

## ELIZABETH HOLT

### THOUGHTS RAISED BY HERBERT'S "EVENING"

The A.B.C.'s "Evening with Xavier Herbert" promised to be at least an interesting half hour, but it developed, in my opinion, into a talk which raised fundamental questions about 'Australian Society of today and the future.

During this talk Herbert asks: Who are We? What happened to the ideals and the optimism of our forefathers? What happened to the belief that in this new land a better society could be created? Besides these questions relating to the maturation of Australian Society, Herbert makes other observations. These I am sure most Australians either do not know anything about, or else have forgotten. He points out the meaning of the word Commonwealth. It means commonweal - the common good. It is the removal of this word from everyday usage that Herbert regrets.

He reminds us of some of the weaknesses that have been present and that are still present in Australian society: our treatment, or rather our ill-treatment of the aborigines; our insecurity; our materialistic outlook; and what Herbert calls Australian supineness.

Whatever our reaction to all of this, one thing we cannot deny is the truth in what Herbert says. However, it is in the realization that there are problems within Australian society, and, in the understanding of them, that Australians can set about trying to rectify the situation. The following discussion, therefore, looks at some of these problems and suggests some aspects of Australian society which should be altered.

One of Australia's greatest problems was, and still is, her isolation which has led to a feeling of insecurity amongst all her people. The other important problem is that Australia is an extremely materialistic society containing the handovers of a frontier mentality. An understanding of both these conditions should help to give some insight into Herbert's statement that Australia was stillborn.

The insecurity which grew out of Australia's geographical isolation can be examined in both the national and international sense. Nationally, Australia varies significantly in geographical characteristics from north to south, east to west. Despite this, we populated the land by a homogenous people settled in small pockets of civilization vast distances apart. As a result our forefathers sought security in the recognition of themselves in others. As well, we refused to become a "melting pot" nation. We were ever fearful of invasions. We refused to maintain contacts with our nearest neighbours to the north. In other words our forefathers did not want (and we still do not want) to cope with controversy and unsettling conditions within society. Confirmity was required. Under these circumstances is it any wonder that our forefathers turned in on themselves? Is it any wonder that those circumstances, aided by a general belief in the Social Darwin theories of the day, produced xenophobic attitudes amongst Australians towards anything and anyone not Anglo Saxon in origin. The poet/critic Judith Wright and others have often traced these aspects of our origins.

These feelings of insecurity at the national level, led to international repercussions. Great numbers of early Australians came out here in order to become prosperous and wealthy farmers. Many of them failed. Land around Sydney was poor and further exploration did not reveal any great amount of fertile land suitable for small farming. This meant, of course, that men with capital were more likely to succeed as pastoralists. But even they were subject to the natural elements which, still today, make life in the Australian countryside so very difficult. The unexpected poor condition of Australian soil slowed Australia's economic growth. As a result Australia became very dependent on British markets to help the country survive.

At the same time our forefathers believed that the convict origins of the colony tainted the Australian character. During the nineteenth century the idea developed that this situation had to be redeemed at the first opportunity. Australians had to prove to Britain what they believed to be true about their society: that it respected law and order and that it would be a loyal and dependent ally.

Finally the small scattered population, fearful because of geographical isolation, developed a paranoid belief in invasions of Australia. French, Russians, Germans, Chinese, and Japanese have all, at one time or another, presented a threat, usually more imaginary than real. (The Japanese, of course, did manage to bomb both Darwin and Townsville during World War II. Fortunately, however, Australians have never had to face a military invasion.) Furthermore because of its small population and wealth Australia did not have any effective military or naval power with which to defend its shores against all 'invaders'. The combination of all these circumstances produces a paradox of Australian history which still exists today, and which contains tragi-comedy episodes. For seventy-five years Australia has officially been an independent nation. For seventy-five years Australians have believed themselves to be independent. The reality is dependence.

The story of Australia's dependence begins with a parody - the struggle for Federation. There are two sides: the Imperial Federation League which wished to retain outward imperial control of Australia; and the Australian Natives Association, far more aggressively nationalistic, which wished to get rid of Imperial control. Both sides argued from a similar standpoint to obtain different results. As the historian C.S. Blackton points out, the differences between the two groups were more apparent than real. On paper, the Australian Natives Association won. Australia federated in 1901. In reality the Imperial Federation League won. Australians have never had the confidence to transfer the paper victory into a real one. Australia had become independent but was incapable of acting in an independent manner. She still is.

What about the paradox? As has been explained, Australians' security led them to rationalize their need for British protection. Federation meant the end of direct British control over Australia's actions. On the other hand because of Australia's unfounded need for British protection, Britain retained indirect control over Australia's actions. At the same time Australians believed Britain had to be convinced that Australia still needed protection. After 1901, therefore, the dependant relationship established during the colonial period continued to flourish. Then came World War I. Now, in one instant, Australia had the opportunity to wipe out the taint of its convict origins; to prove its loyalty to Britain; and to sub-consciously bribe Britain into continual protection in the future. The war did not concern Australia, but that apparently was of

no consideration. Besides Australia had something to show off - her physical superiority in which all Australians had an inordinate pride. The war would offer the opportunity in which to show off Australia's physical brawn. Of course there was no doubt that the allies would win the war. They did. The cost to Australia . . . the death of the youth of a young, underpopulated, insecure nation; the death of hope; more dependence on things British. So much so that fourteen years later, after the end of World War I, Australia did not even have the confidence to ratify the statute of Westminster which was signed in 1932. And during that time Australians ironically still clung to what they did not realize was diminishing British naval and military power. Because Australia did not ratify the Statute of Westminster, in 1939 we became automatically involved in another war. Again this war was about 13,000 miles from Australia, and again we did not have to be involved in it at that time. The other dominions had ratified the Statute of Westminster. They had to declare war. Australia did not even have the independence to do that! Out of this war, however, came the realization that British protection had failed Australia. The problem of finding a substitute father figure was not difficult. In fact Australia already had a protector, one result of the fortunes of war - the United States of America. Then some twenty years after the end of World War II came the final tragedy. The dependence of Independent Australia culminated in her involvement in the abhorrent disaster that was the war in Vietnam. Each generation of Australians has perpetuated his forefathers feelings of insecurity. Each generation has refused to act in an independent manner. Each generation has involved this country in a war.

This however is not the complete picture of Australia's dependence on other nations. As mentioned before, the situation contains some tragi-comedy episodes. While overseas, Australia's head politicians were (are?) apparently not considered important news items in overseas newspapers. One remembers with despair reports by the press about such things as the brashness of Harold Holt; the long slit in Sonia McMahon's dress; and the black eye McMahon received while playing squash in the United States! Early in 1975, three delighted young Americans reported to this writer that Whitlam, when appearing on American T.V. as Prime Minister, commented how wonderful his wife was, and he added that that also included bed! Or perhaps, in retrospect, one remembers the silence surrounding the meetings between the various heads of state and Australian ministers. The meetings were just not important to the overseas press, and by implication the governments of the countries involved in the meetings and the public of those countries. Alternatively these overseas visits received good coverage in the Australian press. Naturally so, as the visits were important to Australians.

Despite this there was a period of hope. Three short years in fact. For a while, under the guidance of the Labor Government, Australia took some faltering towards maturity, then collapsed. This Government made valiant (if sometimes brash) efforts to establish Australia in world politics as a small nation with an independent viewpoint. This is not to say the opinions stated were either right or wrong. The point is that these opinions, devised solely by Australian policy and judgement represented an Australian and only an Australian point of view. It was not the voice of America speaking with an Australian accent.

In an attempt to foster independence at the psychological level, the Labor Government established an Australian national Anthem (although perhaps one can question the method by which this was done). "God Save the Queen" was reserved for a few special state occasions. Further-

more an Australian Honours List was inaugurated to replace the British one. It must be pointed out, however, that the creation of the Australian Honours List illustrates Australians' unwillingness to forego circumstances that reek of British prestige. Then the election of 1975 occurred. Lodge, in a cartoon in The Australian, Saturday 26th January 1976, sums up what has happened since then. He highlights the irony of the current situation. In the cartoon the Queen is saying to Phillip . . . "Toss around some payola knighthoods . . . and my song tops Australian anthem charts again . . ." It is as though the period December 1972 to November 1975 did not exist!

As a final thought on the dependence of Australia, a comment must be made on the appointment of the new American ambassador to Australia. As everyone knows, before December 1972, foreign investment in Australia had reached enormous proportions. Herbert, in his forthright way, summed up the situation when he said:

...the lousy bastards my own countrymen who can't dig a bloody hole in the ground without somebody from outside to pay for it, set up the machinery, and they will be glad to get down in the hole and dig it like slaves and then mess it all up by pretending that they are not slaves ...

After 1972 the Labor Government altered the situation drastically. Too drastically for many people. Then came November 1975, and one remembers that American businessmen in general, practically drooled over the election of the Fraser government. Now there is a Texas businessman in charge at the American Embassy in Canberra. The imagination boggles at the implications of renewed American business interests in Australia and a businessman in charge at the Embassy. Just how much control will the Fraser Government be prepared to exert over Australia's natural wealth? What will be the attitude of the Australian people? Will their usual supineness direct their actions in this matter? On the other hand Australia sent an experienced diplomat as her representative in the United States!

Perhaps the whole situation, not just the 'struggle' for federation, can best be described as a parody. The situation is a grotesque imitation of what should be the real situation. We have a nation believing and acting as though it is independent, but which in reality is a dependent nation. So much was expected after federation, so little has been gained. No wonder Herbert could say "Australia was stillborn".

Australian dependence on other nations is, however, only part of her problem. It is far more complex than that. As mentioned earlier, Australia was, and still is, a materialistic society. Australians still retain a frontier mentality and continue to approach all problems in a pragmatic manner. It must be remembered that our forefathers came here for material gain. And as mentioned earlier, they had an unexpected extremely difficult task in this respect. Therefore they had to survive physically before the development of the spiritual side of Australian society could even be considered. To date we have managed the former, and have conveniently forgotten the latter. But in all fairness it must be pointed out that it would have taken a great deal of self-analysis, self-understanding and flexibility to mould into an independent, mature, secure Australian identity, the old traditions of a European civilization and the kind of life an Australian environment tended to produce.

At the same time early Australian society had the opportunity to bring about the breakdown of the rigid class system of the old world; the breakdown of traditional authority; and the breakdown of the traditional influence of the Church over its people. The chances of this happening were good. The old world was about thirteen thousand miles away. This placed the controlling voice months away in both time and place. The more idealistic pioneers came bringing with them new ideas concerning the structure of society in their land. It would be a classless society, (or perhaps a one-class society would be a more appropriate description) which would mature into an independent, democratic nation carrying out progressive attitudes in its social development. How ironical the result! Today we are a materialistic class conscious society with an appalling lack of understanding of the social needs of our own society and that of the world. In true dependent form we draw our materialistic values from another nation - the United States.

Let us now consider two traits of the Australian character. They have been chosen because they have been, and still are an important part of Australian life. Moreover they are apparently accepted uncritically by the vast majority of Australians today. The traits are the concept of 'mateship' and the need of Australians to prove that they can be successful at the ventures they undertake. Another paradox appears. On the one hand there is the fact that Australians believe a myth to be reality. On the other Australians, to prove they have been successful, often turn a defeat into victory.

The concept of 'mateship' will be discussed first. By 1901 the greatest numbers of Australians lived in urban centres. These had grown quickly during the nineteenth century. Far more quickly in fact than settlement and control of the bush. This situation created problems of urbanization similar to those existing in the old world: overcrowding, impersonalization, crime, etc. As urbanization developed during the nineteenth century our forefathers became more and more interested in and excited by the bush, the freedom of the open spaces and the concept of 'mateship'. The poets and writers of the day sensed a need in these nineteenth-century Australians and they responded to it. The works of A.L. Gordon, H. Lawson, and Banjo Paterson, to name a few, are all examples of this fulfilment of this need.

The reality, as mentioned, was urbanization. But why call this concept of 'mateship' a myth? From where did it originate? One of Australia's well known historians, R. Ward, in his book The Australian Legend, tried valiantly to give some foundation to the concept. He argued that 'mateship' existed between the convicts and the diggers on the gold fields. In other words 'mateship' has always been a part of Australian life. Closer to the truth, however, are the facts presented by other historians such as T.I. Moore and H. McQueen. They point out that fear of other convicts and self-interest more often than not determined the relationship between convicts, not a genuine friendship. On the goldfields, claim jumping appears to have occurred far too frequently to claim 'mateship' triumphed there as well. Even today while Australians extol the virtue of 'mateship' our sick, aged, poor and handicapped are neglected and/or misunderstood. Our aborigines, unfortunately, are both misunderstood and neglected. On the whole, therefore, the existence of the concept of 'mateship' is a myth.

But in presenting the ideal of the bush and the concept of 'mateship', poets of the time helped to preserve the hopes and the optimism of a new society which appeared to be stifling in a repetition of old world urbanization. If, however, our forefathers had faced the reality of urbanization and its problems, rather than accepting only a mythical concept as reality, perhaps the statement that our nation was stillborn would be a little less true. No, this is not an academic question. The problems of urbanization are alive and growing today. Australians still have the opportunity to plan for the future. They should bear the concept of 'mateship' in mind when suggested remedies are recommended to solve current problems. The real question, however, is whether Australians have the maturity and understanding to cope with the problems and to solve them satisfactorily.

The second trait is the need of Australians to prove their ability to succeed. Two examples of this will be examined here. The first is the destructive love that Australians have for the land they cannot tame.

Australians have not only failed to tame their land, but they have also failed to live in harmony with it (not a unique situation) as the aborigines managed to do for thousands of years (a unique situation). Yet Australians love their land: the affluent urban areas, the beaches, the mountains, the plains of the outback and the dead heart. Perhaps they symbolise for Australians freedom and independence, that freedom and independence our forefathers sold out and which we continue to sell out. We are faced again with a paradoxical situation, for too often the Australian's love for his land shows itself in rape. Rape of the land itself; rape of the minerals contained in the land; and rape of sacred aboriginal land. Australians despoil their land, yet they call the destruction of the beloved environment and the wealth this brings, success. What is so ironic about this paradoxical situation is the fact that materialistic oriented Australians give their wealth (almost literally in this instance) to their predators. The recent lifting of the ban on uranium exploration is a good example of this. With a great many questions relating to nuclear power still to be answered by overseas countries involved with the production of nuclear energy, the Australian Government creates a prospecting bonanza for uranium in this country. Will the 75% Australian equity really control uranium exploration? One wonders what price Australia and the world will have to pay if the expected large deposits of uranium are discovered and mined in this land without proper control of it and without complete knowledge of its effects on the environment. Nevertheless, in line with the present discussion, it is not difficult to hear future arguments for the unlimited mining of uranium. It will provide jobs for a great number of Australians. Or it will bring great wealth to this country. And so on. No wonder Herbert writes Poor Fellow My Country.

There is one other interesting question related to Australians' love for their land. Once the land has been conquered and settled, mined and despoiled, and the problems of urbanization have moved inland, what then will become of our love for this land. When we have despoiled it completely, what will be left?

The sanctification of Anzac Day can also be seen in terms of a victory out of defeat. Of course this is not the full implication that can be drawn from the continual celebration of Anzac Day by Australian society, but it is an interesting aspect of it. Australian soldiers fought against terrible odds at Gallipoli. They had a go, but they lost the battle. The paradox: Australians fighting a war that does not concern them, about

thirteen thousand miles away to prove their loyalty, and to keep Britain free so that she could continue to protect Australia. But it was also a psychological victory for Australians. They had proven their fighting ability, they had shed their blood far away from the land of their birth. Australia had come of age in a battle that was a military defeat. Australians proved they were a loyal people. Not to themselves, of course, but to someone else. And today, Australians are still paying with the blood of their youth to prove their loyalty to another nation. Independent Australia remains dependent.

From the beginning Australians had to survive in an alien environment. To do so took a long time, but led to victory in the end. In reality, however, what Australians see, and continue to see, as victories or success, do not, as previously mentioned, always come out of successful venture. They often come out of defeat and destruction. And so appears the cruellest paradox of all. The materialistic outlook of Australians, the perseverance of a frontier mentality, and the deep inbred desire to survive materially, all combine to inhibit the practice of two important values which would benefit Australian society — the concept of 'mateship' for the commonweal or the common good; and the spirit of determination that helps Australians to better themselves, but only in a materialistic manner. Too much emphasis is placed on wealth and success. Not enough emphasis is given to a struggle by humanity to better itself, for the benefit of all mankind.

Finally one last point. Australians' materialistic outlook, and their overwhelming interest in technology exists to the detriment of the arts and creativity in Australian society. In general Australians have been and still are isolated, insular, parochial, ill-educated, anti-intellectual and materialistic. There has been little response and rapport between Australian artists and the public. In the past this led to a drain, a mass exodus of Australian artists overseas. Naturally this reinforced the ever widening gap between artist and public, to the detriment of both, but more so to the public. This problem has been compounded over the years by the lack of substantial governmental financial aid to the development of the arts in Australia. Some aid was given, but this was mere token aid. More significantly, however, the Liberal-Country Party coalition governments of the years since 1945 just did not see the necessity for such aid. Perhaps these governments represented the views of the ordinary Australians of the time. Despite this attitude the 1960's brought a renaissance (is that too strong a word?) to the Australian arts. Then the Labor government came to power. By Australian standards (but low by world standards) this government granted financial aid towards the development of the arts. For the first time the country's up and coming artists were not forced to take extra work to support themselves. Unfortunately a great number of Australians could not, or would not, see the benefit of this aid for the development of the spiritual Australian. As the economic situation worsened during the years of Labor's rule, resentment hardened against these artist 'bludgers' who would not do an honest day's work. Of course it must be admitted that some of the financial aid given was not spent too wisely. On the other hand to be able to spend money wisely is not something that is picked up overnight. It has to be learnt.

Unfortunately it now looks as though the chance to learn how to spend grants wisely will not be learnt. The Fraser Government has stated that financial aid to the arts must be reduced. Evidently economic recovery and growth far outweighs any need for the development of any

other kind of Australian but the materialistic one. What a tragic paradox. A Liberal-National Party Government dedicated, so it claims, to the well being of all Australians and to the creation of a better society for all, is in reality reinforcing an outmoded pragmatic materialistic outlook amongst all Australians.

Alternatively this reduction in financial aid to the arts could prove unintentionally productive. It could unite Australian artists to fight to preserve the continuation of the development of the arts in Australia. The continuation of the development of the arts in Australia is surely something Australians need badly.

It is easy to see why Herbert is sorrowing for his country. It is difficult to believe that at present many Australians will understand the reasons for Herbert's sorrow. Today Australians suffer from a general world regression which is experienced far more severely by those countries that can ill afford it – the so-called 'Third world'. In this way we have been lucky. The situation also illustrates that much of Australia's affluence is securely above the border-line of economic survival: but has this security been achieved at the cost of spiritual bankruptcy? A solely materialistic outlook on life will not improve the quality of life. It is time Australians realised this.