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2026 Colin Roderick Memorial Lecture
Ivor Indyk presents: *Publishing at the Frontier*

The 2026 Colin Roderick Memorial Lecture was presented by Emeritus Professor Ivor Indyk in Townsville on Wednesday 29th July 2026 and in Cairns on Thursday 30th July 2026.

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Publishing at the Frontier

As a critic and as a publisher, I often feel that I am working from the provinces. It may have something to do with my background, or my relationship with publishers elsewhere in the world, who have much larger readerships than we have – but it is also a question of choice, of being attracted to literature which operates at the frontiers, whether of language or of the imagination.

I remember encountering Henry Lawson's short story 'The Loaded Dog' when I came back from studying literature overseas in the early 1980s. I had read the story before, as a high-school student in the mid-1960s, and was completely puzzled by it. This time around I was amazed. Why are the young miners in the story going to such efforts to blow up a creek for their dinner, when they might easily have caught a fish by more rational means? It sounds crazy, but I also felt that there was a strange if bizarre logic to the practice, at least as it is depicted in Lawson's story. Andy's inventiveness in constructing the bomb out of whatever materials were to hand had the surrealism of an obsession about it, yet it served a moral purpose in the end, because the cartridge he had spent so much time elaborating, blows up – not the creek – but a vicious mongrel cattle dog that had been terrorising the neighbourhood. I found the combination of awkwardness and logic beguiling: I thought this frontier story could provide the basis for an understanding of Australian literature. Now, over forty years later, I find myself returning to it again, and to another story by Henry Lawson, 'The Bush Undertaker', in which a lonely shepherd performs a makeshift funeral for his dead mate. It ends with the sun sinking 'on the grand Australian bush – the nurse and tutor of eccentric minds, the home of the weird, and of much that is different from things in other lands.' Exploring that difference was, and still is for me, the challenge.

I offer this preamble, as a tribute to Professor Roderick, who did much to establish Henry Lawson's significance in Australian literature, and to indicate where I hope to go with this lecture, in examining the strangeness and wonder, and also the explosive power of Australian literature, as a provincial literature, performed at the frontiers of writing.

To do this, I would like to focus on a novel which is undoubtedly a work written at and of the frontier, Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*. Though it may seem remote, Wright's setting in the Gulf – with its tidal river, giant sea basin, huge meteorological forces, and divided

population– is exceedingly complex, not only in physical but in social terms. It has been an Aboriginal law place 'since time began'; it is on the other hand, in Wright's telling, a refuge for displaced people, and a dumping ground for rubbish. These contradictions persist in the town Desperance itself, which is divided internally by not one but two borders – the frontier between the predominantly white Uptown and the Pricklebush Aboriginals living on its edges, and again, between the Pricklebush people on the westside, and those on the east, engaged in a quarrel over land claims which is centuries older than Uptown itself. Beyond, there is a third frontier, between the land and the sea; and a fourth, between the displaced inhabitants, and the spirits around them.

It is little wonder then that the population should be so fractious. On one side there are the white people, 'deluded will-o-the wisps from nowhere' who disclaim their origins, on the other the fringe mob, bearing the weight of ancient memories and obligations. The former believe in barriers, and set up a protective net to guard against intruders; the latter, the Pricklebush mob, see 'huge, powerful, ancestral creation spirits ocupying the land and sea moving through the town, even inside other folks' houses, right across any piece of the country'. The slightest incident can have them both up in arms, and the response is often massively verbal, fuelled by resentment, envy, grievance or complaint, talk and more talk, and never-ending meetings, which in themselves point to a community over-governed by a bureaucracy that only contributes to the disorder. If this endless talk suggests a story-telling habit, it is nevertheless a deranged form of story-telling, not constrained by any form of logic, prone to exaggeration, rumour-mongering, scandal. It is easily triggered, by those who are different, or seem to pose a threat, or are themselves possessed by a vision or an obsession, and who, with their exaggerated eloquence, provoke exaggerated responses in others. As Wright observes, 'stories that knew no boundaries grew into epics of speculation', and it is tempting to see the existence of frontiers, and the quarrels and possibilities they foster, as contributing to this compulsion.

Mozzie Fishman, the messianic visionary who leads a convoy of thirty cars back and forth across the Top End, is said to be one among many 'religious and political fanatics, evangelists, bigots, shamans, philistines, and passing-by self-appointed gurus' in the Pricklebush, though he surpasses the others in charismatic appeal and his delivery of monologues that last all day and into the night. In Normal Phantom, the man of the sea who resurrects dead fish by a magical taxidermy performed in a part of his home which

resembles the cochlea of an ear, it is precisely his withdrawal from society which provokes suspicion. His son Will is the particular object of peoples' endless talk, for his actions in opposing the mine enrages everyone, not just Uptown but the fringe mobs too, who see their interest in the mine threatened. The novel puts paid to their talk. 'Blah! Blah! Blah! So on and so forth'. Little wonder that the town's iconic figure is a huge greasy parrot called Pirate. He is so fired up in retelling Norm's stories about the massacre of local tribespeople by pastoralists, that the town comes to worship him as a prophet.

Alexis Wright had served her apprenticeship as a writer taking notes at Central Land Council meetings in Alice Springs, and sitting down with elders on Council business – she knew the voices, and the stories, and the airing of grievances; and personally too, the memories of injustice which fuelled the urge to speak. There is a phrase in *Carpentaria,* 'just chopping wood for practice' which Normal uses to describe the recounting of his memories to Pirate. The phrase appears again in *Tracker*, Wright's biography of her close friend Tracker Tilmouth, a visionary in the mould of Mozzie Fishman and later Planet in *Praiseworthy*: Tracker is said to have used the phrase repeatedly to describe the habit of doing or saying things without any expectation that they would achieve anything.

This repetitive talking as a large-scale response to events has the quality of obsession , and obsession is one of the leading features of those who exist on this frontier. A minor example is Nicolai Finn, 'the crazy whatever' who appears out of nowhere, and dedicates himself to the task of patrolling the seashore against intruders, killing hawks and collecting empty bottles as a cover for his vigilance obsession, shuffling in a zigzag fashion from side to side as he walks the border. His awkward gait suits his belief that 'living next to the sea was like having tragedy as a neighbour.' The bearded white man Elias, who stuns the town by walking in from the sea, without any sense of who he is or where he comes from, is a walking fulfilment of this prophecy. When Nicolai is killed, Elias is given the task of applying the net that protects the community from intruders. But the chorus of suspicion directed at him reaches such a crescendo of outrage, it drives him back into the sea, and his friend Norm after him.

Norm on the other hand, is not a great talker, except when pushed to it by memories of violence. His obsession is the taxidermy of fish, 'to make fish from the sea come back to life, to look immortal'. His fishroom, where he spends all his time, is right on the frontier with the spirit world, to the point where he considers himself not the maker of his magical

work, but the instrument of a supernatural master artist, more powerful than himself – 'Steeped with ideas so enormous they could be tracked as chaotic enterprises, matrices of chaos' – just as it is with Mozzie, or Planet in *Praiseworthy*, or the author herself for that matter. Under this supernatural influence, Normal comes to think of his room as having a life of its own. The room itself seems to be working, breathing, holding one miraculous discovery after another, drawing out the secret knowledge of generations past from its visitors. As if that were not enough, once the spirit had consumed the room, according to Norm's thinking, it becomes a likeness of of the room, a replica of the room which contains the room. Has Norm gone mad? Not necessarily – the room which contains a room demonstrates a recursive principle familiar to those who dwell at the the frontier, and imagine other realities, and realities within and beyond them. The old people who have gathered around the fishroom certainky think Norm's obsession has driven him crazy, and so the gossip starts. For a time Norm does in fact lose his nerve. He doubts his ability to defy death with his fish. But he revives, and so does his respect for the other-worldly spirit who works through him, remaking the fish so they appear more and more beautiful to the eye, 'shining where the dazzling rays of sunlight, hitting onto the scales of fish, left them forever glistening silver gold on colours of green, grey, blue and pink'. This vacillation between despair and wonder is a defining feature of all Wright's obsessive visionaries.

There are many physical and psychological expressions of obsession in the novel – violence, petrol-sniffing, gambling, the guarding of territory, as well as jealousy and resentment. In its repetition and its scale, the tendency towards obsession is like the response to a chronic irritation – you have to keep scratching, it never goes away. As the novel puts it, 'the spirit of the country was raw with unkindness'.

The outbreak of violence is an ever-present threat at the frontier, and the novel registers it, not only in the memories of past massacres, but directly, through the mine's attempts on Will's life, and the devastating brutality meted out to Kevin, Normal's youngest son and joy, both when he goes to work in the mine, and later, when he is set upon by the white-hooded town louts. Like the cyclones that threaten Desperance, the outbreaks of violence escalate rapidly in intensity, as if they too were an ungovernable force. Truthful's assault on the three petrol-sniffing children absurdly suspected of murder is so graphic, blood runs down the walls of their cell, and onto the floor. That is before Mayor Bruiser has his turn, 'his scarred face set like concrete, sweat running down from his hairy skull, over his

lumpy forehead, and onto his exposed brown teeth, baring now like those of a savage dog.' After he has finished, it is left to the children to hang themselves.

The violence is horrifying – easily triggered, uncontrolled, it explodes across the landscape. In its similarity to a cyclone it indicates how easily one might cross into territory where only force rules. Obsessive in itself, the violence breeds obsessive behaviour in those it threatens, like the madness of the barman Lloydie, carressing the fish-woman he imagines embedded in the timber top of his bar, while he surrenders his young son to the violence of Truthful and Bruiser.

In Mozzie and Normal obsession takes the form of dedication to a vision so large it knows no limits. Both are threatened by the journeys beyond the frontier their vision requires – there is the danger of their being driven so far out, whether by cyclone or by ambition, that they risk breaking down, becoming unmoored altogether, left to float in outer space, like an astronaut whose lifeline to the mother ship has become untethered. This is what happens to Angel Day, a remarkable figure, larger than life, vital, quarrelsome, promiscuous, careless of consequence, until she falls prey to it. The victim of her boundless vitality in the end, and of the men dedicated to their visionary devotions, she ends up alone and abandoned in a wintery northern-hemisphere purgatory, 'she who looked like a lurid wish come true', catching eels from a foul-smelling river contaminated by corpses and industrial waste.

Because violence is so close in Desperance, funerals take on a special significance. As a frontier ceremony, the funeral is a recognition that death lies in wait on the other side, and needs to be propitiated. This is especially the case when it takes the form of a journey, as in Norm's burial of Elias at sea, and Mozzie's funeral procession with the bodies of the three dead children deep into the hills behind Desperance. 'Devoid of blue, a strangely coloured creature was man, the intruder, who ventured at his own risk into these faraway watery domains of the ocean…' So begins Norm's pilgrimage with Elias's body to the gropers' palace. The ceremonial perspective is at the same time natural (in terms of the dangers of the ocean), mythical (in its invocation of the spirits who dwell there), and psychological (in its dramatisation of Normal's grief). His voyage outward, beyond the frontier, in space and in time, is also represented as a voyage within, a confrontation with his fears and anxieties, and particularly, his memory of a young and desirable Angel Day, in 'the days of golden yellow, and boats of capillary red.' For Angel has left him for Mozzie Fishman, and Norm is preyed

upon by feelings of guilt and betrayal. The sea world with its mischievous winds seems to embody the spirit of female wantonness and infidelity. Projected across the large expanse of the sea, led by a manta ray which slips in and out of the waters, his imagination replays with yearning and regret, the dying days of his marriage, and Angel's alluring image of feminine dignity and beauty, now beyond his grasp. In his epic struggle with the giant mackerel (another ceremonial creature), his victory brings with it only a sense of humiliation, exposing him as a marauding stranger in what used to be his element.

The golden rays of the setting sun across the waves, and the colours of the giant mackerel, conjure first wonder, then anxiety as the winds 'held in the arms of the saltwater spirits' take hold, bearing the cries of the 'death angel' sea woman, a white flowing-hair witch, with slime for skin, and seaweed for clothes. When Normal arrives at the burial place, an underwater palace, where the giant gropers dwell, he is again struck with wonder by the sunlight playing over the ocean, the flashing wings of the seabirds, the massing of the gropers. The sight fills him with exuberance and joy, to the point that he exclaims, 'This is paradise'. But after disposing of his friend's body he collapses from exhaustion, and the sea whose beauty he had admired now creates havoc in his head, 'dividing itself into greater and smaller horizontal and vertical columns, forming tributaries as thick as the matted hair of the universe'. There is terror in this image, and confusion. The writing is so dramatic, you have the sense that the author is pushing her own imagination to its limits. Normal wakes from his terror to another dream, an ecstatic vision of Elias' elevation to the heavens, but after the ecstasy, he is becalmed – then engulfed by the dark shadow of the sea woman, tempting him with lust, and the dead people he has known, to jump overboard and join them. The gathering storm clouds appear as widows in watery costumes of mourning colours, lined with silver sprays of torn lace. Then, as the storm breaks, Norm's boat is caught up in a war between the trade winds. The storm almost kills him, but as he prays, the phrase 'forgive us our trespasses' suddenly stiffens his resolve, shifting the battle to political grounds, where he imagines himself sailing on a vessel called 'Trespass', living on as a fighter of wars that are never resolved in life, transformed into a death spirit, 'a thing so strange, it was perpetually salvaging little pieces of humanity by preying on lone seamen such as he once was himself.'

Finally, at the end of his journey, cast upon a beach he can't recognise, Normal is overcome by a sense of his own insignificance, intensified by strange visions and hallucinations, and by the silence of the bush – and so he talks, and talks, 'telling the most

fantastic of stories about himself'. He is still talking on the beach six hours later, 'On and on he continued, talking to the Gods, who had stopped ordering fate just to listen about the strange town called Desperance.' As if they would! Wright compounds the irony with a sly reference to the Viking King Canute, 'Plying the sea with words was a strange game but wiser men have done the same'. The sea woman who had tempted him earlier is now replaced by the devil woman Gardajala, tempting him from the bush. In an Odysseus-like gesture Norm straps his hands over his ears, reciting over and over 'Don't go thinking of her, don't go thinking of her'. 'Her' of course is not only the devil woman Gardajala, but the wife Angel Day who has scorned him.

You really have to go with the rhythm of the prose, to encompass the richness of Wright's imagining– the rapid alternations between intense meteorological, mythical and psychological realities, the echoes of other literary ceremonies and journeys, the ways in which all the windings of Normal's voyaging out to sea, can at the same time work as a politically loaded meditation on the nature of trespass and its consequences.

The second funeral, Mozzie's descent into the underworld to bury the three children, though no less resonant, is a lot more straightforward. It doesn't have the turbulence of the sea to deal with for a start. The Moses-like Fishman leads the procession with a large staff, the bodies of the boys are wrapped in tartan and covered in wild aromatic herbs, Mozzie's bag containing his sacramental implements is carried on a pole by his followers, the procession travels through the foothills and valleys to rest in a grove of gidgee trees, witnessed by night parrots, and Will's totem the kingfisher. Then it descends through a dingo's lair to a red-ochre-walled cave. The cave is essentially an ancestral vault, ancient relics litter its floor, its walls are decorated with spirit images, the air resounds to the drone of 'song-cycles arias'. At the far end, the cave opens onto an underground sea, at the edge of which paperbark canoes are moored, waiting to take the children on their journey to the after-world. Throughout Mozzie speaks, in an ancient Aboriginal language, paying homage to the dead.

The ceremonial procession is an extraordinary tour-de-force, all the more so, because the combination of biblical, classical, operatic and indigenous elements enhances the timeless, universal quality of the ceremony. Wright is not beyond investing traditional European associations with Indigenous and contemporary applications – so it is dingoes that guard the gates to this underworld, and Mozzie's sacramental objects have a makeshift

vernacular character (rather like Andy's cartridge in 'The Loaded Dog') – they include rolls of wire and a bit of canvas, a Swiss army knife, an Eveready torch and 'a can of Coke he had forgotten to drink'. The ancestral cave is part mausoleum, part cathedral, part operatic setting, a powerful expression of spirituality 'which was somehow the same, but much older than the ornate cathedrals made with stone, or the monasteries and places of worship to relics of bones and other bits and pieces of sanctified saints of old Europe and the Holy Land.' That is placing priority where it belongs.

There are at least two other journeys in *Carpentaria*, Norm's return from burying Elias at sea; and Will's journey to Desperance after the funeral for the three children. Much of *Carpentaria* is devoted to the movement of its characters, whether across the country, out to sea, or deep within their minds. Frontiers invite movement, or at least assume it, especially when the settlements at their edges afford only a precarious sense of community. Both *The Swan Book* and *Praiseworthy* are predicated upon and devoted to movement on a large scale, especially if one thinks of Oblivia's journeys from the north to the south of the continent and back again, and Planet's endless driving across country in pursuit of his donkey obsession.

Will's return to Desperance and his search for his wife and child is a phantasmagoria of hallucinatory visions, fuelled by fear, guilt, regret, – played out, in extended form, against the destructive powers of the cyclone. Just as Normal's voyage to sea was haunted by the failure of his marriage to Angel, so Will's return to Desperance is marked by the failure of his relationship with his father, caused by his defection to the Eastside in marrying Hope, and his aggressive opposition to the mine. The disruption of family ties is central to the novel, the cause of most of its turmoil. Just as severe is the betrayal of friendships, hard as they are to gain and hold in a fractious community. When Norm grieves over Elias's body, he cries from the pit of his stomach, 'like a lost creature of the earth, until the end of all things roared from his mouth'.

As Will approaches Desperance he is met by a cavalcade of cars coming the other way, fleeing from the cyclone. The people of the town are in the habit of moving *en masse*, like a chorus, blown this way and that by the winds of emotion – as in the 'rubble of disorientation, and rumble' caused by the division of the Pricklebush people into westside and eastside factions, or the 'galloping pantomime of people running through the mud with arms flying' when Elias walks in from sea. The old Aboriginal people gathered in the

Pricklebush 'walked heavy with the inheritance of antiquity stashed in their bones', but it is evident from the exaggeration of their actions, their restlessness, their escalating anxieties, their spreading of gossip, that the inheritance has become fractured. The *yinbirras* of the Yanngunyi tribe, benevolent fairy-like spirits noted for their running, turn up to help Norm after his return from burying Elias – they live beyond the horizon, having run themselves all the way to invisibility, because 'they did not want their histories contaminated with oppression under the white man's thumb.'

Will holes up in the town hotel, to escape the gathering turmoil of the storm – 'the old war of the ancestors making cyclones grow to use against one another', and the detritus thrown around by the winds – only to find the building populated by the ghosts of drowned seafarers, and the spirits of the old people. And also, the swarming of his own thoughts and memories – particularly the memory of his father, and the pain caused by their separation. In the midst of his regrets, suddenly comes this wonderful sentence 'What goes around comes around, the old people always said: *The father calls the son home. Sons sail home in ships of nostalgia*.' Where does this line about the persistence of family ties come from? The novel attributes it to the old people, but it has echoes of Homer in it, and not for the first time. A scattering of allusions mark these flights of the imagination, rather like the detached elements thrown about by the cyclone – Homer, Virgil, the Bible, Shakespeare, Defoe, and the castles, monsters and ghosts of fairy tales.

Finally, under the onslaught of the cyclone, the hotel slips its moorings, and floats off on the floodwaters, 'a monstrous palace' surrounded by rubbish, vegetation, bloated animals, rotting fish, orange sheets of plastic. Wright bestows on Will a kind of operatic delight in the chaos, as if he were the conductor of the destruction of Desperance – 'Vale! the herds…Farewell Bruiser's cattle and horses…Say goodbye pack of dogs…He eyed every bit of the ghostly brown froth and bother heading towards him with outstretched arms, purposely wanting to draw him to its huge, smothering body'. A little later on, washed out to sea, he completes this wished-for communion with the dismantled world when he finds himself stranded on a huge floating island of rubbish.

I remember, when I was starting off with Australian literature, around the time I rediscovered Henry Lawson, coming across E.J. Banfield's *The Confessions of a Beachcomber.* There he extols the rich legacy, from all the corners of the world, washed up on Dunk Island by the winds and tides – coconuts, a paddle, part of a canoe, the globe of a lamp, a coal

basket, a hammer cemented by its head to a rock, and so on and so forth. This is a major characteristic of the frontier, the coming together of abandoned elements from all over the place, and their coming apart.

Pretty soon (or so it seems, it must have taken years, but time is flexible out beyond the frontier) the island turns into a fertile paradise, populated with astonishing plants, insects and bees and birds, an abundance of vegetables and fruit, and all the materials Will needs to build a boat. 'Everything was bountiful…those were the golden days'. Eventually it dawns on Will that his island home is caught in a vortex, it isn't going anywhere. 'So melancholy started to grow in the island's rich fertile atmosphere.' His anxiety escalates. He dreams of other places more fabulous than his island paradise, which now feels like a dungeon. He goes deep into his mind, and encounters in the corner a wizard orchestrating his fears. He scans the horizon and sees ships passing, boat people, victims of environmental catastrophe, searching for a place safer than the ones from which they have come: they're certainly not interested in his floating island of junk. Once again he suffers this vacillation, common to Wright's visionaries – between exaltation and despair.

The hotel populated by spirits, and the island formed by rubbish are mighty images, expressive of the precarity of settlement. The conglomeration of discarded or displaced elements, people as well as objects – as an island, in a lagoon, a rubbish dump or a graveyard – is a recurring motif in Wright's novels. It expresses, in a compressed form, the dislocated logic of frontier life, but the motif also has larger resonances, depending on where you place the frontier. Wright allows the rubbish dump to resonate, since after all the displaced elements come from everywhere, and all times, so what it receives is not simply wreckage from a stretch of coastline or a part of the ocean, but disturbances on a continental and planetary scale. In *Carpentaria* there are references to people smugglers and refugees, and Elias who comes in from the sea with his identity and memory completely effaced, is clearly the survivor of a terrible tragedy. In *The Swan Book* the experience of the displacements wrought by climate change and political upheaval in the northern hemisphere are brought to the junk-filled lagoon by Bella Donna of the Champions. Like Elias, she comes in from the sea, but the devastation is felt on the land as well, in the shifting boundaries and fractured songlines which see black swans migrating to the Northern Territory. In *Praiseworthy*, global warming and the exhaustion of fossil fuels, has the aptly-named Planet in full flight with his plans for an international transport conglomerate based on donkeys.

This enormously expanded awareness of the forces gathering just the other side of the frontier is felt in the unsettling of the population, the convulsions of the weather, the rendering of social ties. Perhaps the most disturbing aspect is the alteration in scale brought about by this awareness, not only in the exaggerated antics of the inhabitants, where 'anything could fall from a loose hinge into full-blown hysteria', but in the way small things – a hand gesture, a sardine, Mozzie's glass eye, the pram Angel sits on as if it were a throne – take on an exaggerated importance. The names that bestow allegorical significance on characters, like Normal and Angel and Hope and Will and Bruiser, is itself a form of magnification. Anxiety and obsession take flight, fuelled by repetition. Vast landscapes are shrunk to the size of a brain, where they expand again under the pressure of emotion. Time escalates and slows, shifts abruptly between the present and the past, memory and dream, places consequences before their causes, and opens the long perspectives of Aboriginal history.

Then there are the moments of estrangement or enchantment, usually brought about through minute observation or delicately wrought images which invoke a larger dimension, as in the hostility of the pelicans menacing Will, 'wherever he tried to cut a path through their nests, their necks lunged out and he saw wobbling up to their mouths, little lumps of sound, travelling and stalling, until breaking out of their beaks into a long, deafening screech.' There is the Italian tenor Will stumbles upon, transported from who knows where, singing the aria *Che gelida manina* from La Bohème, accompanied by a chorus of magpies to an audience of empty fuel drums and used plastic bottles. And the coffins unearthed from the graveyard, floating around in the gulf. There is a long disquisition on humidity as a source of transformation, prompted by 'the giant sugarbag man of the skies' walking from horizon to horizon, 'carrying storms and hazes of madness, and sweat!'. It is another of those phenomena which warp agency, and grow and grow until they reach huge proportions, and in the case of humidity, rampant growths of mould that cover everything. Many of these effects are surreal, moving between different orders of reality; but I find myself reaching for a larger term than surrealism, something like 'the provincial sublime', both because we don't often think of the provicial as sublime, and in recognition of the sheer scale of the imagination at work here, from irritation to exaltation, from the smallest detail to huge perspectives in space and time.