

Greg Manning

SPARKS AND SEAMS: AN INTERVIEW WITH MORAG FRASER

Morag Fraser visited James Cook University in August 1998 at the invitation of The Foundation for Australian Literary Studies and the School of Humanities. She delivered the Colin Roderick Lecture on her chosen topic: "Substance and Illusion: Crosscurrents in Australian Landscape Painting and Australian Literature."

For the last seven years Morag Fraser has edited *Eureka Street*, a magazine of public affairs, the arts and theology published by the Australian Jesuits. In that time she has also co-edited *Save Our ABC: The Case for Maintaining Australia's National Broadcaster* (with Joseph O'Reilly, Hyland House, 1996) and collected *Seams of Light: Best Antipodean Essays* (Allen & Unwin, 1998). Much in demand as a commentator on cultural and political affairs, she is deeply committed to informed public debate and to the institutions which make such things possible—the journals, the Universities and the ABC. But her work as an editor is impelled also by pleasure in bringing ideas, arguments and insights together, to produce what she calls "abrasion," "sparks," the creative energy of dynamic juxtaposition. "Substance and Illusion," the lecture to the Foundation for Australian Literary Studies printed also in this volume, reflects these preoccupations. She explored them further the morning after the lecture, in conversation with Greg Manning.

I

Greg *Eureka Street*, the magazine you have edited for seven years now, is a Jesuit publication. You're obviously not Morag Fraser SJ, so how do you fit in?

Morag I think these things always work in personal terms. Before I started with the magazine I knew the then Provincial, the head honcho of the Jesuit order in Australia, Peter Steele, who's an English academic at the University of Melbourne, and Adrian Lyons, the first editor. If you work with people over a period of time you develop both spoken and tacit understandings of what the enterprise is about, and that was the case with those people. The first time I talked directly to Peter about this he asked me what I wanted to do, and I said "I just want to publish the best writing we can lay our hands on." I wouldn't presume to repeat Peter's words, but it was to the effect of "Well, go for it."

There's a great deal of good writing to be had in Australia, but getting it isn't always easy. There are a lot of very good academic writers—I don't think many people say academics can't write, that's not been my experience at all—but it's a matter of finding them. People who really know their stuff, know it over a long period and can make it accessible to people who know nothing about it, that's what I'm always looking for. Because in Australia I think that's the hole in the market, to put it in crude terms. That's what needs to get done and doesn't. It's money too, partly. To get 9000 words on the Press Gallery I had to pay big bikkies.

There is a formal Jesuit Editorial Board to whom I refer things— you could call it a censorship board if you wanted to— but that's a formality. In the time I've been editing (I can't ever say the word editor! There's a Freudian ... [laughs]) the advice I mostly get from them is to the effect that something hasn't gone far enough, not that I have to pull back.

Greg How important is the church and the theology to the magazine?

Morag Oh, it's absolutely essential. It's basic to the orientation of the magazine. We look all the time for what's valuable, what the values in something are, for openness, for potential for scrutiny, for good argument. The Jesuit tradition is an intellectual one.

Greg So where do you see *Eureka Street* fitting in the Australian public sphere?

Morag Where do we position ourselves? We started out calling it "A magazine of public affairs, the arts and theology", and that's what it has remained. The theology underpins the values for which the magazine stands, but they are values which I think are congruent with the ethical standards of all good journalists. The only difference with us is that we publish straight theology. We have a column every month.

The political part has been important. My proprietor is a religious society, not a literary publisher, and one of the reasons they made the commitment to what they would call a ministry was because they thought that the long analytical, scholarly, ethical tradition out of which they come has something to say to the world at large. It's a very good abrasive place to be, you know, in confrontation with the world at large. And it's good for religious organisations to be there. So the political analysis is a manifestation of that desire to bring the spiritual and the secular worlds into conversation.

Greg Despite the fact that the magazine's politics are in confrontation with the world at large, would it nevertheless be true to say that it remains part of an élite?

Morag I have absolutely not the slightest hesitation in saying I'm part of an élite. Nor would the order that produces *Eureka Street* hesitate to see itself as part of an élite, albeit a different one. They are élites with huge responsibilities *because they are élites*. What you have to watch is the differentials—where the money is, how much money people have got, and the difference between rich and poor. You can be part of an élite without subscribing to the kind of economic theories that put you up one end and guarantee that a whole lot of other people are squirming a long way down the other. There's nothing wrong with thinking hard, and that's what constitutes this élite, surely. That's what universities have to be about, because if they're not, they're just about the accumulation of capital and status. That's not an élite with which I would happily identify.

I think you've got to be terribly careful about this categorising language. That was the tactic of One Nation, but it's been the tactic of both sides of politics for quite a while. It simplifies things and crudifies them, and sets people against one another. I think it's scandalous and very pernicious in Australia to call the academy an élite because the natural consequence of that is that other people think that as a result they are licensed to take absolutely no notice of what academics are doing. But when someone is talking about the quality of water in Sydney, say, and you want acute, honest, independent scientific advice, if the "élite" spokesperson is actually part of a political group then you can't expect to get it.

Greg Do you think that academic cultural commentators in recent years have nurtured an élite of a different kind, writing sometimes in language that is available only to initiates?

Morag I can only give you a political answer to that. Yes, they have to a degree been complicit, but the University system in Australia, like the Catholic Church, is not so far gone that I wouldn't want to rescue it in so far as one can. At the moment we are in a very bad period. I see inside academies a lot, and it distresses me to encounter the kind of internal divisions that cause people to lose sight both of what they are supposed to be doing in terms of scholarship and research, and what the social responsibility is.

A lot of people are still doing terrifically good work, and the tradition we inherited, the sort of psychic bones of that infrastructure, is still there. People are still rung up by the ABC to talk about this and that and you hear a totally independent voice giving you what I think you can still assume is probably the best factual, theoretical, whatever,

approach that you need at the time. That's still there, at least in potential, so I'm not going to spend my time describing the iniquities that I know go on within the institution any more than I'm going to spend too much time describing the iniquities in a Church that has some great things going for it. The great things are the ones I'm interested in.

Greg So how do you see yourself, as editor of *Eureka Street*, relating to the academy?

Morag As a conduit, I think—a fellow traveller. Gadfly and fellow traveller, if you can be both at the same time. And a very happy one. My university experience was very positive and my ongoing contact with University people has been very positive too. And from academics I get exactly what I want! (laughs)

We need the infrastructure, we need the university system that we've got, and we need it to be better funded. So I'm sympathetic and critical at the same time, and I think that's a valuable function. When I say that I'm a conduit, it's not me, it's the magazine. It gives people a platform that's a bit more public than most academic journals. I quite deliberately publish things by academics whom I know can switch from being an academic to writing in a more public mode, because I know that the sphere of influence will be broadened by doing that. *Eureka Street* is a small magazine, but newspapers read what we publish, radio picks it up sometimes, television does. (Television never acknowledges, it drives me crazy.) And that way you can spread it right out. And while we've still got an ABC that's national, a writer on his own in Canberra can generate responses in Launceston, Townsville, Darwin or wherever.

Greg And those flashpoint articles can be the kindling—

Morag That's right. But *Eureka Street* is partly a journal of record, too. I think that's important. Right through the whole Mabo and Wik debate we had more or less first publication rights on Frank Brennan as anything was developing, so we had a bit of the inside running. But it happens with other people as well. I got a phone call from Margo Kingston one time when it looked as though Harradine might change his mind at a particular moment, and she said "Look, I can't get this into the *Herald*, it's at a degree of detail they won't wear. But it's terribly important that people know this. Will you publish it?" Of course we did. And now it's on the record so if you want to look at the pressures and the manoeuvrings and what was happening with Court and Borbidge and Howard at the time, and why certain things didn't happen, you can

find it. It's historically important to get that down. If it's not published you can't find it. History changes.

Greg And the revisers of history meet no resistance.

Morag That's right. Absolutely none.

II

Greg Let's talk about *Seams of Light*.

Morag Oh good.

Greg *Best antipodean essays*. Why "antipodean"?

Morag Partly from an observation by Robert Dessaix, who is quintessentially cosmopolitan and yet quite assertively Australian. I remember him quoting Peter Beilharz at a conference once to the effect that to be antipodean is to be "in relation with the rest of the world." Robert's little twist on this was to say "Look, we're down here, we know about us and we know about them. They know about them but they don't know about us." So it gives us a vantage point.

Also, I am deeply interested in what being Australian means, what it means to live in this country of migrants, and how that manifests stylistically. Why we're so laconic, what that means, how much interaction with Aboriginal culture there's been, how much we brought, and how much Irish and Scots black humour meld to make for that understated diffidence, the laconic, funny style. I quite deliberately included four sequences from John Clarke and Bryan Dawe, which I called "Born Leaders of Men."

Greg Did you get any surprises as you did it?

Morag Oh yeah. The surprise I have as an editor all the time. You get work by 18 different people, many of whom have never met one another, who come from places thousands of miles apart, and it's like an orchestra. You've got a trombone, a bassoon, a soprano and a flute player, and you think, "God, what am I going to do with it?" And it builds into some kind of unity. I suppose it would have to be inevitable, but the cross-referencing is always a very gratifying surprise to me.

If you're putting together a book of essays that date mostly from 1990-97 there will be preoccupations. The zeitgeist will out. But it wasn't just that. We called it *Seams of Light* because I was looking for a kind of hidden revelation. We were thinking about opals in the Australian

strata, and in the essay by Ivor Indyk about Kenneth Slessor's darkness, and his Jewish origins (about which I knew nothing until I read this), there's a wonderful consonance in the metaphorical language he has to use to catch Slessor. I say something in the introduction about how Indyk's reference to the "anthracite radiance" in Slessor fitted beautifully with the gathering notions of the book. It's about these sort of flashes.

There were other consonances. After I put in Inga Clendinnen's wonderful essay on Mr Robinson, references to Robinson cropped up from time to time. Les Murray, in his piece about the magnificence of public monuments, does this marvellous thing at the end about how the Australian landscape is such a major competitor it's pretty difficult to do anything here. I think he's saying you've got to make the gesture grand, it's no good farting around because it won't work. Then there's an essay by David Marr on why Sydney pubs are suddenly putting in plate glass windows and looking out onto the street, rather than doing the English thing that we've always done, going inside and looking at the fireplace. They work beautifully together because they're both about public space and the use of public space, but stylistically, philosophically, they come from different sides of the planet. I like abrasion a lot. You learn a lot from the way the sparks fly between things so they work beautifully. There are lots of other patterns like that. That was the really good thing about doing it.

This sort of thing happens in the magazine all the time. ... There's a moment at which—it's like watching Lotto, something goes *clunk* and the bits tie up. It's serendipitous and it's a great thing. It's all to do with being an opportunist, moving pieces around until you get a pattern. And the patterns do ... they come out. You know that wonderful stuff about Michelangelo when he's carving those figures that never quite emerge from the marble and yet do— I don't know— this works for me as a metaphor. It's in the marble and it will come out if you do it properly, put the words together. Any group of human beings thinking hard about who we are, where we are, where we are going, that's the marbly bit. We compose some sort of unity eventually.

Greg I get the impression that you are reluctant to interpret. I felt it last night, in the lecture, and here again you seem reluctant to draw much in the way of ...

Morag Am I? Hmmm.

Greg Is this connected to a sense of interpretation as imposition?

Morag Reluctant isn't quite the word. I'm not reluctant to do most things so if I felt like interpreting I probably would. But it doesn't get me. Maybe I read too much Susan Sontag too early, that wonderful essay "Against Interpretation." Writing and art works matter a great deal to me, so what I say about them I want to be dead accurate about ... and when you're working with ... I don't know ... what do you want me to do?

Greg I don't mean I *want* you to interpret. I'm just interested that...

Morag I guess what I find most compelling is usually what is most resistant to interpretation. When I was young I did a thesis on Chaucer, who is one of the most resistant poets in the language. It's very difficult to find a critical language for that, and the Chaucer criticism I read in the 60s was just God awful. It had come out of a school of linguistics, and they just didn't know where to put him. I found that difficult to do and I didn't learn very much.

So now in the work I do I would rather present, or enable, or put before people stuff that speaks magnificently for itself. You don't have to do very much. There are the useful people that take you through. I learn a lot listening to people like Robert Hughes— partly because there's so much to disagree with— but there are also enablists that point things out to you and don't interpret. I had a wonderful time in the Hartford Collection in the Wadsworth with Patrick McCaughey in 1990, when we walked around the gallery and Patrick would say things like – "Look at that bit there. I mean, shake that bit of so and so and Picasso's blue period falls out." It's sort of quasi-interpretive but I learnt, I could see something in that painting I had not seen before, that he actually enabled me to see. He didn't *tell* me how to see it, he just said look at this and this. So it's not an actual *resistance* to interpretation. Maybe that's just not the way my mind works, I don't know ...

Greg You seem more interested in adding to ways of seeing, in pluralising in that way—

Morag Mmm. Yes. That's why I like putting things together. You put a whole lot of things together and then people see more. [...]

At the very end of *The Great Gatsby* Nick says something about suspending judgement. I can't remember the exact line. I remember seizing on this when I was thinking about Chaucer, who suspended judgement infinitely, and it was the most enablingly creative principle I can think of, because you get more, you always get more. He sees more and the characters are larger. You look at them, you don't nail

them down. They have all of the shimmer of real life, if I can say that. And I think that Australians, out of diffidence for a sort of weird amalgam of Aboriginal, Irish, Scots, troublemaker, all that sort of stuff, do suspend judgement a bit. You're always looking to see what the next thing might be and that can be very useful. ...

I've been thinking about this a lot. It's probably a bit inchoate. It came out of reading John Button's autobiography, *As It Happened*, which is an interesting title because he's having it both ways, as John always would. One of the predominant impressions I took away from that book was that it's wonderfully funny. It's beautifully written, and there's a self-knowing, ... harshness isn't quite the word ... but it's very tough, very very tough. And I wonder ... I don't know yet, I'll have to think about this more, I wonder at which point John, son of a Presbyterian Minister, does make judgement. I think it might be a bit sooner than I feel comfortable with, it's very interesting. My father made judgements. My father was Scots. He was pure stream Calvinist, and once he made a judgement he did not change it. And that was not a creative principle. So a lot of the ways in which I ... what you call *avoid* interpretation ... I think are bred out of seeing the consequences of too ready judgement.

Greg Did I say avoid? I think I described you as a reluctant interpreter.

Morag Yes, and I am reluctant because what I've seen of sudden and ready judgements has not been enabling for anyone very much.