

EMERALD CITY

Issue 7

March 1996

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Introduction

Good grief, Melbourne! What am I doing here?

Actually it is a relief to be home at last (though I do miss California). It is also nice to know that I haven't entirely missed summer. I had wondered, after landing at Tullamarine in the middle of the day to find it 11C and pouring with rain, but things have picked up since then and the Labour Day weekend has been just glorious. March is also exactly the right time to be in Australia. Things are happening.

One of those things, of course, is St.Patrick's Day. Melbourne has a sizeable Irish population, but it is quite small compared to, say, the Italians, Greeks or Vietnamese. This does not stop the city from throwing an "Irish" party on the big day and everyone going ever so slightly stupid. The ordinary pubs serve green beer and have their staff got up as leprechauns. Irish pubs have huge parties with live music and crowds spilling hundreds of yards down the street. Hardly anyone involved has a drop of Irish blood in them, or has ever been there, or has ever tasted Guinness. Last year we had a genuine Irishman working in our office. He was quite upset by the whole thing.

Car Crazy - Melbourne meets Monaco

"Melbourne, A Great Place for the Race", screamed the posters. "Save Albert Park", yelled the protesters. Both, however, were drowned by the banshee wail of Formula One engines. For four days, Melbourne rang to the sound of their shrieking, wallowed in a haze of high octane fuel, and danced to the tune of international high finance. The circus had come to town, and high tension, high velocity and high emotions were the order of the day.

This is not the first time Melbourne has hosted a Grand Prix. For five years back in the 50s Albert Park was the Mecca of Australian motor racing. Famous names won there: Stirling Moss, and Stan Jones, father of Alan. Then, so the story goes, shabby local politics put an end to the Australian Grand Prix until, years later, Adelaide had the cheek to resurrect it. Now, at last, shabby local politics has brought it back, and more shabby local politics is set on making sure its stay is very short lived.

The Melbourne Grand Prix is the brainchild, to a large extent, of Jeff Kennett, Victoria's rampantly right wing Premier: a man who Margaret Thatcher says she admires, and who is not ashamed of his fan club. In his time at the top, Kennett has done his best to lure big business into the state capital. His achievements include a privatisation program that has

netted around \$12bn so far and wiped out the state debt, massive re-development along the banks of the Yarra (including what will soon become the biggest casino complex in the world), the closure of various schools and hospitals, and the redevelopment of Albert Park.

Much of the opposition has been either thinly disguised Nimbyism or knee-jerk Socialism (if it is Kennett it must be bad). If it had been saved, the only thing Albert Park would have been saved for would have been to become an even bigger eyesore. Now, as well as being a world famous sporting venue, it is well on the way to becoming a sports and entertainment complex that any city would be proud of. All this, it was rumoured, has cost the Victorian taxpayer some \$125m, and many people see this as robbing the public to provide a playground for international jetsetters and petrol-heads. But this ignores the new facilities the city is gaining, the international exposure to rich investors, and the money the race will certainly earn. Any city that cannot make a profit out of a Grand Prix doesn't deserve to have one (which is, of course, why Adelaide lost it). There's a lot of merchandising left, but so there should be: it would have been a disaster to run out. As long as they can sell it off at cost they should be OK.

Australia is a country which is heavily dependant on tourism for foreign income. An occasion like the Grand Prix which, barring the one off of the Sydney Olympics, is the biggest sporting event in the country, is a massive money spinner. The *Financial Review* ran an interesting article in the week before the race on how effective such things were at parting foreigners from their money and the Grand Prix was confidently expected to far out perform more socially acceptable (but no less elitist) events such as the Adelaide Arts Festival. Of course it is still far behind that doyen of Australian culture, the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. Rumour has it that Kennett wants to pinch that next, but somehow I think prim Melbourne would revolt on that one.

Of course it is tough for local people. UK rolegame writer Graham Staplehurst now lives and works near Albert Park. He told me that it was just about possible to concentrate on Thursday and Friday, but he and his family left town for the weekend. If I'd been living down there I would have been very tempted to let my flat out for the week to some rich race fan. People who live near Wimbledon do that during the tennis fortnight and make an absolute fortune.

Much to the surprise of some of my work colleagues, I trotted off to watch the Friday practice. Dolled up in my best Ferrari red, and doing my best to look like I had just stepped off a yacht in Monaco, I would have looked completely ridiculous at any other sporting event. But hey, you have to enter into the spirit of these things.

It has to be said that motor racing is one of those things that is much better watched on TV. Stuck in one place on the track, you have no idea what is going on elsewhere, and when the action does get to you it goes past so quickly you barely have time to notice it. The best thing to do is find yourself a good corner. The cars have to slow down to go past, it is where any overtaking is likely to happen, and it is where crashes usually occur. I'd taken the precaution of reading Jackie Stewart's views on the track beforehand, and his recommendation of turn 3 turned out to be inspired. I was rewarded with Schumacher taking up grass cutting, and a prang in the Formula Ford race that put 9 cars out of action. It was also the turn at which, on race day, Martin Brundle provided such a stunning demonstration of the safety features of F1 cars.

It's a pretty depressing thought that the best action you see at a race is when someone crashes, but there is no doubt it exercises a macabre fascination on spectators. Sure the noise is exciting (provided you've remembered your earplugs, otherwise it is likely to be literally stunning) and the speed with which the cars pass on the straight is truly breathtaking, but the big thrill comes from sitting there with your heart in your mouth as the cars jostle for position. Humans are sick creatures.

On the day of the race, Melbourne was at its beautiful best. The sky was a clear blue, the sun beat down and the temperature climbed to 27C. The beer tents were delighted, the drivers, tucked into their several layers of fireproof overalls, less so. Back home I curled up with a fridge full of Diet Coke and the matchless commentary of Murray Walker. UK readers will doubtless be amused by a wonderful Pizza Hut advert which features Murray shrieking things like "and HERE comes the PASTA", while Damon Hill, in poor imitation of James Hunt, mutters, "no Murray, it's pizza".

Of course, overseas viewers will not have been treated to the support races. We had the traditional 2 litre touring cars, though the drivers were much better behaved than back in Britain. But in Australia they build cars BIG. Here, and only here, we have a championship for 5 litre V8 touring cars: the Ford Falcon and Holden Commodore. These things are loud and fun. Next time I get my paws on the company Falcon, I think I'll take it for a spin round Albert Park.

The big race promised much, but this is often the case with Grands Prix and they rarely deliver. Melbourne has a large Italian population and, despite gloomy prognostications by the World Champion, they turned out in force to cheer on the famous red cars. Schumacher and team mate Eddie Irvine put on a better than expected show in qualifying, but they were clearly outclassed by the Williams cars. What really surprised people was the young French Canadian, Jacques Villeneuve, taking pole in his first ever Grand Prix. The last time a reigning Indycar champion (Michael Andretti) had tried to switch codes he had made a complete fool of himself. Villeneuve, it seemed, was made of sterner stuff.

And they were off. Coulthard and Brundle provided the traditional first lap accident, and half an hour later they were off again. Schumacher tried valiantly to keep up with the Williamses, but was forced out with mechanical problems. Hill and Villeneuve, however, put on a stunning show. Nose to tail for almost the whole race, their competitiveness restrained only by the thought of what their employers would say if they took each other off, they put on one of the best shows Grand Prix racing has seen for years. It looks like it could be a good season.

Sadly an oil leak forced Villeneuve to back off towards the end of the race and robbed him of a well deserved win. Irvine came in third, giving the Tifosi unexpected cause for celebration. The people of Melbourne generally rejoiced in a job well done, and probably fled home in a hurry to avoid having to put up with the post-race John Farnham concert. Doubtless there will be tears in Quebec, and much muttering about favouritism within the Williams team, but it must be said that it was not his British car that let him down, but rather his French-built Renault engine. Tee hee.

Here's looking forward to next year.

Reflections on Australia - Politics

Saturday March 2nd was a big day for Australia. Not only was it the closing date for bids for the 1999 Worldcon, and the day of the big parade at the Sydney Mardi Gras, we also managed a general election. Long time readers will perhaps remember me ruminating on the brinkmanship contest between Federal Prime Minister, Paul Keating (Labor - yes Britain, we do spell the party name that way) and Victorian Premier, Jeff Kennett (Liberal) as to who would risk the ballot box first. It was Keating who finally cracked, and the campaign was in full swing when I got home.

(Not that anyone in Australia cared. We were far more interested in the big fight between the Australian Rugby League and Rupert Murdoch's SuperLeague. King Rupert had induced most of the leading players to breach their contracts and was resoundingly spanked in the courts. Wonderful.)

I should point out that Keating's Labor party has far more in common with Tony Blair's style, or even Bill Clinton, than with anything remotely socialist. He even recognised that he had to do something about the unions, though he was treading very carefully on that one. Equally, John Howard, the Liberal leader, is nothing like the Thatcherite monster, Kennett. He is a quiet, self-effacing man who looks like a garden gnome and who would be well at home in John Major's cabinet. Perhaps the most notable difference between the two is that Keating has a personality whereas Howard doesn't. Admittedly it is a personality based largely on the colourful language he uses to abuse his opponents in parliament, but it is a personality none the less.

Keating, however, faced a serious disadvantage: 13 years of government are enough to make anyone sick of you, no matter how well you have done. And Labor's campaign was lacklustre, as if they knew they had it coming. Even so, with only a few days left, they had just about closed the gap. Then the bombshell hit.

Although each Australian state is, to a large extent, self-governing, none of the states raise taxes. Instead they each get a hand-out from the Federal government. Two days before polling, Labor produced a copy of a letter from Jeff Kennett to the Federal party complaining that their budget plans didn't add up and expressing concern that they would reduce the state grants. A second letter, an internal Liberal party memo from the shadow treasurer, noted that Kennett was dead right, but they weren't going to admit this until after the election. Dynamite stuff.

The next day, Kennett produced fairly conclusive evidence that the letter from him was a forgery, even down to providing a copy of the original letter that his signature had been copied from, exact in every squiggle.

That evening Labor claimed to have discovered that the letters had been forged by Kennett's staff and planted on them, but by that time the damage had been done. On such momentous policy issues are Australian elections decided. Well, so the pollsters said, anyway. A close race and turned into a small Liberal win.

In Australia, unlike the UK and the US, voting is mandatory. You get fined if you don't turn up. Australia also has a preferential voting system (pretty much like Worldcon site selection), and you vote for the upper house (the Senate) at the same time as the main parliamentary election. This makes for a fairly complicated day, and the major parties try to help out by producing voting cards which instruct their supporters how to use their preferences. By some strange quirk of electoral law, only registered candidates are allowed to produce such voting advice, and this led to an even more bizarre incident.

Albert Langer is a well known but ineffectual anarchist/communist activist. Mostly people ignore him, but this election he decided to go round telling people to put the two major parties last in their preferences. The electoral authorities told him to desist, and when he refused, he was arrested and sentenced to a lengthy jail sentence. Free country? The hell it is.

Come the day, of course, the voters decided to ignore the polls and vote the way they wanted. Polling had scarcely closed when it became obvious that Labor was facing a defeat of unprecedented magnitude. Several cabinet ministers lost their seats. Some of the biggest swings were in Queensland which, you will remember, had that cliff-hanger state election last year. (Mind you, I should point out that the largest swing was to an independent candidate who had been expelled by the Liberals for racist remarks - Queensland can be a bit like that.)

So Australia has a new government. It is pretty much like the old government except it will be a bit more in favour of Kennett-style privatisation and a little less good at industrial relations. The unions declared war even before polling day, and the first 15% wage claims are starting to flood in. Hopefully Howard will have the guts to tough it out (and future Labor administrations will no doubt thank him for doing so). Australia can be a very insular country, and with its great natural wealth has been able to afford to go it alone. Those days are fast vanishing, and the massive foreign debt piled up by the Keating government is evidence of Australia's decreasing competitiveness in world markets. It will be an interesting few years.

Howard's main problem will be the upper house. He went into the election in partnership with the National party, a bunch of redneck extremists. The parliamentary results were so clear cut that the Liberals have a majority in their own right. But in the Senate, which uses a more proportional voting system, even with National support he does not command a majority. The balance of power is held by the Democrats, and there is considerable evidence from the polls that voters deliberately opted for such a structure, voting Liberal for Parliament and Democrat for the Senate. This is an option that the UK badly needs.

My final election story concerns Victoria. As you might imagine, Kennett has gone for a snap election, and with Melbourne busy celebrating the Grand Prix, Moomba, Labour Day and the start of the footy season he's pretty likely to have a happy electorate. However, this was no foregone conclusion. The swing to the Liberals, so evident in Queensland and NSW, was scarcely seen in Victoria and there was some nervousness in party ranks. The decision, so legend has it, came from the Grand Prix.

The Grand Prix organisers had put on a special reception to welcome Mika Hakkinen, the Finnish driver who was nearly killed at Adelaide last year. Unbelievably, the Save Albert Park protesters turned up to heckle him. This act of gross discourtesy was witnessed on television by Mrs. Kennett, who promptly phoned her husband and read the riot act to him. Jeffrey duly stopped dithering and called the election. Ah, how the great affairs of state are decided.

Julian May's *Magnificat*

And so at last it comes to an end: a saga which has stretched over millions of years of story time, 15 years of publishing time and 8 novels (or 9, depending on your publisher), pretty much all of it planned from the start. That's quite an achievement in itself. And it is a darn good yarn too. But how does it end? Is it, as John Cooper Clarke once paraphrased, with a bang, or with a Wimpy?

The main problem, of course, is that we all know what is going to happen, and have known ever since that first appearance of *The Many Coloured Land* back in 1982. All the actors are now in place, it only remains for the final act to be played out. In that situation there is not much an author can do to carry the reader along with mystery. There isn't even an obscure witches' prophecy to unravel.

A few things remain to be settled. The identity of Fury is revealed early on, but then I guess most of us knew that already - I certainly did. He and his remaining Hydras have to be defeated, and there is always the question as to whether Marc got pushed into things or managed it all of his own accord. I'm pleased to say that May does not try to wimp out on that one.

But other than that, there is little new. Instead May has to rely on her characters and their moral debates to carry things through. This is always a tough call for an author, and I guess the final assessment has to be "could have done better". May's characters have always been just that little bit over the top - deliberately so in the Pliocene books because they were templates for mythic archetypes, but in the 21st century the sex-crazy, megalomaniac Remillards seem just a little too bizarre. It is also just a little too convenient the way that Uncle Rogi manages to sort things out all the time. May tries to limit this by revealing the secret of the Great Carbuncle, but then things get seriously circular because it is only through Jack using it in the final encounter that Marc learns the truth and thereby knows that he needs to give it to Rogi on his second time through history so that everything works out as it did. Dizzying.

This is all nit-picking, though, and that is something I try not to do. In the end it was a difficult job tolerably well done and by no means an unfitting end to a magnificent epic. The only question is, is it the end? The publishers no doubt would like more material, and there are hooks available to hang it on. The most obvious next series would be Marc's time in the Duat galaxy, which is where we left him at the end of the Pliocene books. A more interesting one was dropped into *Magnificat*. In order to give Rogi enough data to write the full history of the Mental Man project, Unifex had to ask Cloud and Hagen to let him in on a few family secrets,

and that let them in on the secret of the Lylnik leader's identity. Their first reaction, and a valid one at that, was "why the hell are we trusting this guy to run the galaxy". A series following on from *Magnificat* in which this becomes public knowledge is not inconceivable.

Personally, however, I don't think it will happen. The Milieu trilogy has shown many of the signs of an author tired of turning out the same old stuff. It reminds me a lot of the more recent Pern books - all history and little mystery, as if the author is just cranking out words rather than creating a story. I'd like to see Julian May try something different. Surely a mind that came up with such a stunning concept has other ideas in there somewhere (and I do not mean genre fantasy tripe like the Trillium series). Here's hoping.

Moonheart - Canada goes Faerie

The biggest mistake any keen book reader can make is, of course, to buy a book on the strength of the back cover blurb. But almost as big an error can result from buying a book on the strength of its cover. Thus, because I was so completely entranced by the covers, I have until now avoided reading anything by Charles De Lint. Now, with the wealth of the Melbourne SF Club library to choose from at no financial risk, I felt safe to give him a try.

Moonheart is a strange book. Not so much magic realism as an X-Files like attempt to "what if" magic onto the modern world. It starts well enough. De Lint writes well, and he dives into his descriptive passages with the undisguised relish of a chocaholic in a truffle factory. Besides, anyone who introduces his lead character as listening to a Silly Wizard album is obviously a gentleman of excellent taste.

The things get strange. Weird stuff happens. And it is all the more weird for being set in sleepy, suburban Ottawa. Due South aside, it is deeply incongruous to imagine the Royal Canadian Mounted Police setting up a paranormal division and trying to round up a bunch of pixies.

Having said that, De Lint clearly knows his folklore well, and his exposition of the Canadian otherworld, and linking of it to the Celtic realms of the white settlers, is masterly. Take away the Mounties and the gangsters and it would be a darn good fantasy novel.

What really rescues the book, however, is the pacing of the final third, where the story finally gets going and the reader is dragged along at such a pace that she hardly notices the incongruity. By the end I had quite enjoyed it, but it was a struggle at times, and I'm not sure that the idea was a good one. I wonder if his later books get any better.

Miscellany

Isn't that just the way of things. As soon as I get some decent space-fillers it turns out I don't need them. Ah well, here they are anyway.

Bizarre science corner - Whilst in the UK I spotted an interesting newspaper article about structural differences between male and female brains. This sort of thing is, of course, anathema to any hard line feminist who must believe, as an article of faith, that there are no differences. But the rest of us know different, and are starting to be proved right. It turns out, so that article says, that in women the emotional centres of the brain are linked most directly to the major intellectual analysis regions, whereas in men they are linked primarily to more ancient animal relics whose thought processes can only result in impulses for fight or flight.

So there it is, boys. Those of you with male brains now have a cast iron excuse for “not wanting to talk about it”. And those of us with female brains can look down on you as primitive evolutionary throwbacks. Nyah.

Ignorant Americans corner - It is always interested to see what misconceptions the rest of the world has about Australia. When we heard that the new Illuminati cards were going to feature a few Australian themes our interest was piqued. The No Beer disaster card, you will be pleased to hear, went down very well. But the Australian Rules Football card was a deep slur on our national character. All the players were wearing helmets! Whadda ya think we are, guys, a bunch of wimps?

Amazing Australia corner - Seen in the Financial Review last week, an advert for the sale of a plot of farm land in Northern Territory. The size of the plot, a little over 5 million acres. You could fit a fair few sheep on that.

Footnote

Next issue should have the report from the Australian NatCon in Perth and a few words on Vernor Vinge, who I think is much underrated. It should also get written in Scotland. Here's hoping I finally get to do a bit of travelogue from up there.

Given that I'm finishing this issue on St. Patrick's Day, and reviewing a Julian May book, the playlist has a suitably Celtic feel to it:

Past Present - Clannad;

Banba - Clannad;

The Book of Invasions - Horslips;

The Tain - Horslips;

Moondance - Van Morrison.

And a special mention for trying very hard to be Irish even though he isn't really:

Too-rye-ay - Kevin Rowland and Dexy's Midnight Runners.

Where are The Pogues, you may well ask. I hang my head in shame.

Goodnight.