and inspiring welcome address to music scholars on the meaning of music

I'm pleased to say though that over the weeks in which I've been preparing this lecture, the news has come through that the house and studio where the wonderful artist Margaret Olley lived and worked is to be kept as a museum, and possibly as a studio for young artists to live and work for short periods – and hooray for that.

In talking about valuing ghosts and invisible things though we come to the heart of the matter, because music and art and literature – what Sir Les Patterson calls 'the yarts' – are about the invisible private transactions that happen within us when we listen to a piece of music or look at a painting or read a book. I suggest that here in Australia there is still a suspicion about how one measures or values such a transaction. You'll hear the term 'creative industries' now because the arts have appropriated the language of industry, of commerce, as part of its ongoing attempt to give legitimacy to what are essentially non-material activities that are not results-based and measurable, especially in monetary terms. All artists are working in air and art by its very nature is creative, open-ended and no painter or composer or writer knows when he or she starts a new piece of work what its value will be, or indeed if it will reach fruition or be stillborn. In art, the value of everything can't be precisely predicted or quantified unless by some fluke the planets have aligned with the market while the artist is still alive so that, for example, Christina Stead was still on the earth when her work began to be acknowledged, unlike Eve Langley, whose 1942 novel *The Pea Pickers* inspired the poet Mary Gilmore to write to Miles Franklin when she read it of the 'beauty of the book as a response to life and to the living things that are Australia. I found all my own responses in it but for which I have never found words.'⁹ By the time of Langley's death some thirty years later, she was alone, impoverished, and her corpse was not found for three weeks. Happily, Patrick White lived to be awarded the Nobel Prize. But even the market is ultimately no guarantee of lasting value: Mabel Forrest

⁹ Letter from Mary Gilmore to Miles Franklin, 26 April, 1942, Miles Franklin Papers, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW

anyone? Beatrice Grimshaw, best-selling author of the 1920s and once compared to Joseph Conrad? What, then, are we to make of this work of air?

Here I'd like to talk a little about my own modest work of air. You'll know that in the parable of the prodigal son, the son travels to a distant land in willful disobedience of his father, but even before he leaves he has already made the journey in his heart. If Henry Handel Richardson – now best-known for *The Getting of Wisdom* and who sailed away to England in 1888 at the age of eighteen never to live in Australia again – regarded herself as an 'accidental Australian' then I would regard myself an 'accidental expatriate' by which I am meant I am incurably Australian. But I am also a wandering Australian, a temporary citizen of that flying village, temperamentally suited to exile. I became an expatriate not because I was repulsed by my country but because I wanted something else, something strange and difficult and dangerous, something that Australia did not appear to have. It suits me to be a stranger and, for me, my physical exile simply mirrored a more private one. All writers are strangers and, like many other novelists and poets, I also felt marooned from my fellows by physical difference (I had a sunken chest which was fixed by surgery when I was seventeen). From a very early age I was also a reader, and most importantly I was also a watcher, and everything I read and knew told me that the world was elsewhere. I came from a family of travelers and my father was a businessman who regularly came back from America with tales of snow ten feet deep and black men spontaneously bursting into song on the streets of San Francisco. But my dad was also an Australian through and through and when his company wanted to promote him to a position in Minneapolis-St Paul he left the company, knowing he could go no further, and we left the world of corporate Sydney for a pineapple farm north of Brisbane.

Now, when I came to live in London some thirty years later, dad confided to my brother that he couldn't understand why I wanted to live there. He said he could understand it if I was the head of the Bank

of Scotland, say, or transferred by my company, but why would someone who didn't have a particular reason to be there choose to live in London?

Here is where the tricky part comes: how to explain our invisible inner lives, the hidden movements of our hearts? How to explain that my soul felt fed, that I could open up *The Guardian* books pages on a Saturday and find a delicious fat section of articles about Robert Frost and Stella Gibbons and James Joyce and Christopher Isherwood and Lorrie Moore and that I could go to hear a talk on any given night of the week by Doris Lessing or AS Byatt or James Wood at the London Review Bookshop or St Martins in the Field or the beautiful Adams-designed Royal Society of the Arts? That I could walk up to Hampstead Heath, past Keats' house, or chance upon the owner of the house where Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes were happy in Primrose Hill and miraculously be asked inside for a cup of tea? That living in such a place gave me permission to love the things I loved and being surrounded by thousands, millions of other people who also loved what I loved, made my love feel valued and real? My dad had never heard of Sylvia Plath, or else forgotten that he once had and, more importantly, neither did he care. There are lots of people in Australia like him, still, for whom everything I care about means nothing and this goes a long way in explaining why I enjoyed living in London, able to easily go and visit my friend Simone in Paris, that place where books still have a deep value to everyone, not just to the middle class or a bookish elite, so that a Friday night book show, *Apostrophe*, attracted a television audience of 15 per cent in its heyday.

My friend in Brisbane, Sandra Hogan, summed it up beautifully when she said: 'In Australia it's so easy to forget that books matter. It's hard to keep thinking it's important.' She made this comment only this year, fifty-three years after Patrick White's essay. It's hard to keep thinking that those hidden, invisible transactions delivered to us through music and painting and books have a weight and a reality, let alone a meaning that is valued. I suggest that in Australia there is still

a suspicion about the value of what an artist does. What use is the work of a writer whose work is air?

Charmian Clift, another writer and one-time expatriate writing about Australia and its relationship to the rest of the world, said that her parents wanted her to be a school-teacher, because they thought she would be safe. Now Clift's mother, Amy, and her father, Syd, loved poetry and novels and the world of books, *really* loved it, yet in Australia in the 1930s neither they nor Charmian knew that 'a writer was something one could *be* in the way that one could be a schoolteacher'¹⁰. Isn't there in Australia, still, a suspicion about the purpose of art, and its function? Don't we still believe that to be a doctor or a lawyer or a businessman or a schoolteacher is a serious business and one that implies a responsibility to one's work but that a writer or a painter or a pianist has no such responsibilities or cares?

The Canadian author Margaret Atwood once reported a conversation she had with a brain surgeon who had no idea who she was. He finally got around to asking what she did for a living and when she told him, he said: 'I've often thought of doing a spot of writing myself'. She replied: 'Funny, I've often thought of doing a spot of brain surgery myself.'

Because we work in air it is hard to understand that a lifetime's artistic practice is also lifetime's responsibility to one's craft, a lifetime of difficult learning, that if a medical student must take responsibilities for the lives of his or her patients, so too must an artist take responsibility for opening a window on those hidden, invisible arrangements inside us. It's easy to forget how astonishing and miraculous the process of reading is, how it allows us to enter another person's consciousness, allowing us to deeply understand another person's point of view, so that the hidden, invisible pieces inside one person are revealed to another. Imagine a world without novels: we

¹⁰ Charmian Clift interviewed by Hazel de Berg, 1965, National Library of Australia

would have history books to tell us what happened to large masses of people in time, and politics or science or economics or sociology to explain why, but we wouldn't know what it felt like to be alive and breathing. Because *The Man Who Loved Children* was so truthful to the world of feeling it taught us what it felt like to be an intelligent, cast-off awkward girl between the wars, just as *The Tree of Man* taught us that God might exist in a gob of spit. A book is not only a window but a door, a key, a ticket. A book is our humanity passing from hand to hand, one of the most important ways we collectively remember. Even that old curmudgeon himself, Patrick White, ended his essay by admitting that the most rewarding thing of all for him in coming back to Australia was the possibility that 'the book lent, the record played, may lead to communication between human beings.' It was the letters from readers thanking him for opening a window that gave him reason enough for staying. He stayed until the end of his life.

So why did this particular prodigal daughter come home? The reasons are many and complex, involving as they do the dying father, the grieving mother, the sense that the strange, difficult and dangerous world I found in Wandsworth, London, might be rather too strange, difficult and dangerous for my two teenage sons. In many ways England is a wounded place (the recent riots give a glimpse of that) and if it is passionately committed to its literary heritage it also still passionately committed to class. I missed the democracy of Australia, I missed the air, I missed my friends. And always I was conscious that I was not home, not speaking my mother tongue and that like Patrick White's poor, sad expatriate Levantine beachcomber hoping to belong, I was dispossessed. I must also mention here the spectre of invisible things, how lying on the Australian grass under the Australian sun feels like lying on real grass under real sun, and that even though I love the English countryside and I love the streets of Paris which make my heart joyous walking down them, I felt myself to be once removed, as if my real life was going on elsewhere. I know that in coming back to Australia my ardent love of books makes me part of a minority (even though – I proudly add – Australia has a larger book-buying

population than the UK). I know that Australia still doesn't have the population or the market to support anyone who wants to conduct opera, say, (Simone Young has spent virtually her whole career out of the country) and that ballet dancers still head for international companies. I know that it's still unusual for a literary novel in this country to sell more than a few thousand copies (Tim Winton being the exception). But somehow I no longer care about these things because I care more to be speaking my own tongue, in my own place, to my own fellows.

And, because I care about my work and because I take its responsibilities seriously, I want most deeply to do the best work I can. I feel strongly that I can do that best in Australia. I'm sure I speak for all Australian writers – prodigal sons and prodigal daughters, expatriates or stay-at-homes – when I say that writers hope most not that the writer will be honoured, but the books we make will be valued. Our books don't rely for their existence on their physical manifestations, that is, on the paper on which they are written. Books rely on that other unseen spiritual dimension beyond their physical forms and it is up to each of us to honour that invisible measurement. What I hope for in the next and final third of my life is that I will live long enough to see Australian books take their place as precious objects in the house of Australian memory.

Thanks to each and every one of you for coming here tonight to honour books, and for believing that books matter. Thank you.

The Ray Mathew Lecture is supported by the Ray Mathew and Eva Kollsman Trust. You can hear the full text of the lecture at <http://www.nla.gov.au/podcasts/talks.html>