

ml/2020-9

Convict voices unlocked

by Brenda Pittard

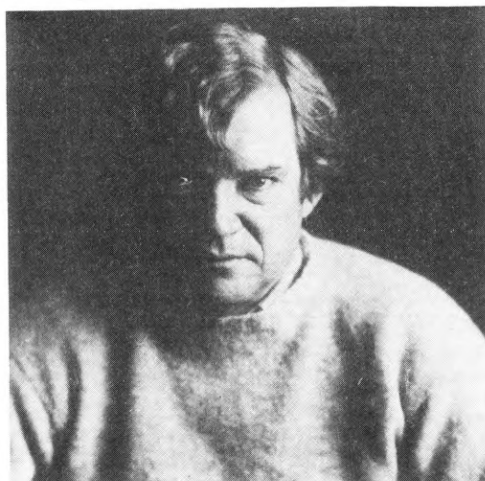
Without the incomparable library collections of Australia, and in particular that of the Mitchell Library, Robert Hughes says he couldn't write the kinds of books he likes to write. He was talking, of course, about his new book *The Fatal Shore*, which has already been so enormously successful, here, in the USA and in Britain, that it must have surpassed even the most optimistic forecasts of its publisher, Collins.

meat for the English market.

By the time he had finished work on the book, Hughes had formed the view most strongly that Australia owed very little to Britain, that the mother country had been a 'very poor parent indeed'. The logical path for Australia to follow leads towards republicanism.

Just these glimpses of his book must have made most members of the audience very keen to read it for themselves to find out more about Australia's beginnings and those early settlers.

The opportunity to meet Robert Hughes and to hear him speak about libraries and his book, was greatly appreciated by all who attended and the Library Society must be congratulated for the speed with which they organised this function. If you want to be sure to keep up to date with events in Sydney's literary world, why not contact the Library Society, c/- the State Library of NSW, Macquarie Street, Sydney.



Hughes was speaking at a lunchtime function organised by the State Library of NSW's Library Society. The feeling of enthusiasm was high among the very large crowd of people who had come to meet the author, buy his book and hear what he had to say.

Many more people than the Theatre of the State Office Block was to be able to hold were crowded in the foyer. Then after being delayed in the foyer by the sheer number of books being sold, people wanting them autographed and just wanting to ask questions, Robert Hughes, blond forelock looking suitably tousled, arrived at the Theatre, filled with people standing in the aisles as well as all the lucky ones who had actually got seats!

After apologising for the jet lag that had prevented him from giving as much attention to the preparation of his talk as he'd have liked, he proceeded to treat us to the kind of lively, interesting, entertaining and well-presented speech his TV appearances had led us to expect!

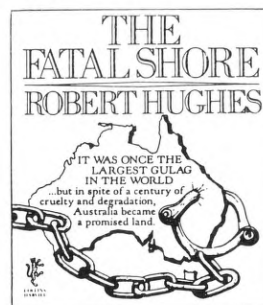
Libraries, Hughes said, were not readily perceived by the public as institutions of cultural value — the purchase of a rare book did not generate the same kind of interest as, say, a painting by a major artist. Yet it was only through the vision of collectors and librarians that there was available to the nation the storehouse of information which enabled a writer to seek out the truth. Housed in libraries 'is the paper which provides the funds of materials about the past upon which we can draw'. As guardians of such vital treasure, Hughes said, 'librarians may be seen as benevolent dragons of care and admonishment before their rare book stacks!'

Beginning his research for *The Fatal Shore*, Hughes had not expected to find so much original material from the convicts themselves. Gradually the letters, journals, diaries and other documents began to tell the story of the early days of settlement through the convicts' own voices. The assignment system *did* work, in fact Hughes feels that it was instrumental in forming the attitudes of Australians towards work. And for the most part, when the convicts had completed their period of assignment, they preferred to stay in Australia rather than return to England. Not, as he said, that many free tickets back were being offered!

The theory of biological determinism being advanced with great enthusiasm at the time is quickly exploded. As Hughes points out, a group of people 'handpicked for their criminal propensities quickly developed into one of the most law-abiding societies in the world!'

Quite early in Australia's history, convict origins began to be hidden away. Such euphemisms as 'government man' or 'empire builder' were readily adopted. Later a 'national pact of amnesia' was entered into so that the people could feel more comfortable and relate to history as they knew it — times of great men and great deeds.

The myth of the 'convict stain' was perpetrated, but an effective solvent was found in the form of blood. The blood of as many soldiers as England needed to fight in her wars. Then, Hughes says, the amnesia became a kind of fierce patriotism which took Australians to war for England until the time came for them to return to their national mission — that of growing cheap wool and



Above left: A warm handshake passes between Robert Hughes and Mitchell Librarian, Baiba Berzins.

Freedom of Information for SA

The South Australian Branch of the LAA is on the FOI offensive and is putting its weight behind a Private Members Bill for a SA State Freedom of Information Act. The LAA is joining with the Civil Liberties Association and the Australian Journalists Association to lobby for the Act.

Coverage in the Adelaide press has stressed the importance of equal access to all information as a basic democratic right. In an item based on an interview with SA Branch Past President, Alan Bundy, published in *The News* 16 February, Alan describes the process of obtaining government information as cumbersome and inefficient.

He also commented that the SA Government's argument about the cost of FOI was a 'red herring' as the cost of free information should be considered in the same way as the cost of administering Parliament — part of the total cost of democracy. The cost argument 'reflects politicians fears, which means they have something to hide, or that the system is so inefficient that it is very cost ineffective'.