

dialogue

Magazine wrack

Brian Musgrove

REVIEWING *MEANJIN* from the vantage of *Overland* is a tricky diplomatic task, complicated by the fact that the current *Meanjin* (61.2, 2002) is themed by the tetchy subject 'drugs'. The issue of drugs deserves wide discussion in all its complex dimensions. Consequently, the note of self-congratulation (*frisson* maybe) in Ian Britain's editorial comment that this is the first Australian literary magazine dedicated to dope can be forgiven.

His suggestion that *Meanjin* will encompass drugs in relation to their contribution to "literature" and "various other cultural forms" is less convincing – mainly because essays on drugs and the arts, or art, are the least successful in the volume. The cover is decorated by a soulful (in context, one reads stoned) photo-portrait of Brett Whiteley; and Sheona White and Craig Judd's article on Whiteley is a capable recap of familiar terrain. It scouts established points economically (Whiteley's view of addiction as "disease", Romanticism and popular culture's drug allures, the torment in that Archibald-winning visual confession) but stops short of anything really new. Tentative finding: drugs were part of a "research drive" into art past and present, possibly supplying Whiteley with "some good ideas".

Christina Thompson's piece on John Forbes is fair enough as memoir, but barely "confronts the role of drugs" in the poet's life and death as promised. It concludes that addiction ruined him and had no function in his writing. Surely it's worth considering that drugs might have been part of a generational aesthetic which shaped Forbes, rather than simply a diversion (quoting Laurie Duggan) in the "gaps when nothing else was happening" in his life. Keith Richards glibly said a similar thing of heroin: he took it because when he wasn't playing rock'n'roll he felt dead anyway. But Richards took the stage on drugs too, confounding any strict demarcation between drugtaking and artistic performance – a problem which might also face future investigators of Forbes' oeuvre. Another conundrum, often levelled at the drugtaking Beats, lingers in Thompson's margins. Where, exactly, does the image of the poetic 'anti-citizen', with its refusenik mystique, shade into that of the freely-willed drugtaker whose closest ideological affiliations are actually to bourgeois individualism? In time, this might be a useful critical route into aspects of Forbes' verse and cultural politics.

Eons ago, in *The Politics of Ecstasy*, Timothy Leary cautioned that personalised accounts of drug-effects are always shadowed by the yawning question "So what?" Thus, Stephen McKenzie's remem-

brance of encountering the 'cultural form' cinema after smoking grass (watching that old hippie favourite *Koyaanisqatsi* sixty times) is placebo autobiography: "I thought a lot of things during *Koyaanisqatsi* . . . sometimes 'deep', as I used to term it." Unreal, man. In contrast, Clinton Walker's 'Potted History of Drugs and Australian Music' could be the blueprint for a fascinating book grounded in sociology and music-industry history, while still summoning personal connections and recollections.

Personal concerns generate perceptive observations on public policy and debates on community standards in Jeanette Kennett's 'Talking to Your Kids'. This is a conversion narrative with social reverberations: the story of how a mother – "once almost as conservative and hardline about the evils of drug use as John Howard and his chief adviser on drug strategy, Brian Waters, could have wanted" – underwent changes of conscience and intellectual position. Kennett mounts reasoned arguments to squarely counter the government's Tough on Drugs campaign. In the wake of Steven Soderbergh's film *Traffic*, she sees that a war on drugs is a war on our own children. Australian kids do not grow up in "wholesome *Father Knows Best* sitcoms", and contemporary teenage attitudes are fired in a furnace of heated contradictions. On the one hand there are

INTERESTING. THE GAP BETWEEN LEFT AND RIGHT IS NOT AS GREAT AS WE THOUGHT



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government information booklets with an "unrelenting focus on the bad effects of drugs and a bit of jargon designed to obscure description of the pleasurable effects; on the other, you have your friends, who are having 'mad fun' and appear to be unscathed". Kennett recommends reality checks in developing enlightened parent-child communication about drugs and risk management, and she polemically rounds on ossified Howardite orthodoxies: "public policy . . . ensures that addicts cannot get a pharmaceutically clean, secure and affordable supply of heroin. It is public policy, not heroin dependence, therefore, that pushes them into crime, poverty and homelessness, and even death." Monash philosopher Kennett continues: "This is true moral evil and policy-makers are knowingly or recklessly implicated in it." As a disarming instance of the muddy moralism surrounding drugs, she cites the case of methadone therapy – as methadone, after all, is a genuine narcotic, or opiate: "If opiates were intrinsically corrupting and damaging to one's health the methadone program could not have the benefits claimed for it."

There are a few high-profile contributors to this *Meanjin* who are regulars in national drug discussion and coal-face work. Howard's personally chosen drug czar, Salvation Army Major Brian Watters, offers his usual bizarre pot-pourri of progressivist feints, transnational drug-strategy comparisons, anecdote (not survey) of the public mood, the assertion that harm reduction doesn't deliver, and inevitable "surprise at the number of times

I'm told that morals shouldn't come into this." That leads to a reprimand of "those who are ideologically driven and believe in a libertarian acceptance of the individual's right of choice to use drugs." Strangely, moral argument can be deployed *against* Howard-Watters style conservatives – who, we are assured with the repetition that characterises addiction to an idea, are *never* 'ideologically driven'. As Jacques Derrida said in an interview, published as 'The Rhetoric of Drugs', hard-line drug prohibitionists have a key commonality with liberalisers. Liberalisers often anchor their right to consume drugs in moral systems: systems sometimes at pluralistic odds with arbitrary convention; or a system which precisely invokes the moral pledge of free will and the right to choose enshrined in consumer capitalism. In short, 'drugs' exposes moral convention as contradictory, transient and contestable.

Watters is the most incongruous inclusion in *Meanjin On Drugs*, differing so dramatically from the others. (What would he make of being in printed proximity to Christos Tsiolkas, interviewed here under the rubric 'Getting Out of It' by Paul Somerville?) Is Watters included, understandably, because of his official position? In lip-service to the ethic of journalistic balance and variety? Or as a foil for more up-beat writers? This last way of puzzling out Watters' appearance is not mere cynicism. As a friend of mine remarked recently, the Major is frequently a strawman for pro-drug lobbyists and a benchmark conservative against whom reformists measure themselves. However, my friend

asked, given Watters' family background, professional form and religious leanings, how else could we expect him to behave or think? The complication lies not with Watters but with the Prime Minister who appointed him. The maelstrom of controversy around Watters' views (and his multiply-noted, immoderate and counter-productive public statements) is not necessarily a strictly *personal* matter. Health-care professionals prepared to innovate are obstructed by a socio-political, ethico-political bloc and Watters is its figurehead – not its foundation.

Frustrations with that immobile block almost bleed through in the articles by two more 'celebrity' drug commentators in *Meanjin*: David Penington and Alex Wodak – both, one would have thought, more plausible choices for Watters' job, but not politically correct by Coalition standards. Penington and Wodak patiently explain how current Australian drug policy and resistance to change is the outcome of historical forces and American-led global prohibitionism, enacted through the United Nations. Our government has invoked obligations under UN narcotics regulations to explain why Australian legislation and treatment practices cannot be altered: an interesting anomaly, given its indifference to many tenets of international law and constant sneering at UN protocols. This would be farcical if lives were not at stake.

Former chair of the Victorian Premier's Drug Advisory Council, Penington zones in on the point that Howard's drug policy is dominated by one of those

despicable elites, and that Australia "needs to mobilise public opinion of a rational kind rather than preaching a moral agenda that is rejected by the majority". And Penington valuably suggests that our official approach to drugs in this country is yet another instance of a troubling deputism to sheriff USA. He urges independence, though it "will require both civil and political courage to oppose the international hegemony of the US State Department with its simplistic reliance on prohibition". The way we treat junkies, then, is an unexpectedly graphic illustration of the way in which power-politics enters and determines everyday lives.

Alex Wodak – long-time interlocutor of Brian Watters – is located in a national drug hot-spot: Sydney's St Vincent's Hospital. President of the Australian Drug Law Reform Foundation and the International Harm Reduction Association, Wodak writes with his trademark clarity and care. He strolls through arguments which he has made in many places previously: on the complicated reasons for the failure of current measures, the logic of harm reduction, and "what stops communities getting better outcomes from drug policy". In terms of the obstacles to reforming legal and treatment options, Wodak gestures at the hysteria which condemns drugtakers to the same social apartheid inflicted on refugees, Muslims, and any number of pariah-types in Howard's Australia: "A mediocre fear campaign usually beats an excellent evidence-based campaign." But there's hope: "Fear delays but does not prevent change."

Meanjin maps the social domain 'drugs' from several angles; though drug specialists, researchers and historians will find very little by way of fresh information or insight. Once again, the editorial claim of novelty is diminished; but this is excusable because of the saliency of drugs as daily reality, intractable 'problem' and – regrettably too often – a matter of ignorance and prejudice. With that in mind, it's obviously worth repeating arguments put before and facts sometimes obscured for a non-specialist readership.

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Once were unionists

Jeff Sparrow

WHEN JIM HEALY, the leader of the militant Waterside Workers Federation, died in 1961, the Melbourne *Herald* carried an obituary by industrial columnist E.C. Crofts in its morning edition of 13 July. Under the headline of 'Healy, idol of the Watersiders', the notice began:

Pipe-smoking, 63-year-old James Healy, wharf leader Communist, who died today, was the centre of many struggles on the Australian waterfront. Son of an Irish labourer and a mother who worked in a Lancashire cotton mill, Healy and his wife, Elizabeth, came to Australia in 1925. He became a waterside worker and joined the Labor Party.¹

By the afternoon edition the headline had, mysteriously, changed. It now read: 'Healy, the man who ruled the wharves'. The text – still credited to E.C. Crofts – ran as follows:

James Healy, 63, who during his lifetime was hated by thousands of opponents and sentenced to jail under a Labor Government, always remained outwardly calm. His sphinx-like imperturbability was described by opponents as 'cynical'. But most of the nation's 23,000 waterside workers regarded him as their undisputed leader.²

Overt hostility to unionism in general (and communist unionism in particular) typified the old *Herald*. Yet the intervention over Healy's obituary may well have involved a degree of conscious spite, with the editorial staff doubtless recalling the two occasions in the 1950s when Melbourne waterside workers forced the paper into embarrassing retractions.

In January 1956, the wharves came to a standstill over a campaign for maintenance of wages and conditions (the so-called 'Margins dispute'). The *Herald* ran a front-page editorial:

If the issue is to be between industrial blackmail or the rule of law, responsible people have no choice. This strike throws out an extreme and dangerous challenge. The majority of people will support firm resistance to it.³

Nothing particularly unusual in that. After all, as Peter Russo, a columnist for *The Argus*, noted at the time, wharfies were "the nation's favourite coconut-shy":