Reviewers in North Queensland enjoy little local skirmishes from time to time, and these three notices will take some issue with earlier reviews that gave Osmar White’s thumpingly good spy story headlines as a serious warning about incipient black power sabotage in the West Australian mining industry, while Nene Gare’s authentic and controlled vignettes of West Australian fringe-dwellers was set down as an inartistic pot-boiler, and Kevin Gilbert’s People are Legends dismissed as “pejorative scrapings from the bottom of a furry linguistic barrel.”

One hopes, indeed, that Osmar White will go on boiling pots of the Silent Reach kind, and he should scrape up pots of money with them too, because Silent Reach is just the thing for a long weekend of light reading. His British intelligence man, George Galbraith, ex-diplomat, is an inspired creation as a medium for introducing city readers to the adventurous world of technological mining in the vast, hard territory of the west. The extremely clear picture one gets of this country and the life it exacts is one of the best things about the novel. White, a leading Australian journalist, seems to know his background so thoroughly that he can build on it very credible political plots, ranging from tortuous double-dealing in Canberra to simple, brutal vengeance in the Kimberleys. There is a mass of characters and plot lines, recognisable to the spy-story addict as excellent Australian versions of the furnishings of the best contemporary European and American thriller. Silent Reach is generous in length and variety, and the style, at first a bit self-consciously masculine — in the first fifty or so pages characters “heft” rock specimens, the slippery breasts of Helga the masseuse, packs and suitcases — settles into a firm, unobtrusive narrative, flexible enough to cope with the changing tensions and environments. Either the style improves or the reader becomes too involved in the story to notice it, which amounts to the same artistic skill in writing of this kind.

The sexual interest is as daring as the politics are conservative, a trait typical of crime adventure since the publications of the Newgate
Calendar, and the sexy, intelligent, committed Tamara Diagulski remains forever just beyond George's reach, a twentieth century maiden enthralled by the evil genius of ideological fanaticism. Most provocative, this is, especially when George rescues her from the atrocities of half-cast nastiness. But one would have to be a bigoted feminist to take humourless umbrage, and a pessimist to take this first-class thriller seriously.

Nene Gare has been respected as a writer for some decades now, since the appearance of her West Australian novel, The Fringe Dwellers in 1969, and the only complaint is that she does not publish more. The quality and the insight of her sketches in Bend to the Wind, also about black fringe-dwellers, compensate for their brevity and prove that if she writes sparingly it is not from lack of industry and invention.

"Bend to the Wind," as a title, establishes as accurately as Patrick White's "The Tree of Man," the perspective that the writer takes on the portrayal of humanity. Nene Gare's stories concern some dozen figures whose strength lies in their ability to bend to and yet not be broken by whatever wind has tossed their generations. The black people of Australia have survived centuries of nomadic subsistence in an arid land, white invasion and spoilation, and clumsy, well-meaning white attempts at reconciliation, assimilation and tribal rejuvenation. The older fringe-dwellers in Nene Gare's stories are reconciled, but they will never assimilate to lower-class bourgeois living, for much the same reason as whites themselves seldom stay in this class for more than a few generations.

Lower bourgeois life is one of joyless respectability, blighted by fear of social gaffes, and uncompensated by a sense of achievement, or even modest affluence. Whites in this class, whether in Britain or America or Australia, are harassed by the impossibility of maintaining independence and dignity in straitened circumstances, patronized by the charitable, and ignored by the rest. No one with intelligence, imagination, or healthy ambition, who has had some experience of this kind of life, is surprised that black Australians show little enthusiasm and less gratitude for white attempts to start them on the lowest rung of the bourgeois ladder.

But Nene Gare's Mrs Magdalen and Mrs Yorick, not to be confused because both have daughters named Belle, feel also the sadness of struggling for the small degree of respectability that might inspire their offspring with bourgeois aspiration, and those basic comforts that separate the lower suburbs from the tents and humpies.

In some ethnic studies — Irish, Italian, Jewish, or Birmingham, Brooklyn or Sydney slum — the dominant note is bitter; irony and tragedy are present in even the lighter moments. In the lives of the black fringe-dwellers, humour is less a delight in settling scores or playing practical
jokes than a perception of life’s absurdities, seen with a clarity that is essentially philosophical. If Nene Gare reports accurately, and there is that in her writing that one would fain call authority, the black fringe-dweller is generally speaking wiser in intuitive understanding than most other Australians.

The dialect is a delight, authentic to those who have heard it, and it flows like music once the ear is attuned. Wisely, Nene Gare gives most of her story as dialogue or interior monologue, reproduced with no fuss, and with very little authorial narrative, and her artistic selection and control will be appreciated by connoisseurs. This is the end of the episode in which Mrs Magdalen returns to her tent home after a trip to Perth for a medical check-up on her heart, but which, as she admits to her concerned husband, she took for a holiday, ignoring the hospital:

Mrs Magdalen screeched. ‘Shutup bout them pains. Forever pushin em down me throat. I’m awright, see?’

‘Ya not awright. Ya jus think ya awright. Why ya think ya got that letter to go down south?’ Mr Magdalen dropped back on the bed and stared at his wife. ‘What gunna happen to ya now?’ He accused.

‘That long face a yours,’ Mrs Magdalen remained defiant.

‘Why can’t ya be a optimist fa once an look on the bright side? I’m back, ain’t I? An I’m awright, ain’t I? What more ya want?’

Mr Magdalen groaned.

‘Hoh you!’ Mrs Magdalen cried. ‘Ya make me feel like having a tack right here on my bed. Always said it was you brought em on. An now . . .’

‘What, Mum?’ Mr Magdalen asked fearfully.

‘Aw, shutup,’ Mrs Magdalen told him. ‘If ya don’t mind.’

The younger generation have the aggression of youth and sometimes a European ambition, and their adventures of mind and emotion are harsher and more poignant. In their struggles they are, however, a long way from Osmar White’s stylized terrorist figures, although they give much greater grounds for concern than his black saboteurs.

The lasting impression from the collection of stories is of the grace and stoicism of the characters, dominating the ludicrous and painful situations in which they are often placed. The vignette called ‘Polly and Choe’ concerns two neighbours who wake Mrs Magdalen by a late home-coming, and who relate their night’s adventures, having been pursued by police as they innocently watched a local dance while white kids raided the parked cars:

‘What happened then well?’

Polly choked back a snicker. ‘Gawd Miz Magdalen. Was jus like it wuz a lotta rats scamperin off. Blackfellers runnin every-
where even those don’t know nothing bout what’s goin on. All
the peoples watchin those wadjellas dancin, all run off an
piece after em.’

‘We was awright but. We run other way. We been right roun
town Miz Magdalen, an ony jus got ere.’

‘An Choe drunk a bit too much that conto. Kep fallin over,’
Polly said severely, ‘E big eavy man to keep lifting up allatime.
You gotta think a that, Choe.’

‘I know one thing,’ Choe said wearily. ‘If they catch all
them buggers that was runnin, that goal gunna be fulla black-
fellers tomorrer. Won’t be no room to put all them peoples.’

‘We is home but,’ Polly said sedately.

Kevin Gilbert’s verse has assimilated only too well the conventions
of Western propaganda writing, and a great deal of it sounds very like
the worst verse of that scholarly radical at the turn of the century. Bernard
O’Dowd. Gilbert writes about the condition of Australian blacks, and his
verse may be at present an interesting social document, but it moves and
disturbs the uncommitted as seldom as does Hitler youth propaganda,
communist slogans or the worst of the Christian hymns I learnt as a
child. If Kevin Gilbert allows his publishers, and it is to be hoped he has
some control over them, to send his work out for serious literary assess-
ment it will probably receive the kind of comment indicated at the
beginning of these reviews. The passionate commitment of the verse does
not compensate for the writer’s lack of really hard work in struggling with
the craft of peotry.

Verse has, perhaps, come too easily to Kevin Gilbert. The rhythms
and the ability to outline an attack sharply, indicate that he has a gift with
which, so far, he has not really got to grips. The problem in reading
People are Legends is that there are two chief reasons for disappointment,
one arising from the excess energy of the pieces, and the other from their
lack of energy.

Those who read verse, or are willing to listen to it read in the street,
where Kevin Gilbert’s work would be heard to best advantage, have
already that degree of interest and responsiveness that makes it
unnecessary to shout at them and denounce them. Even the most moving
of these pieces tends somewhere to replace ideas with accusations.

The second disappointment lies in an opposite tendency. A poem
that could come alive, and that shows some taut and direct writing, is
suddenly betrayed by a flabby rhythm, as easily inserted banal phrase
or a repetition that looks as it it should give strength, but has the effect
of cardboard reinforcement in a plastic suitcase. The final piece, “True,”
is basically a reasoned and calm appraisal of the poet’s relationship with
the unsympathetic elements in white society, a position that clearly has
cost him more intellectual effort and moral honesty to achieve than some of his opponents have expended on any non-material thing.

I know you’re wrong when you claim you’re right
And your truth is black when you claim it white
Still, you **believe** and I know, I know
That we all must tend the land we hoe
And live to the dreams we dream
And we all must rise to the beck‘ning sun
That guides us all on the race we run
And you **believe**, I know I know
That your truth is truth — yet a coal — black snow
Is as white as the truth you claim...

Even if repetition is needed here to express the poet’s effort to hold his balance of mind, and his sincere wish to communicate with the reader, there is too much of it, and it weakens the effort and the communication. Some harder-working instinct must warn the poet of this. The concept of a “coal-black snow” forces itself on the consciousness and the conscience as an image of all paradoxical truths ignored in order to maintain the bigotry one feels necessary for survival. Even the surrounding rhythmical lilt cannot weaken this image. But what are lazy old clichés like “the land we hoe” and “the race we run” doing here? Why the patronizing apostrophe in beck‘ning, when there is no hope of escaping the metre anyway?

These are the things that spoil Kevin Gilbert’s narrative, denunciatory and reflective verse alike, and what they are doing is allowing the writer to slip into the same indolence and unconcern as a poet that characterize his opponents’ attitudes to human rights and justice.

... AND ARTS AND ACADEMIA


Brian Matthews, in *Readings in Australian Arts*, writing about the “burning sincerity and defensive determination” of Australian poets in the forties, and about the curious disengagement and diffidence of poets in
the fifties, concludes by quoting a later engaged and aggressive poem by Bruce Dawe. It is Dawe's famous "Homecoming," describing the air transport of the bodies of Australian soldiers, zipped into green plastic bags, from Vietnam. Dawe had a cause as urgent and basic as Kevin Gilbert's, and like Gilbert he uses immediate images, sarcasm — "the noble jets are whining like hounds" — irony and repetition. "Homecoming" is not perhaps the best of Dawe's poems, but it shows the kind of excellence that Kevin Gilbert's verse could reach if he continues to write with determination reinforced by the tougher intellectual effort demanded by his cause.

Brian Matthews' paper, like the others from the University of Exeter Symposium of 1976, edited by Peter Quartermaine, not only supplies facts, but places them in a new light, interprets them, and so provides another perspective for reading purely creative work. Among the papers most helpful in giving a different perspective are Peter Quartermaine's "The Lost Perspective; Australian Photography in the Nineteenth Century," Ian Turner's "Sydney and the Bush: Notes on Popular Culture," Rüdiger Joppien's "The Iconography of the Burke and Wills Expedition in Australian Art," and David Lowenthal's "Australian Images: The Unique Present, the Mythical Past." A sense of newness, of course, depends upon the reader's previous experience, and a sense of freshness is a result of the writer's mind and the intensity of his interest. Freshness is a quality shared by almost all the papers in this collection. As the Fine Arts are not formally pursued in many Australian Universities and Colleges, several of these papers will serve as adjuncts to a more literary interest for many readers, but each contains a range of information and thoughtful interpretation.

The University of Exeter offers an undergraduate course in American and Commonwealth (unpolitically conceived) Arts, which has achieved wide recognition for its usefulness and soundness, not only as an auxiliary to close study of literature, but for its own imaginative and academic integrity.

A new perspective and introduction to South Pacific writing will be given to many readers of Chris Tiffin's edition of the papers delivered at the first conference of the South Pacific Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies. That these papers were available only twelve months after the conference is a credit to Dr Tiffin, for a long delay in issuing conference papers, inevitable as such delays often are, is troublesome and frustrating. Fortunately, literature and literary discussion seldom suffers the fate of much scientific writing in growing dated and irrelevant, and some of these South Pacific papers will have additional interest for Australian readers to whom areas of writing are still only vaguely known.
Nigel Krauth's paper on Papua New Guinea in recent white fiction and Subramani's "Images of Fiji in Literature" have more than specialist interest, for example. For those who indulge a Keatsian Negative Capability, the study of many approaches to the one subject or related subjects, and the examination of the same approach directed towards different subjects, both stimulate and give that sense of leisure which ideally leads to deeper philosophical understanding of one's chosen art and practice. Thus Leonie Kramer's "The Sense of the Past in Australian Poetry" printed in the Exeter collection, and Thomas Shapcott's "Developments in the Voyager Tradition of Australian Verse" for the S P A C L A L S papers, show some interesting overlap, as do Bruce Bennett's "Australian Perspectives on the Near North: Hal Porter and Randolph Stow" in the S P A C L A L S papers, and Helen Tiffin's essay on Stow's Tourmaline and the Tao Te Ching in Studies in the Recent Australian Novel edited by K.G. Hamilton.

There has recently been academic criticism that collections of papers and articles often fail to exhibit a unity of approach, or together fail to present an immediately discernible theory of literary criticism. Such unity and coherence of critical method is one of the intellectual and aesthetic pleasures of criticism, but it is one expected from reading in the work of a single writer, Dryden, for example, or Steiner, Barthes, or the Australian A.D. Hope, and in reading within a "school." On other occasions the aesthetic pleasure may well lie in the variety of critical assumptions and ends which underlie a collection by diverse hands and part of the intellectual challenge for the reader is in putting his own exemplastic imagination to work to discover unity and coherence for himself.

The rationale of Studies in the Recent Australian Novel, presented by members of the staff of the English Department at the University of Queensland, is indicated in the Foreword to the collection, and the essays are set against a Prefatory Sketch which outlines the major Australian fiction written in the last one hundred years. The contributors have collaborated in the planning of the work, and in mutual discussion and criticism, but the fact that no firm theory about the recent Australian novel is presented is no grounds for complaint.

Each essay has enough originality and sound sense to provoke the reader to re-examine his own conceptions about contemporary Australian novelists and to help him towards finding his own coherent theory. Cecil Hadgraft's analysis of the role of the writer in five recent Australian novels, including the rather neglected two-volume study of the individual man and suburban mores made by Frank Dalby Davison in The White Thorntree, stirs up a satisfying activity in the reader's mind. Also
stimulating is K.G. Hamilton’s juxtaposition of Martin Boyd’s *A Difficult Young Man* and Christina Stead’s little read, *The People with the Dogs*, which raises an interesting question about methods and intentions in both writers. Hamilton concludes that in their presentation of “two difficult young men” a proposition emerges that might hold generally true for all their work, that “while Boyd’s method is the safer, Stead’s offers the greater possibility of reward, as well as the greater danger,” a comment that does not necessarily disadvantage either writer.

Laurie Hergenhan and Richard Wilson take firmly defined approaches to two much-discussed novels: Hergenhan in adding to his seminal *Quadrant* (1977) article to show *Poor Fellow My Country* as an Australian tragedy, and Wilson in a very clear exposition of the intuition of experience by the conscious and sub-conscious mind, that may be seen as one of the central concerns of *The Eye of the Storm*.

Alan Lawson takes up the question of autobiography in Hal Porter and George Johnston, an essay that complements Hadgraft’s, and Leon Cantrell concludes the collection with a provocative discussion of more recent work by David Ireland, Michael Wilding and Frank Moorhouse.

As a more personal comment, I should like to add that Chris Tiffin’s “Victim’s Black and White: Thomas Keneally’s *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*” sent me back to a comment made by David Lowenthal in his Exeter paper:

> Australians are still in flux between extremes of self-hate and self-love, ironic depreciation and vain-glorious boasting, assessing their history now as a chronicle of errors, now as progress towards a magnificent destiny. To most Australians, history is still a mythical and moral statement, not a complex, contingent and sometimes self-contradictory heritage.

The full argument within which this assertion occurs deserves close study, but following on from the discussion of Keneally’s novel it led to the query whether Australian novelists have ever fully been represented by what Cantrell described as the ideology which sustained the earlier novel but which has now collapsed, “a buoyant commitment to originality, individuality, and the virtues of unpremeditated experience.” Certainly the work of Ireland, Wilding and Moorhouse, and of other even younger writers like Peter Carey and Colin Talbot, require new standpoints for assessment, although a stubborn belief in the fundamental universality and flexibility of traditional modes of criticism persists in my own mind. But the question neatly raised for me by Cantrell’s exposition is whether or not the Australian novel has really held, as certain periods of European and American fiction have, “an affirmative view of
the future," or has ever really represented experience as other than a composition of "fragments, held together only by the energy with which we can invest our experience of them." Is not this the final view of experience and the final scepticism of Such is Life, the tragic conclusion of Henry Handel Richardson, and the irony that underlies all White's pursuit of unity?