

## ***Buckley's Hope: 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of publication in 1980***

*Introductory speech given by Craig Robertson at the Trades Hall bar, Carlton,  
Sunday 12 November, 2006*

Well, I've got you out of rabbit holes, from under rocks, down from trees, all over the place. Thanks for coming everyone; you are indeed an elite.

My first thanks go to Henry and Margot, who were Scribe Publications at the time, for publishing *Buckley's Hope* in the first place, and for keeping it before the public for all the years.

I would also like to thank again Joy Murphy for providing the Foreword to the 1997 edition. There were people mentioned in the original Acknowledgments, and some of them are here today, and I would to thank them again, and all the helpers here today.

25 years is some kind of achievement, certainly the biggest for me in a professional sense. The idea to write the story about goes back about 35 years, to days in the bush at Erica. I remember one day sitting on a log talking about Buckley with Neville Scarlett; I think something was catalysed that day.

It's been a long time, so I can't help thinking about 'then and now'.

Then, being 1977 when most of the writing was done; finance was a \$390 tax return I received that year, and Cheryl Grant paying the rent and other expenses until I could repay her later. There was a butcher in Apollo Bay. I used to go down there and buy a huge parcel of bones for the two dogs I had with me; it cost two bob. The butcher would look at me and say: 'Geez, these sausages look a bit grey', and then hurl a handful in with the dog bones. Writers' hard-luck stories!

It's actually not long — two or three of years — since the Friends of William Buckley formed at St. Leonards and around the Bellarine Peninsula, and had their celebrations for the 200th anniversary of Buckley's escape. Two hundred years ago, William Buckley was a young man in the bush, forgetting his English and learning another culture.

It was a long complex process to write the book. It derived from various sources.

There was the folklore of early childhood. I remember playing at being William Buckley. One time I packed a swag and went exploring down Gardiners Creek with my elder sister and brother. There was a huge patch of aniseed bush growing along the creek near Toorak Road. As we beat our way through it, we didn't find any aborigines, but there was a young couple lying on a rug who weren't very pleased to see us.

There was the political philosophy of the time — an interest in early environmentalism.

But, of course, it was the intrinsic drama of the story that appealed — the ripping yarn that resonates with so many issues about life in Australia. I chose *Buckley's Hope* for the title, rather than *Buckley's Chance*, because the word hope reflected that better, in the multiple meanings of the word 'hope'.

In 1980, when the book was in press, Bernard Smith gave the Boyer lectures for that year. They were titled: *The Spectre of Truganini*.

During the lectures he said: 'Black and white alike in this country have every right to hope for a fruitful convergence of the two cultures.' The gap was not unbridgeable, he stated.

This was 13 years after the 1967 referendum. In the lectures he praised and urged on artists — writers and composers in particular — to engage with aboriginal culture. This was progressive thinking in 1980, although it was never clear how that engagement was to work.

By 1997, when the book was re-issued, white writers were being heavily chastised for writing about indigenous culture. There were many instances, but the one I always remember was when an editor at UQP said that white writers shouldn't write about indigenous culture, nor should they have indigenous characters in their work.

So it seems to me that a wheel had turned; and, like so many things that happened in the 1990s, it turned in a way that defied notions of left and right that many of us grew up with.

It is interesting in this context that the book has attracted support from what we could call 'diverse' political views. But I think that is the nature of the story rather than my treatment of it.

I don't know where we are on that cycle now — probably somewhere cf. the 1990s. So I can't say I feel any great sense of progress, at least in the sense that Bernard Smith meant.

Over the years I have done some readings — and I've only ever done a handful (I thank my friends, Judi Forrester and Jane Gross in Apollo Bay, for giving me a start with that). I have also spoken at a few events, notably the Friends of William Buckley events during the recent 200th anniversary.

The theme I always seem to come to when I do these talks is that of striking roots: just how and why do transplanted people strike roots in a new land?

Barry Hill, who is going to read some poetry for us, in his book — an epic book — *Broken Song*, the biography of Ted Strehlow, wrote of the German farmers of the Barossa 'inscribing themselves into the landscape with the passionate intensity of aborigines'. (A nice turn of phrase, too.)

I can't help wondering: who does that now? Again, I wonder if there is any sense of progress. Or might it be the case that the drought — this so-called drought — might unnerve a 'globalised' culture that isn't interested in inscribing itself anywhere?

Perhaps Henry can comment on the publishing side, but have to say I would find it a hopelessly daunting project to write the book today. Correspondingly, I have great sympathy for any practitioner of the arts, such as Jan Wositzky, who does tackle it.

Maybe it just means I got older — all of us got older.

I did try and write it as a movie script in the early days — that was the big dream. I never thought I'd stand here one day to invite all my friends to invest their pension funds in the movie.