

Hanrahan

OR: SELECT READINGS IN IMMANENT ESCHATOLOGY AND THE
HYGROMETRIC EXTRAPOLATIONS OF RURAL COMMUNITIES

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16 December A little early, you might think, to be starting on the February issue, but amazingly I seem to have an entirely free weekend (I'd forgotten what they were like; this is literally the first time in the eighteen months I've been back in Melbourne that I've had no paying work to go on with or worry about); tomorrow I pick up a job that will keep me occupied for the next six weeks, and during those same six weeks Sally and I will be packing, because we're moving house again (this time, with luck, to a house of our own, but we won't know about that definitely for a week or so yet); so all in all it seems a good idea to strike the iron while the bird is in the hand.

I had a phone call a few days ago from my brother-in-law Barry. We have not spoken since Easter 1977, and I have had only one (furious) letter from him and two or three from my sister Ruth in that time, so this conversation was something of an event. Religion, of many weird and wonderful sorts, seems to run in our families, and Ruth and Barry picked up a particularly virulent form of holiness about the time Sally and I innocently went to stay with them nearly three years ago. (If we'd known what we were in for we wouldn't have budged from Adelaide. Every Easter is sad for me, because my father died on Good Friday, and it was to relieve this sadness that we made the trip to Heywood.) Ruth and Barry, apart from being relatives, were among our very best friends. I recall talking to Ursula Le Guin, when she stayed with us in Canberra, about the wild scheme the four of us had to buy a little farm somewhere and lead a bucolic, cultured life together, full of music and books, chess, good wine and self-sufficiency. (Ursula was quietly dismayed, knowing that Sally and I are not the kind of people who can do that kind of thing.)

Barry has always been pessimistic about the future. He cheered up a bit during the three years that Labor was in office, then reverted totally to the conviction that the world is going to hell in a hand-basket and there's not a damn thing we can do about it. Discovering that St John the Divine (or John, as we democratic-fundamentalists call him) had predicted this in fine detail nineteen centuries ago, I think, played a large part in Barry's conversion. I have always subscribed to the

view that St John wrote his crazy little book while recovering from a particularly nasty crayfish supper, but I have not mentioned this to Barry. There's not a great deal I can mention to Barry. He is acutely aware that I spent most of my first twenty years reading the Bible, that I studied at a theological college for two years, and that (atheist though I may be) I have not entirely forgotten what I spent so much time learning. Partly for this reason, he professes to be totally uninterested in church history: only the Bible matters. It is as though the truth had been there all the time, in the Book, available to all for nearly two thousand years, but quite undiscovered until that day in 1977 when Barry Kirsten... Well, I am familiar with that feeling. Barry knows (it's not just a humanly fallible opinion: he knows) that I was never a Christian. A Christian, by definition, has personally experienced the revelation of the whole meaning of life, and once you have experienced that, well, it's not something you turn your back on, unless Satan has got at you. Satan has got at me, and at practically everyone who calls himself Christian. The churches are the handmaidens of Satan, colleagues (presumably along with all the other religions) with international Communism in the imminent destruction of the world. Somehow this is all part of God's plan. The trick is to be on the winning side while ye may, and be joyful.

I kept trying, ever so gently, to get a glimmer of the old Barry, that lovable, headstrong bloke I so often got drunk with, who carefully taught his little daughters to appreciate classical music and use foul language (the latter to Ruth's disgust, and my disquiet), who maintained that no-one knew the answers to anything and that religion was a load of bullshit. 'Do you still vote Labor?' 'No, I can't have that: I'm totally against Communism.' So is the Australian Labor Party, but there was no point in mentioning that, not to someone who reckons Jimmy Carter is a Communist. But at last I got him. On average his every fourth sentence is a quote from the Bible (usually from the 66th book). 'Behold, I come quickly!' he said. 'Don't tell me yer problems, mate.' He roared laughing and said I shouldn't say things like that. 'I'm allowed to say them. You are not supposed to laugh at them,' I said. It was the only bright spot in half an hour of gloom and dejection.

INSTANT RETRIBUTION!

While I was typing the last page my clever little wife came into the room, her left hand apparently bandaged in a towel, and said it was the first time in our marriage she had done it. She looked close to bursting into tears, and I really thought she had cut her hand off, or at the very least a finger or two. (No kidding, that's what I thought. Sally is the kind of lady who can't go for two days without cutting or stabbing herself on something.) She lifted the towel, and there was my wallet, which she had just taken from the pocket of my grey trousers, which were in the washing machine. We have hung out my soggy library card, driver's licence, union card, FAPA membership card, birth certificate, a few wretched-looking banknotes (including my secret cigarette money) and other miscellaneous cards and papers to dry, and I'm ready to believe that Satan Did It. Sally was ready to believe I'd kill her for it - ruin my FAPA card! ach, the end! -, which is why she was close to tears, but I was so relieved to see her left arm intact that I just frowned a little and said she'd have to buy me a new wallet for Xmas. I'm too easy on that girl. Barry would have preached her a sermon. (And would have been told to get stuffed and go to hell before he'd even reached his 'firstly'. Sally and I, on the whole, by and large, up to a point, understand each other.)

The following poem was written by Father Patrick Hartigan (1879-1952), a bloke whose views on life and religion were closer to mine than Barry's. The original is in quatrains, which I haven't room for, and it's copyright, so don't let anyone see you reading it.

SAID HANRAHAN

'We'll all be rooned,' said Hanrahan,
In accents most forlorn,
Outside the church, ere Mass began,
One frosty Sunday morn.
The congregation stood about,
Coat-collars to the ears,
And talked of stock, and crops, and drought,
As it had done for years.
'It's lookin' crook,' said Daniel Croke;
'Bedad, it's cruke, me lad,
For never since the banks went broke
Has seasons been so bad.'
'It's dry, all right,' said young O'Neil,
With which astute remark
He squatted down upon his heel
And chewed a piece of bark.
And so around the chorus ran
'It's keepin' dry, no doubt.'
'We'll all be rooned,' said Hanrahan,
'Before the year is out,
The crops are done; ye'll have your work
To save one bag of grain;
From here way out to Back-o'-Bourke
They're singin' out for rain.

They're singin' out for rain,' he said,
'And all the tanks are dry.'
The congregation scratched its head,
And gazed around the sky.
'There won't be grass, in any case,
Enough to feed an ass;
There's not a blade on Casey's place
As I came down to Mass.'
'If rain don't come this month,' said Dan
And cleared his throat to speak -
'We'll all be rooned,' said Hanrahan,
'If rain don't come this week.'
A heavy silence seemed to steal
On all at this remark;
And each man squatted on his heel,
And chewed a piece of bark.
'We want an inch of rain, we do,'
O'Neil observed at last;
But Croke 'maintained' we wanted two
To put the danger past.
'If we don't get three inches, man,
Or four to break this drought,
We'll all be rooned,' said Hanrahan,
'Before the year is out.'
In God's good time down came the rain,
And all the afternoon
On iron roof and window-pane
It drummed a homely tune.
And through the night it pattered still,
And lightsome, glad some elves
On dripping spout and window-sill
Kept talking to themselves.
It pelted, pelted all day long,
A-singing at its work,
Till every heart took up the song
Way out to Back-o'-Bourke.
And every creek a banker ran,
And dams filled overtop;
'We'll all be rooned,' said Hanrahan,
'If this rain doesn't stop.'
And stop it did, in God's good time;
And spring came in to fold
A mantle o'er the hills sublime
Of green and pink and gold.
And days went by on dancing feet,
With harvest-hopes immense,
And laughing eyes beheld the wheat
Nid-nodding o'er the fence.
And, oh, the smiles on every face,
As happy lad and lass
Through grass knee-deep on Casey's place
Went riding down to Mass.
While round the church in clothes genteel
Discours'd the men of mark,
And each man squatted on his heel,
And chewed his piece of bark.
'There'll be bush-fires for sure, me man,
There will, without a doubt;
We'll all be rooned,' said Hanrahan,
'Before the year is out.'

No, I don't have a poem about Cheesehenge.

'Australia has always had Hanrahans, and today they are thriving in a political atmosphere so poisonous that Mr Fraser would need only to endorse the laws of gravity for a team to set to work disproving them.'

Editorial, The Age, 1 January 1980

We were at this party at Mervyn Binns's place - the usual delightful crowd: Lee Harding and Irene, John Foyster and Jennifer, George Turner, Paul Stevens, Sue and David Grigg, Irene and Noel Kerr, Keith Taylor, Stephen Solomon, Steph Campbell and Mich, Bill Wright, Peter Kemp, Cedric Rowley, Helena Roberts, Simon & Garfunkel and, not one of the old crowd at all but great to see him, however much he reminds me of my age, Erik Harding - and I happened to get talking to Foyster about the tremendous editorial I'd written for Philosophical Gas that afternoon (that afternoon being part of the last day of 1979, except in backward places like Los Angeles where it was still the second-last day of 1979) and he said no, I was mistaken, or a word to that effect. How awful, to be mistaken in Philosophical Gas, the acurate fanzine! I immediately relegated the piece to Hanrahan where it can do no harm, and you'll get it shortly, when I grow weary of this first-draft stuff.

I had said that the Islamic year 1400 started on 9 November (which may yet prove correct), and it was important to my philosophizing that 'about that date the American embassy in Tehran was...' Balls, said John Foyster, or words to that effect. The hostages were there on Cup Day. As every Melbourne knows, Cup Day is the first Tuesday in November, which in 1979 happened to be the 6th - late for Cup Day, but still a few days short of the Islamic New Year. Also, it says here in Newsweek that the embassy was occupied and the hostages taken on 3 November. (Los Angeles or Tehran time? I have no idea.) On the whole, in the absence of any evidence to suggest that Melbourne Cup Day has any significance in the Shi'ite calendar, I must conclude that the concluding paragraph of my original editorial piece was a load of rubbish, and you must take my word for it, since the version here won't have a concluding paragraph.

Mervyn Binns and his father, Ern, are two blokes I am getting to like more every time I see them. I thought I would just say that. Ern, a smoker of the old school and therefore a sound chap, I have known only for about ten years, and most of that time I was away from Melbourne, so I can't say I know him well. It's a pleasure making up for that lost time. Ern was known as one of the best dahlia growers in the country long before he became

famous as Mervyn's father. I have heard the odd word muttered (more in Thoreau than in Ingres) against Mervyn as dictator of Space Age Books, but since I rarely visit his establishment, let alone work there, I have nothing to say on this matter. What I do know is that Mervyn was tickled pink when I told him a little while ago that a Mr Binns, bookseller of Leeds, was one of the original subscribers to The Voyage of Governor Phillip to Botany Bay (1789). I refrained from mentioning that, whereas other booksellers listed had ordered multiple copies, Mr Binns had put himself down for just one. Such caution, friends of Mervyn will attest, suggests direct ancestry.

Possibly something of this was in my mind (we were about to ring in Australia's bicentenary decade that night, after all) when I suggested to George Turner that he write a novel about Matthew Flinders. I even suggested a title for it: The Man Who Didn't Come To Dinner. (A much better title is My Own Destroyer. Sidney Baker, in the book of that name, made much of Flinders's refusal to dine with his captor, Captain-General Charles de Caen, implying that his imprisonment - well, that's too strong a word - his detainment on Mauritius for six and a half years had at least as much to do with his character as de Caen's inclinations. Since no-one has yet satisfactorily explained this absurd incident, Baker's psychoanalytical approach to the matter has great attractions.) Ah! said George, Now if it was done from the viewpoint of the French commandant... Great! I said, You could be the Ernestine Hill of the 80s. You just killed it, said George.

As we left the party, Sally and I kissed or shook hands with our friends there, old and new, and somehow I kissed Paul Stevens. I'm not even sure that he noticed, but I really did. It seemed, at the time, a friendly, appropriate and incredibly non-sexist thing to do. (I can report that he's still using that Californian Poppy hair-oil we used to get at Woolworth's in the 50s, which just goes to show that if you stick with something long enough you become trendy, make friends and influence people.) One of my New Year's resolutions is to be a non-sexist. One of Sally's is, if I keep it up, to divorce me by April. It's early days yet, but I suspect that I'll revert to my chauvinistic self before long and probably never kiss Paul Stevens again. It's just as well. Only Frenchmen and Christians kiss each other, and they are notorious sexists. Ask anyone.

I might just as easily have kissed Lee Harding, but he left before midnight. It's a habit he has. It's not that he turns into a pumpkin at that hour, but that he thinks he might. Matthew Flinders always retired early, too, which suggests a new line of investigation. Anyway, my friend Lee left early, and I reckon it was to save me the embarrassment of kissing a pumpkin.

31 December What is it that makes us so superstitious about the beginnings and endings of labelled periods of time? Right now there is a lot of fuss being made about the end of a decade, the 3652 days labelled 'the Seventies', and tonight I shall gather with friends to perform the annual ritual of wringing out the old year, drinking in the new. Will we still be the same people after midnight, in the first minutes of the New Year and the Eighties? Does it have any bearing on the matter that our midnight tonight will be Eastern Summer Time, whereas (since daylight saving was introduced here in 1971) midnight on 31 December 1969 was Eastern Standard Time, an hour later? Queensland will enter the Eighties at 1 am, and Western Australia at 3 am, our time, which is entirely typical of them, but the people in those states will have had their full decade; we smart south-easterners have somehow discounted our decade by an hour. Where did that hour go to? Will we ever get it back?

It could be worse. England lost eleven days once. By Act of Parliament, Wednesday 2 September 1752 was followed by Thursday 14 September, which caused (and still causes) no end of confusion. Astrologers would have me believe that Shakespeare and I have something in common, because our birthdays happened to be about the same time of the year; but add on those lost eleven days and Shakespeare and I are thirteen days apart, not two, and that could make all the difference in the world: the difference, for all I know, between Hamlet and Philosophical Gas. No wonder I have no time for astrology (and neither does any other Tauran I know).

The one good thing that came out of England's adoption of the Gregorian calendar (apart from catching up with the rest of Europe, which was probably useful) is Old Lady Day. The Americans thought they were awfully clever inventing Mother's Day - as indeed they were, since they have made a lot of money out of it - but it took the English to invent Old Lady Day. And it's just like them that they seem to have lost it, too: if I can trust the English prayer book I have here, 25 March is Lady Day but 6 April is just 6 April. A pity, that.

Every day - every minute, come to that - is the last of a year or decade, and the first of another. Common sense tells us that. But common sense has never had a great influence on man's ordering of his affairs, and so we have official endings and beginnings of years and decades and centuries, and they have a very real significance and impact on us. The reason for this is not hard to find. Next year will be different from this, and the Eighties will be different from the Seventies, to some extent because of the resolutions and decisions we have made in the last few days. We may not hold to them for very long, but the fact that we have made them will change us.

6 January The Prune Minister, Malcolm ('Life wasn't meant to be easy') Fraser, favoured us with an Address to the Nation on New Year's Day. Australia, he told us, is a Lucky Country, and the 1980s are going to be Just Wonderful for practically all of us. I was so stirred by his appearance on the box that I jotted down the main points of his address. This is what he said:

'Good evening ... lucky country ... tremendous resources ... optimism ... confidence ... inflation curbed ... unemployment down ... growth ... achievement ... heirs apparent ... enterprise ... success ... youth ... parents ... home ... family life ... gloom.'

Analysed, what he said was this:

'Good evening. As you've probably forgotten, 1980 is election year. Since we were swept into power by the Governor-General in 1975 we have done our best to convince you that we have brought inflation and unemployment under control. Well, we've failed dismally, but it's not our fault. Besides, if people go round saying that things will be pretty crook in the 1980s, then it stands to reason that they will be. A vote for my government at the election this year is a vote for everything you think is true, good, beautiful and profitable. A vote for Labor is a vote for gloom. Happy New Year.'

Oddly enough, The Age had a lengthy editorial along the same lines on 1 January - the first sign of our only leftish newspaper doing its usual swing to the right as an election approaches - but it wasn't quite so blatant about things as Mr Fraser was. Or was it? 'The Government ... harsh ... inconsistent ... cynical and manipulative ... largely ineffective ... It has compounded, in office, the mistrust it sowed in gaining office. This political damage may hinder us in the eighties - trust, after all, is a vital economic commodity. But we shouldn't let it obscure the improvements... Where we are is at least as important as how we got here.' What an amazing example of praising with faint damns! The Age is really saying that we must go on supporting this pack of reactionary bastards because the alternative is Labor, and look at the mess Labor made of things during the three years out of thirty we allowed them office - why, they'd barely been elected before they started reforming things!

Lucky country? Happy new year? Humbug! In 1980 the rich will get richer and the poor get chilblains. Thus it ever was and thus it will be, because we in the middle, who are neither rich nor poor, will see to it that nothing changes.

And that is the real gloom. How dare The Age say that those who oppose Fraser and all he stands for are Hanrahans! The man himself is the ultimate Hanrahan. 'We'll all be rooned', says Fraserman, 'if Labor wins the poll.' Father Hartigan knew better than that. We quote the line but forget the poem.