A NOMADIC APPROACH TO SALVATION:
AUSTRALIAN RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN LES MURRAY'S
THE BOYS WHO STOLE THE FUNERAL

Jim Tulip

The illustration on the dust jacket of Les Murray's verse novel The Boys Who Stole the Funeral presents three figures. The central one is a dead man, an old soldier dressed in the uniform of an Anzac. The other two figures are those of young men, Ocker Australians. They have stolen the body of the soldier, their 'uncle', from a Sydney funeral parlour and are driving it back to the country for, as they see it, a proper burial. Clarrie Dunn, the old soldier, had once expressed a wish to be buried at Dark's Plain, and to the young men this wish has taken on the qualities of a sacred commitment to honour. They are heading for the Newcastle hinterland and the farming mountain valley world where Clarrie Dunn, the old Anzac, grew up. The story is a bizarre Anzac-Ocker homecoming, an exodus from Sydney, a return to native Australia from urban exile. Clarrie Dunn is buried. One of the young men Cameron Reeby is killed in the aftermath with police. Kevin Forbutt, however, survives, and finds himself reconciled to the land partly through a mystical experience of aboriginal Australia and partly through his acceptance by the Dunn family and the farming community.

In its broadest reaches it is a story of death, crucifixion, sacrifice, salvation, and redemption told in peculiarly Australian terms. And modern terms. It is Murray's parable of Australia in the 1970s. He is working through his anger at the changes that have happened to the old Australia. In one sense The Boys Who Stole the Funeral is a conservative's lament: it lashes out at all forms of modernism and trendiness, the Whitlam years, radical feminism, the 'Californication' of Sydney and so on. In another sense it is a litany of love. It evokes the land, and is an argument for time to stand still. It pleads for the acceptance of simple things, of country ways; for the acceptance of poverty and suffering, of passivity. Murray's originality -- and it lies in his prophetic vision -- is in his identifying the forces that make up modern Australia, and in his forcing
them into alignments and oppositions which reveal the drama, the spiritual and religious drama, of a country which is, by some, thought of as the most secular culture in the world today.

The three figures on the dust jacket illustration both suggest and resist an image of the Crucifixion. The christ-like central figure, his head hanging down, is flanked by the two thieves. These young men are very much alive, and driving a vehicle which is part car, part dish or crucible. But if there is a suggestion by Murray of a crucifixion ritual in the death of an Australian warrior, then it is occurring as a creative 'misreading', a reinterpretation for modern times by modern times. For, here, it is the Saviour who is being saved. It is as if the Ocker youths are a pair of Hebrew zealots who are acting the roles of 'resurrection men', taking the body of their leader away from the control of the hated authorities and urban bondage. The dust jacket image, comic and gleefully bizarre as it may be, catches at a conservative's angst and anger. But the book as a whole goes on to explore and expand the possibilities of redemption in contemporary Australian terms.

Murray who converted from his childhood and ancestral Scottish Calvinism to a pre-Vatican II Catholicism may be wishing to save Christ from contemporaneity. But in more social terms he is aligning the Ocker, the Anzac and the Aborigine as figures who rise up in their alienation at the changes which have happened in Australia in the past twenty years.

His vision of Australia as a 'vernacular republic' has its roots in the six books of poetry he had written prior to writing The Boys Who Stole the Funeral. His anger locates itself not in conservative ideology or high culture or entrenched privilege but in proletarian sympathies drawn largely from the battlers of the Australian farming community. It is a complex and unusual mix, but one which by sheer force of personality and poetic gifts Murray has raised into a leading literary expression of his generation. That his is a somewhat difficult and daunting voice, provocative, at times crude and confronting, goes without saying. The style of life in Australia today -- especially its centralism and idolatry of politics in Canberra -- is anathema to him. (Ironically, as it happens, the changes now taking place in Australian economic fortunes may be working to bring Murray's views into the mainstream of political and social debate.) What I want to do
here, however, is to look mainly at the religious aspects of The Boys Who Stole the Funeral as sympathetically as possible, and use them -- for all their arbitrariness and gratuitousness -- as a point of entry to a larger debate of how in a modern society such as Australia religion and culture interact, and how Australian literature with its long record of people coming to terms with the land offers insight into the way in which reconciliation, redemption, and salvation apply in modern culture.

The car which the boys drive is a Morris Nomad, and there is a nomadic quality to Murray's poetic style and mind. It ranges around, loosely feeding here and there, pasturing as it goes. His style is a leaping and elliptical one, conversational and laconic. Yet the surface lightness of his manner of address leads deep into certain mysteries of the Christian faith which present themselves both doctrinally and existentially. The poetry of The Boys Who Stole the Funeral will leap from allusions to the Bible to particular observations of Australian life, from debates on sacrifice -- on blood sacrifice especially -- to sardonic asides expressed in a uniquely Australian idiom. The narrative presents itself as 140 sonnets, as the deconstruction of a novel. Yet this post-modernism in its presentation is irrelevant to its essentially conservative concerns. It is a work of high originality which the Australian public has not as yet been able to receive, let alone absorb.

The dust jacket illustration of the vehicle the boys are driving is, as I noted earlier, in the shape of a crucible or large dish. By the end of the book this image takes on symbolic power of a metaphysical kind as being for Murray the Common Dish, the Grail of the 'New World', the 'grittily real' place of Australian spirituality and redemption, the opposite of anything 'rarefied and mystical'. It is the common life of Australians. 'It's ordinary' (as Murray says in Sonnet 131) 'It's - subtle. It is - serious'. This is the positive, the saving outcome of the story, its movement into hope and towards grace.

The process of the poetry has an intuitively dialectic style of testing doctrine against (or in terms of) experience. It is done with an astonishing freedom and verve on Murray's part. It must be said that the arbitrariness of his judgements and postulates is a stumbling block to many readers. Yet the range of his awareness, the cryptic insights he offers on
page after page, and his positive sentiment or commitment of feeling to and for Australian life comprises a balance for the seemingly gratuitous way he has constructed and presented his story.

The narrative proceeds through several phases. First there is the stealing of the body and the escape from Sydney; then the reception of the boys and the 'body' by the country folk and its burial; then the completion of flight from the police, and Reeby's death; and finally Kevin Forbutt's experience, possibly in dream or hallucination or in some kind of actual mystical happening, of being initiated into an aboriginal awareness of Australia.

The poem opens with a direct statement of its subject:

It is the story of the boy
with his gift of laughing at deadly things
who stole a Digger's funeral
and took it on the country roads.

Throughout the poem Murray maintains a stance of speaking as narrator and yet of entering dramatically into the thought and conversations of his characters without formal signs or apparatus apart from changes in typography. This makes for difficult reading until the reader is willing to grasp the method, and participate actively in and contribute to the interpretation. It is closer to a didactic text than a mimetic one, at least in the sense that it requires an argumentative response from the reader. The poetry may be filled with actualizing referents but its central principle of form is, as I say, argumentative.

There is much conversation between the two young men as they drive. There is incident as they break into the funeral parlour, and, later, when they encounter a group of bikies at a roadside restaurant. But the dominant effects of the opening twenty sonnets are the climaxes of insight the poetry offers into why they are doing what they are doing.

you talk as if this were fate or something

Cameron Reeby puts to Kevin Forbutt, who replies:
He's going home. I'll make it fate.

In its cryptic way, this is Murray's flat assertion of rationale, loaded as it may be with classical and religious significance.

In the opening sequence the father of Kevin Forbutt is used satirically or sardonically as a presence and persona to voice an exaggerated critique of the Anzac or Australian warrior tradition. The fact that the son Kevin Forbutt is at odds with his father (who is a cosmopolitan Sydney trendy opposing the Vietnam War) locates and 'places' the father's views on the Anzacs in a way that does not ask for endorsement of them by the reader. But the feeling is there that Murray is getting said through Forbutt Snr something he wants to have said in his poem. I quote his views on Gallipoli, presented as they are by Murray with much capitalising-in-typeface to set Forbutt Snr's views up for ironic reading.

One Aspect that's never Developed in the Accounts is that wars in that Day were a Kind of Male Bohemia, even better than the Bush, for a buttoned-up Era. I think of Anzac as a scruffy steep Balmain full of Talkers and Dreamers and Blokes who liked a Go Killing the Turks and Germans, but fighting England: that is the secret of the First AIF, you know —

Later, in the opening sequence, an opposing voice comes into the poem when the two boys pick up someone from the side of the road who travels with them for a sonnet or two, and then disappears when they stop to stretch their legs. Now if this is Murray's allusion to the Einmaus road incident of the New Testament, then it is provocative and disturbing. The man says nothing until 'drowsing towards dawn ... Forbutt hears their passenger intently murmuring to Reeby':

Fellows of your caste have been withholding blood, friend. The women turn savage when men will not give blood.

We have hidden that too deeply: the fruit of Eve was flesh; prey, victims, the newborn: little bloody things. It was all resolved once: this is My Body, My Blood, It's coming unsolved now. And your thinkers did it.

The blood is on the thinkers. Your caste is wild for blood and yet it's denied all the masculine menstruations; war, hunting, sacrifice. No wonder women assailed you?
Perhaps you'll return to the oldest Australian solution, splitting penes with flint, and painting with blood for sacred knee-flexing round dances, making X, making O.

The two voices — of the Father and of what Murray calls the Whistle-Cock Man — circle round and create a circumference for the boys' understanding of what they are doing. Obviously, there is a high valuation being placed by the poetry on the soldier figure of Clarrie Dunn, of the Anzac tradition, and of the ultimate sacrifice offered by men in war, an assertion that blood is a test of truth. This 'blood-theology' of the Whistle-Cock Man with its 'thick voice of dread' and Forbutt Snr's supercilious explaining-away of the Anzacs define the parameters of meaning in the boys' actions for Murray. Negatively, it is anti-intellectual, anti-modernist and anti-feminist: positively, it is the clearing of space through its rejections of metropolitan culture, space for the experience of grace and hope through suffering.

A central section of the poem (Sonnets 20-76) deals with the country people and country life the boys encounter on their arrival with the body. Clarrie Dunn had expressed the wish to Kevin Forbutt to be buried at a place called Dark's Plain, near Cedar Creek, not far from the Colinbungle Post Office. This is familiar Murray country, a world only part myth, up beyond the Myall Lakes. Kevin Forbutt's mother had been a Dunn ('That isn't close' says Athol Dunn on meeting the boys). But generally their reception is a kind one. There are strong women here, competent and supportive. They are the practical saviours. There is Father Mulherin whose theological scruples yield to the point of accommodating the funeral; there is the angry activist farmer Charlie Powell who comes in for sardonic treatment, and there are the men of the farms. Eventually, a city reporter appears, following the story. He puts it to Father Mulherin provocatively:

that the First World War
was in part a post-Christian en-masse human sacrifice?

and goes on

But surely you believe, Father, in the efficacy of sacrifice:
'Without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins?'

That is completed in Christ's blood, comes the answer.
Now Murray, the poet, makes a lot of this tendentious questioning -- as much for its Australian idiom as for its content. He catches the rising inflection at the end of sentences as a point of aggressive insecurity in the speaker. He proceeds to make this trait of the rising inflection the hallmark in the speech of Noeline Kampff, the radical feminist and companion of Forbutt Snr, when the pair arrive to sort out the mess and put the country people in their place. 'Hey Generalissimo Anzac,' as she confronts Kevin Forbutt in the Post Office, 'why are you hiding your privates behind that counter? Scared of Daddy?' Her portrait by Murray is a notorious part of the poem. (Perhaps he was over-reacting to the 'Jesus is a Feminist' T-shirts of the 1970s.) But it goes further than that. He spells her name Kampff as in Mein Kampff with a double f to underline the fascism of feminism as he sees it. Noeline Kampff is there to avenge her sisters on Cameron Reeby.

The poetry of the central section of the poem is not all drama or melodrama. It is interspersed with moments of quietness when Kevin and Cameron come to experience and understand the strength and values of country living. There is the sonnet (No. 24) given over to describing a kitchen. Rarely has such metaphysical weight been placed on such a simple place as happens in Murray's reflections here:

The kitchen's not urbane. The past has not been excised here or wittily selected. It has gradually shifted outwards from the centre. Or held. The blender on the laminex reflects timber, and a tea caddy. The electric oven and the iron Beacon Light stove are toe-to-toe under the mantel.

His grief, which has been a clamped white concentration colours for the first time, teasing out the principle:
that the world is provisional, complete at every moment,
that the centre is the First Real World. My parents'. Then mine.

That away from the centre are the losses, the stands, the arrangements,
the bayoneted man dreaming I can still live, arching over as he bleeds from the centre, like and unlike the shallow river straddling a new pylon, beginning to rearrange gravel in fresh miles of consequence. Only the centre holds, the centre ...

The claim on innocence, here, would be sentimental and the belief in 'the centre' naïve if they were not put so thoughtfully ('the world is provisional, complete at any moment'), and if this vision were not being tested against its opposite in the dying bayoneted man, along with the
surrealist juxtapositioning of the pylon creating shape in the pattern of a river's flow. Murray takes an almost gleeful delight (over against the angst of the liberals in the 20th century) in asserting that the centre holds. But he does so with an underlying state of rage and paranoia to him.

Sonnets 77 to 119 tell of the boys' escape after the funeral (there is a kind of bushranger-settler solidarity that keeps them away from the police). They find employment in a sub-legal activity of meat-running, of driving illegally killed beef into Newcastle for a figure called Phil Cotton. This section of the poem is striking for two incidents that happen to Cameron Reeby. He has a traumatic encounter in Sonnet 108 with Noellne Kampff, the radical feminist, and later he is accidentally killed. Noellne Kampff and Reeby enter the kitchen at the same time on one occasion:

She sweeps from the table a bucket of watery beef-blood and with a dancing attack uplifts and discharges it fabulously down, a halo, a robe of smashed scarlet that streams to the lino, off hands, off shoulders, off forehead, that pours over chest, knees, crotch, vivid with clottings;

Murray brings many strands of his thinking and sacrifice into focus in this act. He makes one character the sacrificial victim, the other the aggressive villain. Obviously, putting this incident into his poem is a grotesque exaggeration of his anti-feminist feelings. Yet he makes the other characters present at the scene react in character and decisively. Forbutt Senior sees Noellne Kampff in a new light: his own shallow liberal trendiness is exposed by her radical fury and self-centredness; their companionship is dead. Forbutt Junior sees it as Kampff's expiation of her own guilt in having aborted her child. And someone called 'the ancient woman' (a kind of choric presence in the poem) cries out 'O Jesus Mary! O you godless mad devil-whore, you've murdered Clarrie', which may be the ultimate Australian curse for Murray in its sense of the repudiation of the sacrificial Anzac figure. But then also in the scene is the Burning Man Powell, the political activist of the farm world, who quickly sees an ally in Kampff. Sonnet 109 is a series of elliptical juxtapositionings of all these viewpoints. Murray's poem has to live with this climax at its centre, and doubtless we are too close to it to assess
the issues fully. In the poem the incident tends to overshadow the remaining events. Thus when Cameron Reeby himself is killed in Sonnet 118 it comes as an anti-climax in an absurd scuffle with a policeman.

All of which is unfortunate for Murray's poem since the closing section of the poem embodies a movement beyond this ritualised sacrificial act towards a kind of paradisal vision in the way Kevin Forbutt is brought towards his atonement with the Australian land as if the land were in itself a deity. I cannot resist quoting one sonnet (No. 112) leading into this final section. It is quiet, understated, observant; and tells of the two boys seeing an echidna, the spiny-backed anteater crossing a country road. Murray has long shown a love for the odd animals of the Australian bush -- such as the platypus and the flying fox -- as if allowing them in their shyness and oddity to become objective correlatives for himself in the poetry. He makes this echidna moment one of rare intelligent communion between the two boys, a recovering from the crucifixion trauma:

On their way to load meat, at the rainforest floodway
the two are stopped short by a black loaf of nibs
that is crossing the road. With brisk picket skirts
an echidna is humping home, nose to the gravel.

It stops, bunches, sinks as their boots come around it.
Formic-smelling, weak-eyed, the animal arsenal
gets set for a long siege. Let's sit on the bank;
he'll come out if we're quiet. Watching long water rub
crystal at points, Forbutt says Clarrie told me
how the bush altered here, when he was a boy;
one year it dripped passionfruit; one year, the bush hens
flocked into the farms. And he saw the first rabbits.

that's the first time you've talked about uncle alive.
You're talking again, Cam? Ah, there goes his nibs.

Kevin Forbutt's salvation is worked through seriously by Murray from Sonnet 119 to 140. It involves first his own physical and psychological dissolution or crucifixion as he flees into the bush after his friend's death, his wanderings, his eating of a snake, and his encounter (whether in hallucination, dream or actuality) with two figures in the bush who are shadowy, comic, and a mix of aboriginal and Irish ethnicity. They heal him and show him the secrets of the land. They initiate him into their mysteries. They take him on a track to the high lonely country of the
Australian outback. They are the outsiders of Australian society and yet possess a kind of wisdom which Murray promulgates as his poem closes. Then descending, they offer the young man the vision of what Murray calls the Common Dish, the Grail of the New World. It is a vision of the Eucharist transformed and being offered in Australian terms. Murray absorbs much knowledge of aboriginal sacred thinking into this vision. Sonnet 123 expounds a theory of the use of rock crystal in Aboriginal ritual life, as a point where Australian light, timelessness, space and singularity flow into 'the prism and the play'. It is a high point of poise and equanimity in Murray's poem. But it is through the moral vision of the Common Dish that the poem takes its hero back into society:

It's - ordinary. It's - subtle. It is - serious.

The taste suggests the holiest thing in the universe is a poor family at their dinner. It is that dinner.

Murray's imaginative world has led him to this vision of humility. His angers, his wilful and at times malign presentation on some of his characters, are a way of acting out within himself aspects of his own intelligence and feeling. In The Boys Who Stole the Funeral he attaches or applies this process of self-examination to a story of Australian life, a possible story, a parable. He achieves peace through experiencing nature after having entered into the crisis of human nature in terms of these Australian historical and social concerns.

I have spent all this time on Les Murray's The Boys Who Stole the Funeral because it is a work of contemporary and complex originality, and of a provocative and uncomfortable power. It also identifies analytically certain of the key elements to spiritual formation which have arisen in the Australian literary tradition. For if there is an idea of salvation in Australian literary and cultural experience as such, it lies in the coming to terms with the land. The past thirty years of imaginative writing in Australia have been insistent on this claim. Patrick White's Voss (1957) and The Tree of Man (1956) provided the foundation of this modern restatement of Australian experience. Randolph Stow's To the Islands
(1958) followed, while David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life* (1978) and Robyn Davidson's *Tracks* (1980) have consolidated the genre in quite diverse ways alongside Murray in contemporary terms.

Notably these visions have involved a kind of ritual sacrifice, a dying into nature, a going away from the city or civilisation to experience assimilation with nature through an extinction of the self in the infinitude and otherness of the vast land. The quest may have been at times a romantic one, one denied the ordinary person in society. It offers, nonetheless, an imaginative model of prophetic force. And, specifically, it reaches out in each case to the aboriginal world as a point of help and judgement in realising this vision and experience.

It would not be difficult to point back in Australian history, finally, to literary expressions of this preoccupation in earlier times. The first major poet Charles Harpur in a sense wrote the archetypal poem of this genre. 'The Creek of the Four Graves' tells of white explorers trekking west from Sydney and being slaughtered at night by the Aborigines. The narrative, without presuming to be symbolic, taps into the elements of an Australian myth; and in focusing on the explorers' graves in its title Harpur's poem fixes on an evocative centre of historical experience and reflectiveness. Adam Lindsay Gordon's poem 'The Sick Stockrider' also highlights the lonesomeness of the white man's burial place in colonial times. Later Henry Handel Richardson's *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* evokes a mixed feeling of part belonging and part not belonging to the earth in which the body will lie. Graves tell a story at first of colonial loneliness and isolation, then turn-of-the-century ambiguous and uncertain belonging, and now in Murray an almost dogmatic assertion of the need to die into the land.

Murray has seized on this tradition and forcefully sounded the theme of the Australian body accepting the Australian earth, realizing that in doing so he has had to reject those forces in modern Australian society that respect neither the body (and its blood) nor the earth. I believe that he is aware of the limits of literature and what it can say of the truth. Yet he also knows its powers. Right throughout *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral* he teases us with this motif of 'what is literature':
(Why did you go to the war, 
Uncle? asks young Kevin, standing on his skateboard; 
Oh it beat cows, son. It beat horsebreaking. It was 
Literature.)

'Literature' here seems to connote imagination as an instinct, an 
impulse, operating in the simplest of human circumstances, something 
gratuitous and free, even irresponsible and not always moral. Yet in 
Murray's case he allows this life process to shape itself around a world of 
structured ideas, ideals, beliefs and Christian doctrines. Perhaps we may 
let the last word be said by Clarrie Dunn from his remembered 
conversation with Kevin Forbutt, seven years before his death. The 
Murray mix of down-to-earth Australianism and a mystical and moral 
superstructure of religious ideas is clearly apparent in these stanzas from 
Sonnets 90 and 91:

I tramped with a banker once, laughs Clarrie Dunn, 
the Depression had foreclosed on his sanity. 
He wrote to Mussolini every night. But he could scrounge 
ration, 
a dab hand. And I owed him some help. He'd foreclosed on me, 
my Soldier Settlement block and my lust for possessions.

It was literature. The King. And it was the common dish. 
Do you know that dish? You will be offered it. 
Work, agony, laughter are in it; flesh and queer fish. 
You bring your own spoon. And the flavour varies a bit.

Some pick, and cry that it's bitter. Some others hoe in; 
among the eaters, most things are understood; 
long-handled spoons, gold spoons, poor spoons of tin -- 
Starvation and shame not to eat. Yet it's difficult food.

Eaters never trust the ones who will not eat; 
(I've respected some who ate from a private bowl). 
The Buddha saw the dish, and claimed there was nothing in it, 
but Jesus, he blessed it and devoured it whole --

Clarrie Dunn speaks slowly, his hands stopped round tobacco, 
talking war on the skateboard day, seven years ago.