

Editor's Introduction

The 2009 ASAL mini-conference was a singular event. 'Vincent Buckley 20 Years After: Life, Work, Politics and Times' drew together a range of people from universities and beyond, with diverse reasons for their shared interest in Vincent Buckley's legacy. The event had neither the coolness of the symposium nor the narrowness of the colloquium. Rather, it more accurately resembled a kind of *festschrift*. Poetry, reflection, analysis, criticism and memoir were voiced as testaments to the ongoing effects of Buckley's influential life and work.

Quite properly, then, this Special Issue of *JASAL*, which derives from that mini-conference (though it also includes articles from non-participants), has the spirit of just such a dedicated gathering of writing, motivated by the impact of one person. Like the mini-conference, it embraces the life, work, politics and times of Buckley. It also reaches out to the many contexts—literary, cultural, historical, and personal—which envelop Buckley's life and work. Taking its cue from the mini-conference, this Special Issue is deliberately multimodal. The registers employed by the authors herein shift from the scholarly to the personal (often in the same article). The methodologies change from analysis to reflection, criticism to testimony, debate to conversation.¹

Central to all of the articles here is the figure of Vincent Buckley, variously characterised as (public) intellectual, teacher, author, friend, mentor, leader, memoirist, man, and above all, poet. The many portraits of Buckley capture such features as 'the grandness of his ambition' (Hatherell 3), his shift from 'Irish-Australian' to 'Australian-Irish' (Devlin-Glass 1), and his 'soundless delicate shoes' (Wallace-Crabbe 1). He is remembered as 'a man who was generous in sharing his appreciations of the skills of others but reluctant to speak of his own achievements' (Jacobs 1), 'clearly the major figure in a group of distinctive young thinkers' (Coady 1) and a 'mentor for a life of poetry' (Wright 2). As a teacher, he is credited with crafted expertise: 'His teaching practice was personal, intense and mature, giving and demanding wholehearted attention' (Lee Dow 3). As a public figure, he is depicted as a leading light: 'Buckley engaged in the politics of his time with the passion of the warrior, and the religious troubles with the passion of the explorer' (McLaren 4). As a leader, he is cast, idiosyncratically, as a poet: 'he brought to the leadership the heart and mind of a poet' (Joyce 7).

Most importantly, this Special Issue of *JASAL* presents a critical reappraisal of Buckley's work and its contexts. Twenty years after his death, such a project is overdue. As the articles attest, Buckley's contribution to public life in Australia and to its literature was sustained and comprehensive. His published writings, speeches, lectures and tutorials inspire discussion here by a range of scholars from various disciplines. Literary criticism of Buckley's poetry and prose sit alongside considerations and analyses of his participation in religious communities, political debates, and individual lives.

Peter Steele's 'Buckley's Places' locates Buckley's poetics via a concentration on the links between story, history and myth in his work. Through his focus on the geographies in and around Buckley's poetry, Steele plots a set of coordinates for Buckley's *oeuvre*, mapping the paradigmatic and mythical figures that people

Buckley's poems, and locating the poetry in relation to other literature. Steele identifies the complex links between self and world that are negotiated in Buckley's poems (a theme which Carolyn Masel takes up in her article also). In distinguishing the importance of 'the poem as the world's place' and 'the body as the self's place' (5) as recognisable logics in Buckley's work, Steele also identifies the ways in which these places amalgamate. Thus, Steele accords with Buckley's descriptions of how the poet can be implicated in poetry; how self and world can unite through the text. There are convincing reasons for how this might be viewed through the lens of biography (many of which Penelope Buckley outlines in her article) and, as Steele is aware, subtle ways in which self, poem and world coalesce. As Buckley confessed: 'I'm conscious of having written only a fraction of the poetry that, as it were, I've experienced' (qtd in Rosenbloom 325).

Frances Devlin-Glass locates Buckley in different territory: as a public intellectual and memoirist, and as a third-generation member of the Irish Diaspora. She considers 'the matter of Ireland' and the vicissitudes of Buckley's identity-formation across his life. For Devlin-Glass, Buckley's replacement of the 'vital, transformative and communal narrative of liberal Catholicism' with 'a more secular politicised Irishness with a distinct literary tenor' (2) plays out in distinct ways in the genres of memoir and poetry in which he wrote. Focussing on *Memory Ireland* and *The Pattern*, Devlin-Glass pays attention to Buckley's positioning of himself in relation to Ireland, the political dimensions of his writing, his Irish mythopoeitics, and the functions and modes of his poetry. This article (along with those of John McLaren and Penelope Buckley) offers answers to a question that Buckley once asked 'post-colonial' poets: 'by what convictions of origin, value and destiny (i.e. by what *myths*) shall we live?' ('National' 146).

Carolyn Masel's article on Buckley's *Golden Builders* looks to the grammar of this sequence to find clues that might elucidate 'its central questions about being in the world, about self-representation and the forces that threaten it, about the meaning of place and the function of memory' (13). Like Steele, Masel notices the 'interpenetration of self and world' (5) as it is presented in Buckley's work. She extrapolates from the *Golden Builders* sequence certain features common to Buckley's *oeuvre* with its 'unpredictable turns' (3). For Masel, the most persuasive explanation of Buckley's poetics with its 'passive attentiveness' is Keats' Negative Capability (1), an idea that Joanne Lee Dow also associates with Buckley. Masel's description of Buckley's construction of the self—as 'undone by something as subtle as its own sensitivity to the shapes of air and sound' (12)—relies on the same impulse towards synaesthesia that informs many of Buckley's descriptions of poetry, as, for example, 'a matter of trying to give a rhythmic shape to a whole life-experience' (qtd in Rosenbloom 319) or as 'matching in language...the vibrations of nature...and the inner vibrations of the person' (qtd in Booth 28).

Buckley's concern with the art of poetry and its role in public life is reflected in William Hatherell's analysis of his participation in debates about literary nationalism in Australia. Hatherell finds in Buckley's critical work ambivalence about, but also a vested interest in, the formation of a canon of Australian literature. Buckley's ambivalence, which Hatherell implies is characteristic of his intellectual circumspection and of his habit of revising his position within debates over time, is epitomised in the instance of 'a rhetoric that seeks to protect the literary from the ravages of both the nationalists and the researchers' (6). However, as Hatherell makes

clear, this ambivalence is also (perhaps paradoxically?) a product of 'the tension...between his commitment to a new critical rigour in approaching Australian texts and the national project that inevitably underpinned the work of canon-formation' (2). Holistic attention to Buckley's critical *oeuvre* is repaid, according to Hatherell, and uncovers his valuable positioning of Australian poetry 'within an international tradition' (8), or, as Buckley described, as 'always part of a network' (*Faber* xxix). According to Hatherell, Buckley's critical interventions into debates about Australian poetry produced thought-provoking ideas that retain their intellectual currency more than twenty years after the fact.

Hatherell's questioning of what Buckley's 'repeated insistence on the "sacred" and "incarnational" nature of successful poetry might mean for contemporary Australian poetry' (5) is addressed in Robin Grove and Lyn McCredden's 'The Burning Bush: Poetry, Literary Criticism and the Sacred.' This article takes the form of 'a conversation/meditation on the sacred' (1) which uses Buckley's work as a starting point, but broadens out to consider other literature and art in relation to the sacred. This article asks what the role of the poet is today, and how notions of the sacred might be implicated in this role. It also asks how language (mainly textual) can structure, embody, or communicate the sacred. In their dialogue with each other, Grove and McCredden also bring Buckley's poetry into dialogue with dance, and with other literary works. Moreover, McCredden insists that Buckley's poetry necessarily transcends its own limits, embracing other cultural forms, other realities, in its 'refusal to make the historical and the political and the material oppositional to the sacred' (8).

Lyn Jacobs finds in Buckley's later poetry (particularly that of *Late Winter Child* and *The Pattern*) just such a manifestation of the sacred. She argues that in his poetry, Buckley engaged with the ethical, the social, the cultural and the historical through the operation of writing as 'a "sacralising act," as a means of setting aside to reveal through memory' (1). Jacobs follows Buckley's poetry through various iterations in style and address—from rhetoric, to orchestration, to 'overt statement' (2). Like Masel and Steele, Jacobs reads Buckley's poetry as concerned with 'the processes of delving into self in order to transcend self' (3); as poetry that 'synthesises observation and sensation' (4). Following Jacobs' lead, it might be possible to view Buckley's poetry as his constitutive element—what he called 'your earth-tremor, your vibrato / turning you slowly into song' ('A Poetry Without Attitudes,' *Collected* 454).

This 'earth-tremor,' internalised by the poet and expressed in the poetry, is perhaps what Penelope Buckley describes when she notes in Buckley's poetry 'points of equipoise where what is in the head and what is outside seem to hold each other steady, almost become interchangeable' (1). Consonant with Masel's analysis, Penelope Buckley finds that the barriers between inside and outside, between self and world, break down (or at least become malleable) in Buckley's poetry, so that, for instance: 'All Buckley's allegiances, personal history, poetic themes and preoccupations are brought into the poem as somehow invested in the city: in that sense he invests himself in it' (9). The focus in this article is on the spaces (mostly physical) of Buckley's poetry. Penelope Buckley traces stasis, entrapment, claustrophobia, tension and freedom in the poems. She concentrates on the differences between rural and urban spaces, public and private spaces, bringing Vincent Buckley's biography to his poems as a key context for their interpretation.

It is to one aspect of this biography that Tony Coady turns in his article on religion and politics. Coady remembers Buckley as a public intellectual, a thinker and participant in various debates in post-war Australia. Coady's article moves from a reflection on his personal relationship with Buckley and their mutual inclusion in Catholic circles in Melbourne during and after the 1960s, to an analysis of Buckley's anti-Communism, to a philosophical discussion of models of relationship between religion and politics which centres on a consideration of 'Exclusionism and its Problems.' Coady's article takes incarnational thought as central to Buckley's understanding (and practice) of Christianity; it discusses Buckley's critique of the Movement; and it assesses the ethical and intellectual ramifications of Buckley's political stances on Communism and on the troubles in Northern Ireland. In Buckley's public life, Coady finds a 'commitment to the autonomous significance of the intellectual life and the idea that values and projects should be tested against an individual's lived experience' (2), as well as an opposition to oppression and persecution. However, as Coady argues (along with Devlin-Glass), such commitments as these can produce blindnesses and can colour a person's perception of political and social events. Coady examines the relationship between Church and state and asks how religious people might 'play a part in public life' (7) in contemporary times.

In the subsequent article, Marie Joyce offers one model of such participation in public life through her psychosocial analysis of the Newman Society in Melbourne in the late 1950s and 1960s. Joyce places herself within this context and reflects on the leadership qualities of Buckley and others, suggesting that the intellectual apostolate within the Newman Society fomented a 'critical consciousness' rather than 'conventional thinking' (2). Joyce discusses the 'relationship between theology and poetic language and imagination' (3) in this context, drawing on literary and theological texts to make sense of notions of the sacred, of community and of incarnation. Joyce consults the archives of papers given by Buckley during Newman Society events, and testifies that '[t]o listen to Vin's presentations was to be drawn into the paradoxical nature of religious faith and into a desire to seek deeper understanding and engagement' (4). In Buckley's emphasis on paradox, Joyce finds intimations of the post-modern thinking of later decades. In his thought and writing, she finds the indelible mark of the poet.

The importance of Buckley's role as poet is also emphasised by John McLaren, Buckley's biographer, who argues that 'Buckley was above all else a poet. His life had to be told in terms of the poetry that it produced' (1). Like Joyce, McLaren recognises that 'there is also a close parallel between the development of his religious thought and his poetic practice, so that to discuss the poetry is to discuss the religion' (1). McLaren suggests that Buckley's words 'produce the God that Buckley seeks' and 'invite us to interrogate the God they produce' (6). McLaren's discussion of Buckley's life and work is informed by Mikhail Bakhtin's work on dialogue, the novel and heteroglossia, as well as by Martin Buber's work on dialogue. McLaren situates the biography as another kind of dialogue and studies Buckley's work for the presence and absence of dialogue there. Like Devlin-Glass (and in line with Coady's arguments regarding Buckley's anti-Communist politics), McLaren scrutinises Buckley's sometime partisanship as precluding dialogue: 'His poems on Northern Ireland...present the experience of the nationalists, but make no attempts to enter into any kind of dialogue with their opponents' (4).

Dialogue of another kind entirely is invoked in John Wright's article. Wright testifies to the lasting presence of Buckley's poetry in his imagination and memory across numerous decades. For him, the endurance of poetry in the minds of its readers provides a possible criterion for its value: 'For me, if poetry served no more than this kind of personal purpose by leaping unsolicited into my consciousness, that alone would be sufficient to justify its study' (2). Interestingly, Wright's admission that '[w]hether running, cycling, walking, or just drinking quietly on the veranda, I bump into his lines' (2) runs counter to Grove's claim (regarding *Golden Builders*) that 'I find that in reading I am quite gripped by the poem...but it doesn't continue inside me for the days and nights afterwards...' (12). Both articles, however, demonstrate how Buckley's work can be read as 'a poetry which reveals how the sacred lurks within the everyday' (Wright 6). As a preface to his discussion of Buckley's poetry, Wright provides a personal history of his time in the English Department at the University of Melbourne (which approaches a partial institutional ethnography of sorts). He revisits the context of Leavisism, as well as his recollections of prominent lecturers. As a postscript to his discussion, Wright offers the poem 'A Belated Elegy for Vincent Buckley,' which presents an intertextual demonstration of one reader's relationship and response to Buckley's poetry.

Jennifer Strauss, another former student of Buckley's, contributes a personal reminiscence of her memories of Buckley. Strauss documents her experience of the English Department at the University of Melbourne in the 1950s. Like Wright, Strauss discusses the influence of Leavisite criticism on the English Department. She argues that although there was 'a considerable coincidence between [Buckley's] poetic affinities and the Leavisite reordering of the poetic canon,' 'Leavisite criticism was profoundly English and profoundly Protestant. Buckley's affiliations to Ireland and to Catholicism, however troubled the latter, were bound to create tension' (2). Strauss describes an education in Australian literature at the University of Melbourne which inspired further reading. She depicts an atmosphere in which Australian poetry was 'something in process, going on around me, with living poets publishing and arguing and generally acting as if literary history was something to be shaped by them in the here and now' (2). This scene, of which Buckley was a central player, is reflected in Chris Wallace-Crabbe's poem 'Memories of Vin Buckley, Spelt from Sibyl's Golden Leaves,' which ends this issue. There, Wallace-Crabbe provides a fitting stage for Strauss' scene: '...those huge trattoria windows / behind which we sipped and planned / to change the whole face of Australian Lit' (1).

Joanne Lee Dow also offers her personal memories of Buckley, as both colleague and friend. She declares that Buckley was 'unexpectedly, surprisingly various,' and that she 'found him to be a great teacher and exemplar, and discerningly generous to junior and other staff and students' (1). Her portrait of Buckley is of a charismatic, judicious, intelligent and thoughtful man, for whom differences in opinion and politics didn't spoil personal friendships, and who was egalitarian in his departmental dealings. In line with many other contributors here, Lee Dow emphasises Buckley's central concerns with place, identity and knowledge as what she appositely calls an abiding interest in 'relatedness': 'His great impulse as poet, reader, teacher and critic was, to quote him again, "the need to know and to place the self" (3).

As all of the contributions to this Special Issue of *JASAL* demonstrate, Vincent's Buckley's life and work can be understood, appreciated, represented, remembered and critiqued—*placed*—in myriad ways. Buckley's considerable body of texts, with its

range of genres and modes, its shifts in emphasis and interest, is a sizeable archive. Over the last year, more books, conference papers, reviews, and articles have augmented and complemented this archive.² The articles in this Special Issue further extend the discussion of the nature of Buckley's work, its many effects, and the contexts within which it can be read. In 1971, Buckley emphasised the importance of contextual frameworks when he posed the following question: 'Trees grow, diamonds grow, men [sic] grow, are we to believe that poetry just happens, like something on a screen or within a dream?' ('Poetry' 39). The critical attention paid here to Buckley's poetry, but also to his life, work, politics and times, responds to this call for thoughtful consideration of the ways in which literature is implicated in private and public spheres and their associated official and non-official memories.

May the conversation continue.

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on behalf of the editorial committee for this issue: Damien Barlow, Penelope Buckley, Charon Freebody, Lyn McCredden and John McLaren.

NOTES

¹ Please note that the views and opinions expressed by the authors of articles included in this Special Issue of *JASAL* do not necessarily represent of those of *JASAL* editors.

² See particularly John McLaren's *Journey without Arrival: the life and writing of Vincent Buckley* and Buckley's *Collected Poems* (edited by Chris Wallace-Crabbe).

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