‘Some Spirit which Escapes’:
Starting with the Spirit in the
Southern Land

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In 1605 Pedro Fernandez de Quiros, believing he had found the hypothetical great southern land named his discovery, with a certain baroque extravagance, Australia del Espiritu Santo. Two hundred years and a European Enlightenment later, the pragmatic Englishman Matthew Flinders reinvented Australia but quietly dropped de Quiros’ pious allusion to the Holy Spirit. The question before us is: is there (Flinders notwithstanding) a relationship between Australia and the Holy Spirit, and if so, what is it and perhaps even more importantly, what isn’t it?

One clue to the presence of ‘spirit’ in Australia is A D Hope’s poem ‘Australia’. It is perhaps a rather dated point of departure (a great deal has been written since about the experience of being Australian), and its sentiments are questionable, but I want to use it because of its quite explicit, although ambiguous, pointer to spirit.

There are several things to be said about the poem. First, I understand what Hope calls the ‘monotonous tribes’ to refer to white Australia, the ‘second-hand Europeans’. Though thank God we are a lot less monotone, and monochrome, than we were when Hope wrote, it is about the Australia that has been constructed since 1788, not primarily about Indigenous Australia. I am exceedingly grateful that others have begun to explore the theology of the Indigenous Rainbow Spirit. I personally do not feel qualified to speak for

indigenous Australia, but I will say this. Just as any realistic reflection on contemporary Australia is going to involve the encounter of indigenous with imported cultures, any realistic reflection on the Holy Spirit in Australia is going, in the end, to have to take into account both indigenous and biblical experiences of spirit.

Second, the poem alludes to, and hopes for, a vitality it attributes to ‘some spirit’, some unnamed and undefined and unidentified spirit. This spirit is ‘savage and scarlet’, it is a passionate and raw spirit. This is not Aristotle’s mind-spirit, it is not Hegel’s absolute spirit of ever-progressing civilisation. It seems not to have all that much in common even with Hildegard of Bingen’s green spirit of fecundity and nurture. This passionate, vital and raw spirit is one that, arising out of ‘the Arabian desert of the human mind’, shatters human constructs, including the Aristotelian and Hegelian absolutes we like to make in our own image and then venerate. It is not identified with white Australia - it may even subvert the post-invasion construct we know as Australia. But this is also a spirit that might just have encountered us elsewhere, in another existence so to speak. This spirit might just speak, as the Nicene Creed puts it, through the prophets — if there be prophets around. And this spirit’s iconography of ‘savage and scarlet’ is not all that far removed from the iconography of the biblical ruach elohim.

1. Australia: a nation-state or a state of mind?

To Gough Whitlam is attributed the witticism that Queensland is not so much a state of the Commonwealth as a state of mind. Once those of us from south of Coolangatta have had our chuckle, we find ourselves faced with a question we need to consider before we can move on to the more properly theological question about God the Spirit in Australia. Is there a sense in which Australia itself may be more a state of mind than a nation-state? Certainly Australia has a prehistory in the European imagination. The existence of the Antipodes was the subject of speculation and debate from early in the intellectual history of the West, the belief in a southern land finally gaining the dubious honour in the 8th century of a papal ban. This of course did not stop a good catholic like de Quiros searching for it. Jonathon Swift located his mythic land of Lilliput ‘to the north-west of Van Dieman’s Land . . . in the latitude of 30 degrees two minutes south’; that is, somewhere between Perth and Geraldton. Even after the beginnings of the invasion, white settlers here continued, against all the evidence, to mythologise the southern land. As well as being a place to stir the scientific curiosity of post-Enlightenment Europeans, it was populated — at least for a couple of decades, until a mindset of denial became politically expedient — by the ‘noble savage’. Major Thomas Mitchell named a part of the country ‘Australia Felix’, a name that rarely appeared on maps but caught the imagination of artists and novelists. It finds a distant echo in the title of Donald Horne’s ascription ‘The Lucky Country’, a term that gets reiterated over and over, most recently in the 1999 Australian of the Year speech. So Australia is mythologised, by its own inhabitants, as a land of felsitias. Even our misfortunes are mythologised with deliberate reference to European myth. We become a nation, in the older white Australian imagination, at Gallipoli - that is, on the plain of Troy, with a replay a quarter of a century later, just to be absolutely sure of it, at the pass of Thermopylae. It is as if we ‘second-hand Europeans’ have to relive this European mythic experience for ourselves. And Australia continues a state of mind.

8. This mythopoesis can be seen in the tendency of some turn-of-the-century artists to people the Australian bush with figures drawn from classical European mythology (eg Sydney Long’s ‘Spirit of the Plains’ [1897, 1914] and Arthur Streeton’s ‘Spirit of the drought’ [c. 1889]), and, later and in another form, in Sidney Nolan’s Ned Kelly series. All of these are held in the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.
This 'state of mind' condition perhaps explains why we go in for a great deal more introspection than might be expected of the pragmatic people we pride ourselves on being. A.D. Hope's poem is a good example. It is no glib anthem in praise of outward appearances—there is no 'golden soil and wealth for toil' here—but an attempt to look into the Australian soul. It has this in common with a plethora of books, not to mention the constant stream of articles in the weekend press. These books and articles include works of theological self-reflection. We Australians are constantly asking ourselves: who are we? When we speak we are not given to bold assertions of fact or identity, but rather give even our statements in the indicative the insecure, self-questioning, rising inflection of the interrogative.

And yet, whoever we are, there are at least two things we know about ourselves for sure. First, we know we are a secular, post-Enlightenment culture. In notable contrast to European settlements in other parts of the world—North and South America and South Africa—Australia was settled by Europeans without religious charter or theological sanction. This country was invaded for reasons that were at worst purely pragmatic (settlement driven by law or poverty) or at best humanitarian (Caroline Chisholm's settlement scheme, and the planned settlement of South Australia). From the beginning Christianity was a foreign import, at times even a foreign imposition. The Christianity of the British Isles did not transplant easily. This may not be entirely without its benefits: North American tele-evangelism transplants just as poorly. Colonial anti-authoritarianism saw to it that God the Father would be killed off long before Nietzsche thought to tell us about it. Although a suffering servant figure might have grasped the Australian-born imagination (we identify easily with battlers who end up being done in by the powerful, as the mythologies surrounding Ned Kelly and Gallipoli make dear) this was not, on the whole, how Christ was portrayed by the English-speaking churches in the 19th century. The pre-Raphaelite Christ of so many neo-Gothic stained glass windows looked more like a consumptive aesthete than an Aussie battler. Although the Christ-figure appeared in Australian literature quite early, and more recently in Australian art, the churches largely failed to recognize him and continued proclaiming a kingly Christ who simply failed to speak to the Australian condition.

All this did not mean Australians stopped believing in God. We just failed to see God in our various inherited churches. God was bigger and more nebulous. The newcomer who felt dwarfed by the landscape could scarcely take seriously the tribal gods that might have made sense back in England, Ireland, Scotland, or—more recently—in a host of other homelands. This sense of the sheer bigness of God, the nexus between what we find difficult even to name as 'God' and sheer vastness, continues long after the Promethean rebellion against imported deities has receded to the point of irrelevance. We still look for something, and sense the presence of something—it is less personal than someone—that we dare hardly name. This is perhaps a function of our introspection, a function also of the inarticulateness that sustains the chatter of cultured apes' even while it stands in awe of such chatter.

Second, we know space is important for us. Every Australian child who has ever been on a summer camping holiday knows what Geoffrey Blainey called the tyranny of distance. More positively, we know Australia is space, expanse, distance, and a large part of our introspection dwells on the effects of this space. Manning Clark's


history sets out to analyse the story of the encounter between a culture, the culture of Enlightenment Europe, and a geographical space, Australia. More recently, Robert Manne, space as one of the essential ingredients of Australian life. Whoever we are, and even if we feel we do not really belong here, space is important to us.

It is perhaps this sense of space that leads Australians to think of ourselves as different from other peoples, as somehow sui generis, like the platypus and the echidna. This gives us, despite our outwardly self-disparaging ‘cultural cringe’, a sneaking arrogance akin to what the older moralists called ‘spiritual pride’. Here ‘at last the ultimate men arrive...’ This sense of difference stems at least in part from the strangeness, even foreignness of the land, and while it has sustained a mythology of felicitas, it has also created a real sense of isolation, even desolation in the minds of settlers from elsewhere. Quite apart from the famous lists of desperate place names—Mounts Hopeless, Desperation, and so on—‘Australia’ is itself a name in someone else’s language, and more importantly, making reference to somewhere else, to some other ‘home’. Australia is simply ‘south’, in the way Austria—a country we are often confused with—is ‘east’. How can a land named like this by its own inhabitants ever function psychologically as centre of the world? It remains a place of exile, even though its inhabitants ‘build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat what they produce, have sons and daughters...’ (Jer 29. 5-6). Non-indigenous Australians are genuinely surprised when we visit places where people like us, people who are culturally Europeans, seem to be at home. It takes a conscious and deliberate effort, as even the popular, sentimentally patriotic song seems to suggest, for us to ‘call Australia home’. The land is foreign, and we cling to its edges. It has confronted us, especially male white Australians, as something tough, an adversary to be overcome. But this was always a costly misperception. We confuse infertility (the womb within’ that is dry) with hardness, failing to see ‘the breast still tender’, forgetting also that part of our own tribal story that should remind us how often it is the older, supposedly infertile women—Sarah, Hannah, and Elizabeth—who give birth to the children of promise. This apparent hardness belies the actual fragility of the Australian land, a vulnerability far greater than other moister, more fertile, more familiar, ‘younger lands’. Sarah’s bitter laughter and Hannah’s tears may express very well this vulnerability of the land, but while Australians often fail to hear either because we have lost our own stories or our own dreaming. This contrasting moistness and fertility of ‘over there’ is not purely physical. Over against that metaphysical ‘lush jungle of modern thought’ stands the great Australian emptiness.

2. The dangers of Spirit-talk
All this might suggest that where God-talk and Jesus-talk have failed in Australia, Spirit-talk might just succeed. Christians could begin to talk about the Spirit without ever once mentioning God the Father or the Co-eternal Son. And one of the themes of more recent work on pneumatology is the nexus between Spirit and space. The gospel might just be introduced by subterfuge. The anonymous person of the Trinity may just speak to us where the more identifiable members, the Father and the Son, have long been relegated to irrelevance. It might also suggest that our experience of space and of distance gives us an affinity to the Spirit not known in other, more crowded spaces. Well, maybe—but not so fast!
We need to be aware of two apparently opposite dangers inherent in Spirit-talk. We run the risk of unthinkingly identifying the Holy Spirit with either a logocentric spirit, a spirit of western culture too closely associated with word, or alternatively with non-specific, experiential spirit.

12. R Manne, 111.
14. This sense of surprise is one of the themes explored by Joan Dugdale in her novel The Gripping Beast (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1993).
The first phenomenon has been identified by Michael Welker, who writes:

The Western world has been shaped and defined by a spirit that exhibits another constitution, other interests, other goals, and other power structures than the Spirit of God. This spirit... has been frequently confused with the Spirit of God. 18

This western spirit is the spirit identified with mind and cognitive processes that appears in the tradition of thought from Aristotle to Hegel. This spirit is closely tied to the hegemony of the word, and it finds theological expression in the creational filioque clause binding the third to the second person of the Trinity. 19 This spirit proceeds from the word and is always secondary to it. This spirit can never escape the logocentric bias of western civilisation. The confusion of this spirit with the Spirit of God has had disastrous consequences, according to Welker, both for Christian theology in the West and, because of the hegemony of western civilisation well beyond the confines of the West in the modern era, for life on the planet in general.

Because we remain, culturally speaking, a part of western, European civilisation, this western spirit is likely to find unquestioning acceptance in Australia. Even though we Australians may fondly imagine ourselves to have an antipathy to metaphysics, and an exemption from what we sometimes perceive as the northern hemisphere focus on meaning, the outcome may be that we simply fail to notice the underlying metaphysical agenda in our tendency to introspection. We may like to think we are beneficiaries of space and its attendant virtues, while still unconsciously governed by this western spirit. 20

20. Helena Gamer's The First Stone: Some Questions About Sex and Power (Sydney: Picador, 1995) (and subsequent writing) can be read as a cry of the heart against the subjection of eros to nomos in current Australian culture, and perhaps less directly, of eros to logos.

The apparently opposite tendency, to vagueness about the identity of the Spirit, has been acutely described by Carol Johnson. While the images of God the Father and Jesus endorse, respectively, a public and masculine realm on one hand and a private and 'sentimentalized feminine realm' on the other,

(t)he Holy Spirit... has been viewed as wholly disconnected from either the Father or the Son, floating around to be co-opted by anyone who wants to make use of it... The Holy Spirit without the incarnate Son is emptiness, available for empowerment without finite identity and without suffering... (a) Spirit of easy grace and easy satisfaction of infinite desire... 21

Where the western spirit is logocentric, this is the unreasoning spirit of immediate experience. This is 'some spirit that escapes' not only the learned doubt, but indeed any identity formulated in relation to logos.

Like Apollo and Dionysus, these two apparent opposites are in reality two sides of one coin. 22 The bond between them is obscured by the tendency of popular culture to distinguish happily between 'knowledge' and 'experience', setting up an uncritical binary opposition between them. It is inappropriate to identify the Spirit of God with either Apollo or Dionysus, either logos or eros, either reason or experience, either detachment or passion. Though the Spirit of God is not without relationship to both, this Spirit transcends and indwells and enlivens both.

3. Contextualising Spirit-talk in Australia

I am very aware that all this has been no more than an

impressionistic glimpse at the experience of being Australian. Nothing has been said, for example, about the highly urbanised setting of Australian life or the multicultural composition of Australian society. I have not even begun here to explore the beach and ‘its place in the Australian psyche’.23 But the purpose of this admittedly unrepresentative sketch has been to begin to contextualise our deliberations on pneumatology, the theme of this volume, within the Southern Land. It is the question as to how this Spirit, who speaks through the prophets, might connect with Australian culture.

Steps have already begun towards a theology of the third article that starts with a biblical experience of Spirit that is not irrational, not alogikos, but which breaks open the binary opposition between word and experience.24 Lyle Dabney suggests the Spirit, properly understood, offers us such a third way to speak about God. This new way acknowledges that before we speak (with Barth) of God speaking to us, or (with Schleiermacher, and arguably also with Rahner) of us responding to God, we are already and perhaps unknowingly ‘otherwise engaged’ in the Other in whom we live and move and have our being. Further, this otherness has built into it an element of relationality. We are related to God’s Spirit, and related to one another in God’s Spirit. Dabney’s point is that this question of Spirit must become the starting point for theology. This proposed ‘first theology’ will take us beyond the ‘either/or theologies of modernity’ represented by Barth and Schleiermacher. Though Dabney’s proposal is not without its parallels in contemporary pneumatology, this does not diminish its radicalness. Where earlier essays into this area saw pneumatology as being at worst a sub-theme of ecclesiology and at best a ‘third article’ of a trinitarian doctrine of God, the proposal here is to make pneumatology foundational for theological method. The result could offer a sapiential theology that transcends both speculative theorising (‘knowledge’) and totalising narrative (‘experience’).25 This is a possibility of Spirit-talk in contemporary Australia.

‘Wisdom’ says Robert Dessai, ‘is not the same as knowledge, although not opposed to it. It’s another kind of knowing. Wisdom is seeing without analysis . . . (it) implies a much wider and more complex relationship between the knower and the known . . .’ 26 This Wisdom, which is so closely bound to Spirit is, as Mark Wallace repeatedly and emphatically tells us, above all pragmatic.27 As such it has the potential to appeal to those ‘whose boast is not: “we live”, but “we survive”’. As such it appeals to that side of the Australian identity, that sees itself as pragmatic, that admires the stoic and underdemonstrative art of survival in a harsh environment. This ‘other kind of knowing’ conforms neither to the irrelevant ‘chatter of cultured apes’ on the one hand, nor to the rampant Australian anti-intellectualism that makes uncritical claims for the superiority of ‘experience’. This is the wisdom, for example, discerned by Digger in Malouf’s novel The Great World when, in a high fever in prison camp, he sees another prisoner eating his rations.

Digger saw there was something to be learned from it: a hard-headed wisdom that would save Vic, and might, when the time came, save him as well.28

Digger is a worker, immensely practical, but he is no anti-intellectual. He reads avidly and commits what he reads to memory. But his way of knowing, especially at this revelatory moment, transcends both book knowledge and his own immediate experience of powerless indignation. This wisdom is a potential survival skill in ugly and desperate conditions.

This leads me to two reservations. One is about the term ‘wisdom’. It can so easily be idealised into something ‘prettier’, superficially


27. M Wallace, 33, 175, 194, 207.

more attractive, than this hard wisdom of the prison camp, and the Bible. The biblical Spirit is not tameable. The characters it inspires may not be particularly likeable. It has a tendency to be capricious. The biblical Spirit is an opposition Spirit. Also, as Luise Schottroff has pointed out, pragmatism has its own moral ambiguities. The other reservation is that, because of the dangers of Spirit-Talk outlined above, there needs to be some discernment of spirits. The wisdom that is of the Spirit of God is not to be confused with the more conventional wisdom sought by ‘the Greeks’. It is here that I am not entirely satisfied with Dessaix’s definition as ‘seeing without analysis’. Wisdom does not necessarily neglect analysis, but it certainly resists being satisfied with analysis alone. It is in the task of discernment that Lyle Dabney’s pneumatologia crucis will have its proper role. Even so, this biblical Spirit will appeal to Australian pragmatism. So long as it is a non-filioquist Spirit, a Spirit related to but not too closely tied to logos, to language or cerebration. This is a Spirit with the freedom to inspire a non-verbalised sort of wisdom.

There may be a second advantage in this Spirit-talk that Dabney offers, though it is one I cannot develop here. This Spirit may offer the possibility, as he suggests, of breaking open binary oppositions, not only between different ways of knowing, but also the deeper opposition between signifier and signified. The first theology suggested by Dabney may have the advantage of being eminently post-modern, with the potential to appeal to the members of the post-Enlightenment society Australia is.

Dabney’s suggestion for a new first theology that starts with Spirit may not be just a helpful direction for theology in general as we approach the new century. It may be the only way to do theology in Australia. We have already seen it in the work of the Rainbow Spirit Elders, whose implicit assumption is that the Spirit has always been present in this place, though we—or at least, some of us—did not know it (Gen 28: 16). This oldest of lands is not heavily overlaid with ‘the emotions and superstitions of younger lands’. But it is this very barrenness and emptiness of the land, of the fact that sphinx is long demolished and stone lion worn away, that may give us more immediate access to the wisdom that emerges from the land itself, a wisdom that takes flesh in the messiah, the Spirit-annointed one we know from our other dreaming. And this wisdom, though seemingly harsh and inhospitable to those of us whose tribal myths stem from greener, younger lands, may turn out, when listened to carefully, to offer an extraordinary generosity:

Today there are lots of people living in this country. People who have come from all over the world. But we don’t call them foreigners. We don’t ask ‘Where’s your country? Where’s your father from?’ They have been born here. Their mother’s blood is in this country... This is their country too now. So all of us have to live together. We have to look after each other.

To start with the Spirit would involve a new understanding of the task of theology and the churches. The task of theology would be to listen to wisdom, the wisdom of the people, of the land and of the coastline, and to relate this wisdom to the biblical traditions about Wisdom and Spirit. This does not mean either the direct application of wisdom themes, not does it mean speculation about wisdom. It is much closer to Dietrich Ritschl’s notion of theology as wisdom. It is not about wisdom as a theme for theological reflection, but about wisdom as a method. The task of the churches would then be to understand themselves and to live as custodians of this wisdom.

34. Op cit.