

Germaine Greer

Too many of the people who rushed into print about my *Quarterly Essay*, *Whitefella Jump Up*, make the mistake of belittling their subject, so that one must conclude that they had nothing better to do. Some of the authors egregiously confess to being so hampered by prejudice that they couldn't address the substance of my proposition for fear that it was a "stunt". Only in Australia is my life of unremitting hard work assumed to be driven by an infantile need for attention; this libel is asserted so often that it is axiomatic and will probably feature in my obituary in the Murdoch press. I spend four months a year in Australia seeking so little attention that nobody knows I'm there, yet the sneering axiom remains unchallenged. Only in Australia is Greer "famous for being outrageous". Australian newspapers never commission me to write on any subject whatsoever, but pick and choose from what they consider the most sensational articles commissioned from me by British editors and run them under headlines that have been known to side-track a busy prime minister into condemning me for an argument I never made. This is the truth behind P.A. Durack Clancy's fantasy of my "ten out of ten for media coverage". When commonsense dictated she should have listened.

Clancy's way of defending the reputation of her Durack ancestors displays as well as I could wish just what history looks like seen from the whitefella's end of the telescope. A "well-organised, well-disciplined reconnaissance" can also be described as a "land-hungry posse"; it's all a matter of point of view. Clancy will never understand that Australia was in no need of opening up, that opening up was in fact evisceration, that what drove the operation was greed, or that the final outcome was disaster, any more than she can understand that my essay is not about her aunt who I'm sure was a wonderful person. Clancy calls me "a self-exiled academic", which will puzzle English readers who don't know that in Australia the word "academic" is an insult. Her determination to use the word is the more piquant because, though I still teach, it's more than thirty years since

I earned my living in universities. Clancy is not the only writer to dismiss me as an expatriate; Australians have still to understand that one could be a Martian and still write truth about Australia. It is a curious fact that they will accept the snap judgement of a reporter who spends two days in the country (provided it is a rave) before they will agree to consider the hard-won conclusions of someone who has spent more than half a lifetime there.

Clancy's cousin Patsy Millett, who is also involved in the Durack hagiography industry, is as convinced as she is that I wrote *Whitefella Jump Up* because I was desperate for media exposure. The sole ground for this belief is the fact that I made two appearances on Australian television in fulfilment of my obligations to the publisher of *Whitefella Jump Up*. Millett was not to know that I had repeatedly refused to perform (for a fee) for the insignificant Denton, whose impertinences I find unbearable, and only agreed to the exposure (for no fee) for *Whitefella Jump Up*, which, in keeping with his unassailable mediocrity, Denton had not bothered to read and did not discuss at all. Millett somehow managed to describe my demeanour with Denton (who was so struck by my indignation that he wrote an apology) as "mischievously flirtatious". Avid for any kind of exposure though I am said to be, I consent to my publishers' pressure to allow interviews about my work only for radio and television. So far radio and television have allowed me to give a reasonably fair representation of myself and my views, as interviews in print do not, but not to a viewer as astigmatic as Millett. She mistakes the tone of *Whitefella Jump Up*, attributing scorn where there was none, and seeing an analysis of settler mythology as a personal "denunciation" of her mother, Dame Mary Durack. Millett also states that I made "headlines" in 1972 with a condemnation of "disgusting conditions" for Aborigines in Alice Springs. I don't think of Aborigines as being kept in "conditions" like animals in a zoo, or of the Todd River camp as "disgusting" then or now. If I made any such headlines it's news to me and – as is usually the case in Australia – the words in inverted commas aren't mine. Clancy and Millett need have no fear; *Kings in Grass Castles* is still displayed in every airport bookshop in Australia and nothing I say is likely to reduce the numbers of people who just want a reasonably priced adventure story that insidiously and relentlessly displays white supremacy. The royalties will keep rolling in.

A more sophisticated version of the *argumentum ad hominem* holds that everything one writes must be about oneself, the view taken by the West Australian poet Fay Zwicky, whose poetry does seem to be all about herself, which is why I don't find it particularly interesting. So much more does Zwicky know about myself than I, I can't actually understand what she is saying. "As daughter of the

priestly utterance with a vision of the ideal, her posture of defender of the dispossessed is theatrically compelling if impracticable.” Cripes. I learn from her quotations of herself that Zwicky has been writing about me since 1989 and always apparently in the same patronising terms. Funnily enough for a poet, she interprets “the shortest way” as a short cut, and then intones that there are “no short cuts to anything worthwhile”. You’d think, wouldn’t you, that a poet would twig that the shortest way could still be very long. She should have recognised the echo of Cathy Freeman; after her win in the Sydney Olympics, with the media of the world pushing microphones and cameras into her face, Cathy said in an exhausted voice and her face stiff with a pain that was not muscular, “I just want to sit on the ground,” turned away and did just that. When I say that we should sit on the ground I mean what she meant.

Les Murray is a poet of another order. I can’t think why he agreed to comment on *Whitefella Jump Up*, except perhaps that he had a Germaine Greer story to tell. It is true that rather more than “a few” years ago Murray read his poems at Cambridge University and I was there. I wasn’t “a lady” and I wasn’t “in the back row” and I didn’t assert. In fact I was rather hesitant about my question. I confessed that I had been struck by the way he read, by the liquidity of his consonants and the Aboriginality of his way of speaking, and I wondered if he would agree. He didn’t reply “I’ve got any number of Aboriginal relatives.” It wasn’t such a fashionable answer in those days. He was a bit bemused by my question, as was I. There was no intention to trap him, but we have got used to Murray’s irrational suspicions and I shan’t take it personally. His idea that I want to transfer “nominal ownership of our country from Queen Elizabeth to the Aboriginal people” is entirely his own. The queen is not the crown; the crown is the landlord not the “owner” and the people would be us and we would have accepted our Aboriginality and we would simply claim the land for its people. Tired of me and my jejune ideas, Murray soon reverts to his own pet notion of convergence, not to be confused with assimilation, and provides a poem in support of it. We may be in the same ball park, after all, but Murray wants to own the ball.

As the latest of many white interpreters of Aboriginal society to the whites, having lived in Maningrida for a year and now writing a book about her experiences, Mary Ellen Jordan might be considered to have a better claim than most to take me to task, but not by referring to notions I do not peddle, such as “a mystical plane of higher Aboriginality”. The clichés are not mine but Jordan’s; because she thinks in clichés she cannot hear that I’m saying something different. Nor can she notice what I’m taking care not to say, the words

I refuse to use. She and I will always differ about the success or failure of colonisation, because she interprets the devastation she witnessed in Maningrida as evidence of colonisation, and I interpret it as evidence of its failure. America was successfully colonised; settlers spread across the country and stayed there, so that you have urban nuclei across the landmass; you have desert conurbations like Reno and Las Vegas and Los Angeles, next to which Alice Springs is a truck stop. American hunter-gatherers have enjoyed head rights, a guaranteed income without hand-outs, since the 1920s (which hasn't done them much good because like the Australian hunter-gatherers they are still in mourning for the lost land). Compared to the United States, Australia never got going.

Unable to imagine this different perspective Jordan decides that my account is "inaccurate" when my position is actually opposite to hers. Jordan frets about what my proposed "Aboriginality" might consist in, but she would have been even more fretful if I had prescribed some pseudo-Aboriginal lifestyle. Aboriginal people themselves could not describe Aboriginality, because it would be as new to them as to us. She vaguely twigs that the word would come before the fact, as a commitment, and then dismisses the idea as not new. Then she fakes obtuseness. In whose scenario would admitting that the continent is Aboriginal and adopting hunter-gatherer values involve pulling down your house and heading for the desert? It's much easier to hunt and gather by the beach, where most Australians live already. Can Jordan be the only Australian not to notice that more and more Australians are building houses in which living is done more outside than in and that our semi-naked children are out there demonstrating for sustainable development and down with the multinationals? If Australian official culture was hunter-gatherer, Australia would be committed to conservation and maintenance of resources rather than massive exploitation in the interests of RTZ and their ilk. If Australia provided the international hunter-gatherer forum, we could help to defend other hunter-gatherer minorities, all of whom are under pressure and virtually voiceless. And no, we wouldn't have to wear ochre and possum-fur.

My essay was not written for Aboriginal people or about Aboriginal people, but you won't be astonished, dear reader, if I tell you that their reactions were of overwhelming importance to me. Just as I don't know of any part of Australia that is not Aboriginal, I don't know any Aboriginal person who doesn't know (in his head) and feel (in his heart) that the whole island continent belongs to the Aboriginal peoples. It is important to me that ordinary Aboriginal people, as distinct from those Aboriginal people in charge of interpreting Aboriginality to their white counterparts, think I'm on the right track. If the central thesis of

*Whitefella Jump Up* is not conscientiously absurd, if the right thing might be doable after all, it is all credit to the patience of the Aboriginal peoples and none whatever to the captious and capricious whitefella. Lillian Holt's response to my groping suggestion was typically generous; she understood my silences. She saw where I couldn't go, what I wouldn't say, out of respect for the reticence of the people who've taught me the little I know. There have been other responses like hers, some from people who don't write articles for print, some from senior anthropologists who, while stroking their grey beards at my temerity, sent me papers of their own on the moral and political systems of Australia's indigenous peoples. There is a space where the idea is alive, just, but there's no hint of it on the op-ed pages of the worst English-language newspapers on earth.

Of all the responses to my essay Marcia Langton's was of the greatest importance to me. Years ago, when she was a light-hearted and astonishingly inventive activist, Professor Langton and I used to know each other rather better than we do now. Then we were friends and I thought we always would be. Now I am startled by the vein of nastiness that runs through her response; why does she think I boast about being adopted by Kulin women? What's to boast? She is perfectly entitled to doubt the "depth of my engagement in these issues" which must perforce be less than hers, but not to accuse me of "essentialist ideas about identity" as shaped by "race". The whole essay is obviously or, as Australians would say blatantly, anti-essentialist. Professor Langton calls me "Dr Greer" though I am as much a professor as she is and she knows it, and laments that I didn't address the question of Australian racism. This I didn't do because it was not my subject, just as it was not my intention to add to the volume of polemic clustering about Keith Windschuttle's amateur historiography or deplore the appalling abuse of Aboriginal women. Of course the view of history in my essay is truncated; what else could it be? Though my subject was not the suffering of Aboriginal people or the terrible offences we whitefellas have committed against them, this consciousness suffuses the whole short work, otherwise I wouldn't have argued that the wanton destruction of the continent is an expression of the whitefellas' frantic guilt. More seriously, Professor Langton makes a fundamental error in dealing with my modest proposal, in assuming that what I propose as a necessary condition for achieving any kind of cultural coherence (aka nationhood) I am also proposing as sufficient. In case I didn't make myself unmistakably clear (and the title of the essay could mislead), let me restate it. Australia will never achieve political maturity unless and until it recognises its ineradicable Aboriginality. Ultimately Professor Langton, despite her belief that an Aboriginal Australia is a ludicrous idea, consents to move into the imaginative

space of the essay. Once upon a time in the centre, she would have been less uncomfortable there.

Langton expresses regret that in illustrating two hundred years of misfit between the settlers and the land I didn't discuss more recent Australian literature, which she takes to disprove my case. Among the examples she cites is Australian journalist Nicolas Rothwell's *Wings of the Kitehawk*, which grew out of a commission for a series of articles retracing the steps of Leichhardt, Sturt, Strehlow and Giles. Rothwell as much as Leichhardt uses "the landscape as the sounding-board for his heart". Like Leichhardt he seeks in the kite-hawk of his title the "dark reflection of his own character". As he dashes about "discovering" a country that was never lost, he enters fully into the solipsistic world of the explorers for whom the country exists to be traversed, described, classified, and ultimately conquered. Why Langton would imagine that such a book illustrates a new relationship between whitefellas and the land I cannot imagine.

Tony Birch allowed himself to get off my case and take the idea out for a run. He has a right as an Aboriginal person to think that I romanticise settler violence, but actually it breaks my heart that people oppressed and driven from their own country ended up having to oppress and extirpate the people of another country, perpetuating the cycle of outrage in an endless proliferation of evil. It may be because I have followed the desperate struggles of my Australian forebears that I feel unable to demonise them, but he's right. I didn't. If that's romanticising their violence, I'm guilty as charged. Birch was interested and amused to wonder how my "country folk" would respond to my suggestion that they take a long hard look at themselves in the mirror and repeat, "I live in an Aboriginal country". Well, mate, I've done it. In my secret Australian life, in Queensland, echt Hanson country, I made that very suggestion to one of my workforce. "I don't consider there's any difference," he said. "I see myself as Aboriginal." I thought that was a bit steep myself, at the time, but he does work in rainforest rehabilitation, eats bush tucker in huge quantities, and treats the land with deep reverence, and I wish there were a few million more like him.

Geoff Sharp's response to *Whitefella Jump Up* is to translate my argument into his own moral terminology and to congratulate me for something I don't understand myself to have done. His attempt to argue that Australian use of alcohol is not dysfunctional is valiant, but it doesn't convince me and I doubt it would convince anyone else looking at the figures for deaths on the roads or domestic and other violence. Still, I am grateful to him because he has understood what the space is that I want Australians to jump up to, which is not mysticism (of which there is far too much already) but awareness.

It was not as if I expected readers of *Whitefella Jump Up* to bear me in triumph through the streets and cheer me to the echo. It would have been wonderful if numbers of clever people had seen some potential in my idea of Australia as an Aboriginal republic and amused themselves by seeing how far they could develop it. I cherished a faint hope that the chattering classes might kick the idea around for a week or two, long enough to see if its time might not have come, but they didn't and it hadn't. It will come though; mark my words. A hundred years from now, Australian children will be amazed to learn that Australia once considered itself a "British" country. They will understand what a hunter-gatherer republic might be, and how the interests of hunter-gatherer minorities have to be reflected in international policy because they are fundamental to any notion of sustainable development. It would make me swell in my grave with pride if Australia got to lead this international conscience-raising exercise but, as whitefellas apparently can't grasp the lesson that blackfellas never give up struggling to teach, we'll probably have to learn it from Canada and the Inuit.

I expected ridicule because, though I didn't expatiate on the vicious racism that disfigures much of Australian society, I am well aware of it. I'm used to being patronised by the stay-at-home intellectual establishment as well, but much of what was said and written was meaner-minded than would have been considered seemly in the wider world, and made me ashamed for the people who had written it. English readers will now have the opportunity to see the essay in the context of the responses that it elicited, and may come to understand why I choose to endure the manifold disadvantages and discomforts of life in England rather than return to my birthplace. And before Zwicky gets on my case again, can I just say that for me homelessness is not a disaster? For me diaspora is the true human environment and homeland a murderous delusion. I don't sing the Ha Tikva any more.

Not one of the responses to *Whitefella Jump Up* so much as gestured towards the most pressing motive for writing it, though it was plain to see. Whitefellas simply look away when I point to the devastation inflicted on the island continent in a mere two hundred years. The denial of the disaster continues; the devastation accelerates. Two weeks ago, the British invertebrate conservation charity Buglife of which I am a vice-president had to protest to the Australian government over its grant of permits for the importation of European bumblebees to pollinate green-house crops. Just as Nicolas Rothwell couldn't see the terrible wounds on the face of the Pilbara or the exotic grasses changing the face of western Queensland, none of these commentators has understood my genuine desperation. Australia doesn't owe whitefellas (including me) a living.

They should stop ripping its guts out for a pittance, and sit on the ground. Sit on the ground, damn you, and think, think about salination, desertification, dieback, deforestation, species extinction, erosion, suburbanisation, complacency, greed and stupidity. As if.

Germaine Greer