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MY AUSTRALIA IN THREE BOOKS

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Alan Marshall, *I Can Jump Puddles* (1955)

Neville Shute, *On the Beach* (1957)

Donald Horne, *The Lucky Country* (1964)

Why do it? That's a question often asked of me and others who have spent a significant part of our professional lives engaged in that most bloody and dangerous of trades – Australian national politics – and have acquired some visibility, or notoriety, in the process. What is it in our genes or experience that makes us expose ourselves to the inevitable stresses, and almost certain pain and periodic humiliation, that comes with of public life? Why do so many of us go on doing it for so long when so often our hopes and expectations are disappointed?

In my own case, and I can only speak for myself, I tried to address that question – and also to explain my policy preoccupation for so long with human rights, legal and constitutional reform, and international relations – in my *Incorrigible Optimist: A Political Memoir*[1]. I wrote there about my experience growing up in a working-class household in the late 1940s and early 1950s, redolent in words with all the racial, gender and other prejudices of the period but in practice with basic human decency. I wrote of the huge impact of a number of teachers who inspired and guided me through my school days, and of coming of age in the vibrant and transformative campuses of Melbourne University and Oxford in the 1960s. I wrote about the enormously formative role of my many months of shoestring travel as a young adult throughout Asia – with indelible human experiences along the way, in particular, in Hiroshima, Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia, and India – and in Africa, the Middle East and Europe. And I wrote about the breathtakingly game-changing arrival of Gough Whitlam on the ALP scene, in the late 1960s, which changed almost overnight my generation's, and certainly my own, sense of what might be achieved through political action.

What I did not then write about at any length – somewhat surprisingly, in retrospect, because ever since my Blyton, Bunter, Biggles and William childhood days I had been an assiduous reader – were the *books* that had helped inform or inspire my developing worldview, and my sense of what I might be able to achieve in my adult life. And those that I did mention – like Bertrand Russell's *Why I Am Not a Christian*, Maxime Rodinson's seminal Penguin Special *Israel and the Arabs,* and John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* – were none of them by Australian authors. Looking back, that was a mistake. I *was* influenced, in my formative teens and twenties, by a great deal of Australian writing. And thinking now about which Australian books influenced me most at the time, which remain most unforgettable, and which – for all their age – still have contemporary relevance, three classics stand out.

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[1] Melbourne University Publishing 2017

Alan Marshall, *I Can Jump Puddles* (1955)

Marshall's exuberant and enchanting account of his rural Western Victorian childhood before t World War I, overcoming the ravages of the polio that crippled him from the age of six, had nothing to do with my decision to become a lawyer, civil liberties activist, politician, or foreign policy specialist. But it made, I think, a big contribution to that sense of determined optimism – indeed *incorrigible* optimism – with which, rather strangely to others and often to myself, I always seem to have been imbued, and which has sustained me through a professional lifetime in which there have been at least as many frustrating lows as triumphant highs.

Less well read and remembered today than it should be, but much loved by those like me who grew up on it, *I Can Jump Puddles* was a huge success after its publication in 1955, translated into thirty languages, selling hundreds of thousands of copies worldwide (especially in Eastern Europe, where Marsball's communist sympathies, born of his opposition to fascism and war in the 1930s, were well known), and later made into both a Czech film and an ABC mini-series. The book's success was well-deserved. It is beautifully written, easily and artlessly capturing the flavour of country life at the time, showing – as Marshall did in all his writing – a fine eye for character, a fine ear for dialogue, and a gloriously wry and dry sense of humour.

Above all *Puddles* – and the successor volumes of his autobiographical trilogy, *This is the Grass* and *In Mine Own Heart,* focusing on his young adulthood, getting started as a writer, and coping with the cruel prejudices of employers in depression-era Melbourne – brilliantly capture the character of the author himself. This is a boy, and then a man, utterly unwilling to be defined or defeated by his disability, totally lacking in self-pity or bitterness, endlessly fascinated by other people's stories, kind and compassionate in all his human instincts, and with a fine gift for friendship.

And not just in his art, but his life. No doubt he must have offended, enraged or let down at least some along the way – no-one is ever a paragon of all the virtues – but Alan Marshall seems to have won not just the respect but the lasting affection of just about everyone he ever encountered through the course of his long life. One of those was a RAAF and later Cathay Pacific pilot he met in the last years of the Second World War, who helped him travel around the Northern Territory listening to the stories of Indigenous Australians (sensitively later recorded in *Ourselves Writ Strange* and *People of the Dreamtime),* hosted him around Asia, and remained a close family friend thereafter. That pilot happened to be my uncle, and as a teenager I had the pleasure and privilege of meeting our author in his company on several occasions. And so it was that I joined the ranks not just of Alan Marshall readers, but acolytes.

It's always dangerous to generalise about national characteristics, but I have always been among those who have felt that there is something instinctively and attractively egalitarian about Australians, whatever their background, education or life experience: an absolute willingness to take others as they find them, neither sucking up nor kicking down; responding to the way others behave, not the way they look, or dress or talk; and whatever their station in life. Drawing upon my own direct observations both as foreign minister and then later, for nearly a decade, as head of the International Crisis Group, I have often made this observation in the context of explaining the very high regard in which Australian peacekeepers are held internationally, both among fellow professionals and in the local communities, whether they be Asian, African, Middle Eastern or Pacific Island, in which they have served.

If there is some truth in that collective character analysis, it is hard to think of anyone who has embodied, and written about it, more comprehensively and persuasively, than Alan Marshall. And if for no other reason than that, he deserves to be read, and re-read, again today.

Neville Shute, *On the Beach* (1957)

The 1959 Hollywood film, starring Gregory Peck, Ava Gardner, Fred Astaire and Anthony Perkins, is probably now better remembered in Australia than the Neville Shute novel on which it was based, published – to widespread international acclaim – two years earlier. Perhaps understandably, given the immortally memorable quote, invented as Gardner's by a local journalist, that 'Melbourne is a great place to make a film about the end of the world'. And perhaps also, for those of us who lived through the COVID-19 lockdown in this city rather more recently, for the eerily irresistible resemblance of our totally empty city streets – and the tattered newspapers blowing in the wind outside the State Library – to the final scenes of that film, depicting as they do the final obliteration of all life here after the arrival of the deadly radiation cloud generated a year earlier by a nuclear holocaust in the Northern Hemisphere, and drifting inexorably south ever since.

But that would be a pity, The novel remains a compelling read, accurately described by various American reviewers when it came out as 'the most haunting evocation we have of a world dying of radiation after and atomic war', 'the most shocking fiction I have read in years: both the idea and the sheer imaginative brilliance with which Mr Shute brings it off', and 'an emotional wallop, which should be made mandatory reading for all professional diplomats and politicians'. Re-reading it again now, seven decades later, I was particularly struck by the subtlety and poignancy with which Shute – English aeronautical engineer that he was, before migrating to Australia – portrayed the emotional responses of his central characters. In the film, Australian party-girl Moira Davidson (played by Gardner) has, as the box office would demand and expect, a rapturous last fling with the Gregory Peck's American submarine commander, Dwight Towers. But in the book Towers, clinging to the fiction that his wife and children back home are still alive and waiting for his return, remains loyal to them, and Davidson remains chastely respectful of his decision. The hard-back is infinitely more moving than the celluloid.

That subtlety rather eluded me as a teenager. The impact the book made on me, and so many of my generation, was simply its bringing dramatically home the catastrophic reality of nuclear war. Nuclear weapons were not only the most indiscriminately inhumane ever devised, but their use posed an existential risk to life on this planet. That perception was hugely reinforced for me a few years later, when on my first-ever overseas trip – to Japan in the bowels of a steamship, as part of a student group, when I was twenty years old – I visited Hiroshima. Not even Shute's book had quite prepared me for the experience of standing, in the real world, at the epicentre of that first nuclear bomb strike, and being overwhelmed by the almost indescribable horror of what had occurred here just two decades earlier.

It seemed to me then that I had to do whatever I could, using whatever opportunity my professional career allowed me, to try to rid the world of these horrifying weapons. And much of my life has been devoted to doing just that – initiating as Foreign Minister under Paul Keating the Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons, co-chairing under Kevin Rudd the Australia-Japan International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, and speaking, writing, founding and working with like-minded international NGOs. None of that activity has borne the fruit I would have liked, but it is critical that – in a fragile and volatile world where nuclear warfare seems once again to be becoming thinkable,

and nuclear arms control ever more elusive – that kind of effort be maintained. And *On the Beach* –even if its science needs updating (with nuclear winter now seen as a bigger global existential risk than drifting radiation clouds) – will go on being an indispensable advocacy tool.

Donald Horne, *The Lucky Country* (1964)

Who of my generation was *not* influenced by Donald Horne's wake-up call, probably the sharpest, most timely and impactful work of accessible. non-academic political, social and economic analysis ever penned in this country? Re-reading it now, six decades later, there is much that seems dated and unpersuasive – for example the non-recognition as any kind of issue of climate change and fossil-fuel use, or (more indefensibly) Indigenous disadvantage. And much that simply jars to modern eyes and ears, above all the complete failure to acknowledge that women had any role at all to play in dragging Australia out of the torpor he describes – reflected throughout the text, and in chapter headings like "Men at Work" and "Men in Power".

But all that acknowledged (and some of these blind-spots were better addressed in later revised editions), the book sold massively, has never been out of print, and there is much in it that still rings loud and clear today. Above all, Horne's insistence on Australia forging our own clear identity, free of all British and American apron strings, nurturing our relationships with and living comfortably in Asia, getting our technological and innovative act together, and being less comfortable than we continue to be, not least with our business and political leadership, with the complacent and second-rate.

Certainly there is no question about the positive impact that it made at the time, including on me. Some of the critical intellectual renaissance for which Horne clamoured in the book had already been under way over the previous few years, not least in small magazines like *Meanjin.* And those of us who came of age in the 1960s will be in no doubt that a cultural revolution had started (as Philip Larkin put it in his poem *Annus Mirabilis*, 'Sextual intercourse began. In nineteen sixty-three …Between the end of the Chatterley ban. And the Beatles' first LP'). But Horne's book captured the moment as nothing else had. And what resonated most of all was his withering contempt for the leaders of both major political parties, Robert Menzies and Arthur Calwell and the rest of their 'decrepit', 'antediluvian' generation, who clung to power by keeping the nation 'spellbound in boredom'. All captured in the sentence that everyone remembers: 'Australia is a lucky country run mainly by second-rate people who share its luck'.

It took some time for Horne's wake-up call to transform the reality of Australian politics. But that happened with the arrival on the scene of a political leader who was anything but second-rate, or boring. Gough Whitlam proved to be – in aspiration, if not disciplined performance in government – the messiah he was craving: highly intelligent, cultured, and acutely conscious of the need for national transformation. And when Whitlam was – outrageously, in breach of every hitherto accepted constitutional convention – dismissed from office in 1975, Horne was engaged and enraged to an extent he had never been before, becoming a prominent campaigner for Australia becoming a republic, and embracing constitutional change that would ensure that the 1975 assault on democracy could never recur, It was in that context that Donld Horne and I – equally enraged, as I made clear in writing for *Meanjin* in 1976[2], one of my first ever published articles – became close colleagues. The spirit of *The Lucky Country* ran through my veins.

[2] Labor and the Constitution, in *Meanjin* 35.1 Autumn 1976

Donald Horne in person was peppery, cantankerous and egotistical, but endlessly engaging and stimulating. Impossibly, unashamedly, right-wing in his earlier years, a Cold Warrior from central casting, he defied all the normal stereotypes – in which people get more conservative as they get older – by moving with breathtaking speed to the left after the 1960s. With a Road-Runner-like speed and level of conviction rivalled, in my experience, only by Malcolm Fraser[3] and Robert Manne.[4]

Contemporary Australia needs more Donald Hornes, to remind us of what we can be as a nation if only we can shrug off our complacent acceptance of the mediocre. We need more Neville Shutes, to dramatise with compelling potency the scale of the existential challenges we, along with the rest of the world, face in the decades ahead. And we need more Alan Marshalls to remind us, with beautiful clarity, of our common humanity.

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[3] *Dangerous Allies*, 2014
[4] *A Political Memoir: Intellectual Combat in the Cold War and the Culture Wars,* 2024