

Philosophical Gas



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Published irregularly by John Bangsund: Parergon Books PO Box 357 Kingston
ACT 2604 Australia mainly for members of FAPA, OMPA and ANZAPA.

Figure 1

Cover illustration by Gerald Carr

Lord willing and Gough Whitlam permitting, 1973 will be the year when I destroy this myth forever. Maybe. In April the first of my major debts will be paid off, and in October the other three. I have many ideas for wasting the surplus money that will start accumulating during the year, but I am trying to resist them all. Besides, I must remember that I am only a temporary public servant.

We have spent a little over four weeks working at Parliament House, and it has been an interesting experience. (When we resume in January, we'll be back at the Government Printing Office and I can stop wearing my tie again.) The recess between sessions of Parliament - especially this one, when an election has been held - is a very quiet time in Hansard. Our work at the House has not been at all what you would call interesting. For three weeks we checked the index to the last session - 850 pages of the House of Representatives, 600 pages of the Senate, each - reading, checking, cross-checking, analysing speeches where the indexer hasn't bothered, and so on. Nasty stuff, and a somewhat traumatic experience for anyone who still has some illusions about the dignity, intelligence and decision-making functions of Parliament. As one who still retained a few such illusions, the job was pretty sickening at times for me.

Now we have a Labor government, and a lot of my illusions have sprung to life again. In less than two weeks as Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam seems to have done more good things and undone more bad things than the Liberals managed in the last decade. I say "seems", because a lot of things he has announced have still to be ratified by Parliament, and without a majority in the Senate he might have a job putting them into effect. Even so, someone compiled a list of what he did during his first 100 hours as PM, and it makes rather incredible reading. I have the delicious feeling that after twenty-three years of Liberal (translation for overseas readers: Conservative) government we are suddenly about to be dragged screaming from the late 40s into the 70s.

But enough of politics. Four weeks close up and I'm sick of it.

After Syncon 72, I had the honour of escorting Lesleigh Luttrell and a nondescript bunch of Melbourne fans around King's Hall at Parliament House. Lesleigh wasn't awfully impressed, and I was somewhat ashamed to admit that, apart from a short interview with the Hansard chief on my first day here, this was the first time I had been in Parliament House since my father took me there not long after the war. I can now assure Lesleigh that the place is much bigger inside than outside, and I wish I could have shown her some of the places I've now discovered.

One of the extraordinary things about Parliament House is that you keep on seeing or bumping into famous people - and they are ordinary people, just like you and me. It tends to restore one's sense of wonder, somehow. Senator Lionel Murphy, the new Attorney-General, came into the staff lunchroom to buy a packet of fags one day last week. "Christ!" I said to my friend Bob Lehane, "That's Lionel Murphy!" He turned around slowly, said "Yeah", and went on eating. (Bob has seen it all before.) Yesterday he said something like "He really looks like one of the world's great human beings", and I said, "Who?", and he said "Gough: he's right behind you", but when I turned around the great man had disappeared.

I said to Bob, "Do you know Mungo MacCallum?" He said, "Yes, I thought you did, too." I said I'd never met the man, and Bob said he'd often been looking at the papers in the corridor when we had passed that way. Bob knows all the journo's. He knows a lot of things I haven't found out he knows yet.

Another day I remarked the presence a table or two away from us of a very handsome, extremely well-built young lady, and he said "Megan Stoyles". "Who is she?" I asked. "Writes for the Financial Review," he said, "And Bill Hayden's new press secretary." "Uhuh." I said. "She achieved fame some years ago by getting her photo in Time, and on the front page of just about every paper there is, wearing a tee-shirt with 'Make Love, Not War' on it." Too much. When that photo appeared I thought she was one of the handsomest women I had ever seen. Now I have seen her, often, and still think the same.

Today a senior reporter named John Campbell (who thinks I'm writing a book about him) showed me the two houses. At least, he showed me the Senate. We walked into the visitors gallery in the Reps and were promptly ejected by an attendant who said we would have to join a guided party. John has been with Hansard for twelve years, but we were tossed out. A funny place, Parliament House.

22nd January: February seems a lot more believable now - Thursday week, I think it is - and those thirty-eight glorious days are almost finished. Let us all be unhappy together. Let us sing a catch. Let me tell you What I Did On My Holidays.

After typing the last stencil I started thinking again about going to Melbourne, and that meant thinking about the strong possibility that the Volkswagen wouldn't last the distance. I could take a plane, and use my sister Joy's Renault 10 to get about in. But that would mean returning to a broken-winded VW. So, spend the air fare getting the VW repaired. But I didn't know what was wrong with it; it could turn out to need a new clutch and a new engine, as it did about this time last year. So. So? So-so. Then again. Saturday I spent thinking about getting another car. Rather wisely, I feel, I didn't actually do anything about it until the car dealers had closed down for the day. On the way to a party at Dickson I stopped to look at new VWs. I went round to the back of the place, where the VW dealer keeps his used cars, and fell head over heels in love with a white Valiant Pacer. Then I went to the party and asked people to tell me why I shouldn't buy a used white Valiant Pacer. That's a pretty good party game, if you want to get all the men in the place talking, excited and angry. Try it sometime. Anyway the theoretical choice came down to a VW 1600 station wagon or a Renault 16, either new or not too used. (I say theoretical because there was an excellent chance that no car dealer would be interested in the red beast.)

I drove to Fyshwick and looked at Renaults. New Renaults. I took a white 16 TS for a test drive. It felt kind of exhilarating: all the weight at the front of the car instead of the back, all that acceleration in top gear, those luxurious Peugeot seats, that thick green carpet, the crazy column gear change that operates as smoothly and quickly as any floor change I've ever experienced, the unaccustomed speed, solidity, comfort and quietness: oh, I was sold completely before I got back to the showroom. (If only our Gallic friends would concentrate on flooding the Pacific Basin with Renaults instead of radioactive fallout... Then Boney he'd come pouncing down, rollicum rorum, &c. Old Song. Hardy, I think. Pardon me.)

So, after a lot of toing and froing and proing and conning about finance and insurance and all kinds of guff like that, on Tuesday afternoon I picked up the new car and pointed it at Melbourne, and thitherward we wended at a rapid pace, the white beast and me. (Part of that sentence is a quote from John Foyster's "Chunder!", and so are the next eight, just in case you feel you've read this stuff before.) Outside Yass I picked up a hitch-hiker. We chatted about this and that. I told him about what I understand to be the Russian system of hitch-hiking. Since cars are, after all, a valuable resource, drivers are encouraged to pick up hitch-hikers. The hiker is issued with coupons, and when he gets a lift he hands one to the driver. When the driver accumulates enough of these coupons... "He gets a hitch-hiker all his own?" said my passenger. It was a good trip. I never found out that bloke's name, but he was great company. When I saw him by the side of the road, with his long hair, greasy headband, dirty-looking old patched jeans, his slightly crooked grin and his great beak of a nose painted white with sunburn ointment, I knew immediately that here was a nice, decent young feller I could trust not to clobber me and make off with my car and meagre wallet at the first opportunity, and I was not wrong. It's the short-haired, clean-looking types you have to be careful about. (I picked up one of those, too, and he left potato crisps and an empty coke bottle on the back seat.) This fine young man had gone bush somewhere in Queensland to escape the draft, and was now emerging to see his folk in Adelaide. (Gough scrapped conscription in the first few days of his ministry, and a lot of good people like this kid have come back into circulation.) He was gentle, with a whimsical but barbed sense of humour, and of course, he reads science fiction. There was a time, on discovering that, when I would have immediately demanded his name and address and tried to introduce him to fandom. These days I don't do much in the way of recruiting. I feel that these people will find fandom for themselves when they need it. Towards midnight we were utterly lost in Melbourne's north-eastern suburbs, which have been completely revised and edited in the last year, but eventually I found the place in Box Hill he was making for and about ten minutes later was sitting drinking beer with my brother-in-law at Burwood.

I have it on good authority that during the three weeks I spent in Melbourne I was drunk all the time and surly, nasty and generally obnoxious to everyone in sight. This comes as something of a surprise to me. It doesn't sound at all like the sober, congenial, courteous (and what was that adjective Gillespie used about me recently? - oh, yes;) and mellow chap I have come to know and respect, so I am forced to confess that I don't believe it. (Perhaps it was someone else of the same name.) I know I didn't get to see everyone I have ever known in Melbourne, and many I could have easily telephoned, I didn't. Two lady friends who have been very close in the past, I saw only once. There is a reason for this slight reluctance to re-establish (or attempt it) old friendships and acquaintanceships, a reason which might emerge eventually as I write this. But I definitely do not recall being nasty to anyone. I even smiled at Mervyn Binns once, and smiled at my little niece and nephew in strict moderation (since I was a guest in the house). Drunk - or pretty close to it - yes; I will admit that I was just that, once or twice - but, dammit, xmas comes but once a year, and if a man can't get quietly blurred at the edges on a passable red while watching the Pakistanis playing a dashed good game of cricket on the telly at xmas, what's the world coming to?

What did I get for xmas, you ask? (Go on, ask. Ta.) One tin ham, three pairs underpants, one tin shortbreads, one fancy box exploding Japanese matches, one collapsing wine-rack with bottle 1968 Kaiser Stuhl Bin 33 claret, three 1800' tapes, one Bulgakov novel, one xmas cake, one sf paperback (which I'd read), one Renault 16 TS, one Edward Stewart novel, one packet mixed nuts, one magnificent volume of illuminations. And a wombat in a gum-tree. (No, I didn't get that. I've been after one for years, but no-one ever seems to think I might like a wombat in a gum-tree and I know I'll just have to go out and buy one eventually.) Bill Wright gave me one of the Rotzler Australia-in-75 badges from LACon, and let me look at his copy of the programme book. Robin gave me something, too. What was it? One box O'Grady's Whisky Sour Mix ("just add whisky")? No, he left those at my place last May. Ah, a cassette, yes. But mainly what I got for xmas was a lot of hospitality and good talk with friends old and new. You can't ask for better than that.

On Wednesday, 20th December, I drove into town from Burwood (the Renault handles very nicely on the freeway at 90) and walked into the Degraes Tavern, traditional meeting-place of Melbourne fandom for some years. (Formerly Jenny's Cellar. See ASFR 5, p.41.) My arrival surprised everyone except Diane, who knew I would be there, and Henry, the proprietor, who is surprised at nothing. Even as I reached the bottom step (assorted fans recoiling in horror or gasping at their rediscovery of a sense of wonder) Henry was calmly pouring me a complimentary glass of house red, which he presented to me at the bar with the words, "So you're back" - or something polite like that. "Yes, sir," I said. "I've been to Canberra and changed the government, and have returned for further instructions. Sir." "I still think you're a bloody spy," said Henry. "Merry Xmas." "And a merry xmas to you," I said, raising my glass in salute. He refilled it. "Your friends are over there. You have noticed already. Good. Your wife looks very attractive tonight. I do not know what she sees in you, and I am not interested." Ah, it was good talking to Henry again.

Elizabeth Foyster invited me to sit opposite her, which I did. Diane did look very attractive indeed, and it was very thoughtful of Elizabeth to keep me at the other end of the table. John Foyster came back from buying food, or some such unsocial activity, and said, "Ah, Banger. If you want something in the next Chunder! I'll need it next week." It felt good to be back. Harding walked in, bearing an enormous bunch of flowers. He caught sight of me, stopped dead, and simultaneously dropped his jaw and the flowers. A born actor, Lee. He joined us at the Paris End of the table, introduced me to Irene and said, "That's the John Bangsund!" "No!" said Irene, who is very lovely and an actor in her own right, "Not the John Bangsund?" "Not so loud," I said, "I'm supposed to be incognito." "You look more like inebriated," said Foyster. And so the merry night went on.

I wish I could remember everyone who was there. It was like a mini-con - at least

two dozen of the elite of Melbourne fandom (plus Robin Johnson, who is more the pica size). Just about the only great&famous fans not present were Bruce Gillespie, who was home typing up an issue or three of SF Commentary, and Paul Stevens and Mervyn Binns, who had urgent business to discuss privately at a horror movie or something.

On the following Tuesday, Boxing Day, fannish history was made (in an unassuming kind of way) with the commencement of the First Australian Bring-Your-Own Convention. This non-event had been carefully unplanned by Gillespie and Edmonds - to the extent that I was under the mistaken apprehension that the thing was to start on Tuesday afternoon. It started on Tuesday morning. I was supposed to be Non-Guest of Honour or something, and a few people had started wondering whether I'd had too much to eat the previous day (I think they said eat) by the time I arrived. Interstate attendees included Paul Anderson and Alan Sandercock, and there were a couple of people from Zambia (I think it was). I couldn't see Kevin Dillon anywhere.

I had brought a stencil for Bruce to run off - a cover for the BYOCon's Do-It-Yourself Programme & Memory Book. A lot of people typed pages for this immortal volume, which Bruce ran off and distributed on the spot. There was a lot of drinking going on (which fills me with alarm for the future of Australian fandom, of course), Bill Wright was trying to teach people some eval board game he had brought back from the fleshpots of Los Angeles or Hagerstown or somewhere, Paul Anderson was talking about sf, Robin was talking about Zambia, George Turner and I were talking about Dryden or someone, Harding was talking about practically everything (a born raconteur, Lee), and Mervyn was talking in rather uncomplimentary terms about the bloke who had just run into his car and near enough to wrecked it (a born loser, Mervyn, I sometimes think). Relieved that the bastard had run into Merv's Falcon and not my car, which was parked opposite, I had another glass or bottle or three, and next morning I woke up in Harding's living-room.

It didn't take Lee and Irene more than an hour or so to wake me up. I greeted them courteously, asked them for details of my conduct the previous night (for future reference), and suggested we go and pick up Leigh Edmonds and drive to the Foyster Farm. Lee sort of looked at Irene with a funny look, and Irene looked back the same way, and Lee said, "We've been asking you for the last hour or so when do you intend to pick up Edmonds so we can go up to Foyster's Farm." I looked at Irene. "Would you like some coffee?" she said. A wonderful little lady, Irene. "Yes," I said. So I had my breakfast and we went to pick up Leigh. He threw a few cats out of the flat, checked that he had his sausages and his score of the Shostakovich quartets, and we were on our way.

At Woodend (or was it Diggers' Rest?) we stopped for some more breakfast, and I walked over the road afterwards to investigate the public facilities. I emerged from same, and stood for a moment watching Leigh Edmonds walking slowly up and down the main street of Diggers' Rest (or was it Woodend?), his thigh-length hair gently flowing about him, silently conducting a Shostakovich quartet, and I felt quietly proud of him. Pimply little Leigh, who not so many years ago had commenced a letter to me, "Dear Sir", who even more recently had been enmeshed with pop music and drugs and stuff, and I had exposed him to Mahler and Bach, and Harding had exposed him to Haydn and Penderewski (or someone), and here he was: walking up and down the main street of a quiet little Victorian country town, humming Shostakovich to himself from the complete score. He's a lunatic, I thought to myself.

Foyster was trying to get the portable barbecue thing started in the barn, since it was a Total Fire Ban day. He was immaculately dressed, as usual, in orange shirt, purple tie and old-slouch-hat-with-the-side-turned-up - which latter he was using, somewhat ineffectively, to fan the barbecue alight. John Alderson solved the problem by pouring some of his home-bottled Mallee Root Dry Red 1972 onto the reluctant briquettes. In no time at all - scarcely more than two hours or so - we had a roaring barbecue which engulfed tall sausages at a single gulf, and someone handed around salad and stuff and it was a fabulous mess of good eating. Then we went and played cricket.

I have not played cricket since I was in theological college - indeed, there are some who would say I have never played cricket at all. In college I was always last to bat, and never ever bowled. My position was called drawback, if I remember correctly, or deep-way-out-long-stop. Something like that. What it meant was that I stood by the bank of the Gardiner Creek reading poetry, and when the ball came my way everyone yelled at me and I scrambled down into the creek to retrieve the ball. (I played the same position, more or less, in football, too.) In this game, on the Foysters' front lawn, we used a soft ball and everyone was allowed two chances. Someone bowled me out first ball, of course, before I could get my eye in, but under the second rule I was allowed to stay at the crease. (Maybe they made that rule up for me. I wonder about that, come to think of it.) After a while I started playing all kinds of fancy shots, hitting the ball in the process almost every time. I loved that part, but I hated running up and down between the wickets. I decided I'd had enough and started hitting catches. No-one caught them. One went into a pine tree, and it was a beautiful and memorable sight to see the cream of Melbourne fandom gathered in communion under that tree, hands upraised to catch my falling ball. It fell about three feet away from Tony Thomas's back, if I remember correctly. I was wearying. Sport is all very well in its place, on the TV and such, but to be involved intimately, as I was, was taking things a little too far. At last I succeeded in lobbing the ball straight up, someone caught it, and I retired gracefully to sleep off this unwonted exertion for an hour or two in the car.

I have suggested to the Australia in 75 Committee (of which I understand - but apparently no-one else does - I am still a member) that in the event of our being successful we might organize a game of grid-iron on Foyster's front lawn, using the same rules. I feel that our American guests would appreciate this. A soft ball, of course, and two chances at the crease. But of course - I am forgetting - you folk in America use a different kind of bat, don't you. (Memo Robin and Leigh: Check with experts such as Harry Warner Jr on correct bat to use in grid-iron.)

Later in the day, Robin played some tapes of the LACon banquet. We listened to Bob Bloch, Fred Pohl, Juanita and Buck Coulson, Andy Porter and a whole stack of people we all know and love, and it was really great - except that they all, for some reason, seemed to have American accents. This disturbs me. I am sure Robin wasn't putting us on, so this must mean that American fans speak with the same kind of accent that we hear all the time on television. I am finding this difficult to comprehend. All these years I have believed, without thinking about it, that fans the world over speak with the same cultured kind of voices as Robin and Mervyn, Harding and Edmonds, Bill Wright and myself. Perhaps a few might affect a slightly outlandish (but loveable) lilt like Bob Smith's or Jack Wodhams's, but I never thought that some might have the same accent as Glenn Ford or Dick Nixon or Lesleigh Luttrell. Lesleigh Luttrell! Of course! Why didn't I realize it before? That's why Lesleigh didn't sound like a fan! The lady looked like a fan, of course, but sounded like an American. Even what she said seemed eminently fannish and sensible, but it sounded wrong somehow. Good heavens! - now I think about it, Mike Horvat talked like that, too, and Hank Davis and Ed Hamilton and Leigh Brackett and Bruce Townley and Ron Smith and Jack Williamson and Jean Jordan and... and... that tape from Jim Blish! American fans talk American!

Pondering this, I missed the third day of BYOCon - a party at Liz George and Peter House's place.

On the fourth day (my sweetheart said to me: four kangaroosters, three Foster's Lager, two knuckledusters, one whistling bunyip - and a wombat in a gum-tree) there was a party at Lee and Irene's flat. I arrived with a flagon of some muck or other and a boot-full of bricks. Leg had mentioned (often) his desire to build some book-cases out of Besser bricks and boards, and had insinuated (even more often) that the Renault had a large boot and I not a great deal to do in my spare time, so why don't we go to a brick shop and buy some Besser bricks? I was forced to steal some of the bricks I had left behind with my sister, and dutifully transported these to the Harding schloss. He didn't want to know about it. "Later!" he said. So I sat down with Don Symons and

Steve Solomon and Irene and John Litchen and Monica Correa, and listened, fascinated, as Don and John and Monica talked about Latin America. Don has travelled a great deal, and loves Latin America. John has probably travelled even more, and always seems to finish up in Mexico or Cuba or one of those places over there. And Monica... Monica is the sister of Chile's foremost sf writer, Hugo Correa. I listened. I wish I'd had a tape recorder there.

That party was fantastic. Everyone was there, and anyone who turned up who didn't seem to be especially anyone became someone before the night was over. There was a delightful bloke talking to us at the table for quite a while (I should mention that I prefer talking at a table, and I didn't wander far from Harding's table all night), and eventually I found out that he was Roman Mazurak - one of my subscribers, bless him, but just a name until that night. I knew for sure that he was a subscriber when he said I'd never sent him anything.

Ah, a great night, and impossible to describe. Little incidents remain in the memory, along with a great big good feeling. Robin Johnson, in striped shirt, shorts, shoes and socks, dribbling an empty McWilliam's flagon, as soccer players are wont to do when they have no ball. Dancing cheek-to-cheek with Irene while everyone else was stupidly square-dancing. (Well, maybe it wasn't square-dancing, but it was awfully athletic and individual looking, and Irene is not a lady to be wasted like that.) After everyone had gone home or to bed there was still a little rough white remaining, and Robin, Roman, George Turner and I were the last to leave. I mentioned the bricks. The other three agreed to help me carry them in, and we did the job quickly and efficiently, given the circumstances. Lee and Irene's flat is upstairs, and we didn't feel like carrying all those heavy bricks up, so we placed them very carefully on the lower stairs in such a manner that we could close the door when we left - and anyone coming down stairs later in the morning would have to climb over them.

Roman said goodnight and walked off. George and Robin, who had possibly drunk more, got in the car. I dropped George off somewhere near where he lives, and drove round the corner to Robin's. He remarked that we hadn't had much of a chance to talk about Australia in 75 matters. I remarked that the night was young yet, and if he had some coffee I would gladly talk with him. So I followed Robin into his flat, and he went off to the kitchen to make coffee, and when he returned I was fast asleep in his chair. I stayed the night.

I could go on indefinitely about the good times I had in Melbourne during those three weeks - getting to know Lee and George all over again, talking with Robin and Bill and John Julian and John Litchen and Paul and Mervyn and Leigh and Valma and many others, meeting Lindsay Cox again and carrying on where we'd left off last time (same joke, even), and possibly best of all, getting to know Irene. I could talk about the chess marathon with my other brother-in-law, Barry, and the good times I had with him and my sister Ruth. I could wax philosophical about how I realized that I am no longer a Melburnian-in-exile, that for better or worse I am a Canberra; how I realized that some friends from the past must remain in the past now, others become closer friends than ever in the future. But it is after midnight, which means that it is now 23rd January - Shayne McCormack's birthday (happy birthday, Shayne) and the day I return to work (happy work, John).

I will mention that I returned to Canberra on the 8th with my mother (spending a happy night with Irene and Noel Kerr, who stayed here for a week or so), had a quiet time playing scrabble and cards with her until the Friday, when I drove her over to Yass to catch the train home; that Shayne came down from Sydney on the Saturday and stayed (by day with me, by night with Helen and Leigh Hyde) for a week - a good week of fun and work; that last Saturday I drove to Sydney, met Mrs McCormack at last, and stayed in the tranquil/stimulating atmosphere of Lyn and Bob Smith's place, dined with the coming Secret Mistress of Australian Fandom, Margaret Oliver, and all in all rounded out my holiday in the most happy and satisfying manner. It has been an excellent start to what I am confident will be a memorable year.