

Cutting Grass: In Search of the Australian Male*

Keith Sedgman**

Even Bastards Care

She was pretty, I was confident
She was pregnant
We married
I did the right thing
That's how I cared.

I yelled at the children
Then went to work
I gave her a home
I did the right thing
That's how I cared.

She asked for my time
I had my own interests
I paid all the bills
I did the right thing
That's how I cared.

She said, 'I don't love you'
I said, 'You're unwell'
I asked for a reason
I did the right thing
That's how I cared.

She walked out last week
It seems so unfair
I can't understand it
I pleaded with her
This 'bastard' cares.

Feelings flood through me
Hurt and despair
Why didn't I listen
What care meant to her
But who would believe
Even 'bastards' care.

Peter K. Jordan***

Years of working with men in counselling have confronted me with the question: who and what is the Australian man? Men who say 'Blokes can't get a fair go in Court.' 'Courts are biased.' Biased toward whom? Biased

against whom? These men say, 'biased toward women.' 'Biased against men.'

Many of these men hold traditional male jobs: that is, their work takes place outside the home. Their partners and wives often occupy more traditional 'women's work' roles including work inside the home. These women also report that they deal, on behalf of them-

*An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the Australian Family Therapy Conference in Sydney in 1994.

**Keith Sedgman is a Court Counsellor at the Family Court in Brisbane (GPO Box 9991, Brisbane). He is also the author of a book of short stories published by the Family Court in 1997.

***Peter K. Jordan, poet, private practitioner, ex Family Court Counsellor. PO Box 466, Indooroopilly Q 4068.

selves and their children, with teachers, doctors, and social workers, and have learned the language used by those agencies. In taking personal details from a couple (in an initial session) I frequently see men squirm with discomfort even when asked for marriage, separation and birth dates. Their lack of awareness of these details confirms their sense of inadequacy and distance from the emotional life of their family. Often, in my experience, the Australian man presents in Court like a stranger in a strange land; wary, hostile, with low expectations and protecting a vulnerable hope. A hope for reconciliation. A hope for justice. Despair that a relationship may be over or that there will be further losses—loss of his own role as father, as husband or partner.

The Samson Solution

There had been an alleged incident of indecent sexual assault by Phill on Sandra.

Phill couldn't remember. He was drunk.

Sandra left with the children. Went to a refuge.

Phill is desperate for reconciliation. 'Come back and I'll change.' Sandra is desperate for separation. 'Change and maybe I'll come back.'

Phill has intrusive thoughts of snatching Sandra and the children and driving them and himself off a bridge—the Samson Solution.

Sandra has refuge workers, Women's Legal Service, Domestic Violence Resource Centre, the police.

Phill has . . .

Phill doesn't believe in counselling. He comes for a talk in the hope that this will convince Sandra to return.

Phill comes for twelve 'yarns', and 'chats' on the telephone twenty something times during twelve months. He joins AA. Achieves access. Forms a new relationship. He and Sandra attend for a joint session after twelve months.

Men like Phil often describe their situation in terms that illustrate their sense of powerlessness in Court; their powerlessness to deal with their own feelings. They describe no connection between themselves and the problem and hence, experience no connection to the solution. The very term *counselling* can be alienating for them. For them, counselling can mean giving up their control; giving someone else control. Inviting strangers into private parts of themselves and their lives.

As a Man, I'm Here under Protest

What can you do for us
You with your degree for fixing us
I'm here under protest
So let's see if you meet the test

Our problems are private
But she wants them discussed
Even said she'd leave if I didn't front up
So let's see if you meet the test

We adults should be able to work it out
But she just ignores me now
You're supposed to be good on advice
So let's see if you meet the test

You expect me to reveal myself
But I don't agree with us opening up
What good can talking to you do for us
So let's see if you meet the test.

I wanted her to tell me about us
But she says I'd make too much fuss
Now here's her chance to open up
So let's see if you meet the test

You've listened so far with hardly a word
I'm surprised I've done all the talking
With you just sitting there
So let's see if you met the test

You've heard my views on counselling
With my anger and my despair
But, since I've put aside the time
Would you consider counselling us?

Peter K. Jordan, 1989

This paper is part of my attempt to learn about, understand, and work with the Australian male. And this is how I went looking for him.

While filling the petrol tank of my trusty Briggs and Stratton mower and setting the height of the blades, I glanced up and down my suburban street at the neighbours' lawns. It was a Saturday afternoon and my mower was about to join in the cicada-like cacophony of the weekend mowing ritual of Australian suburbia. The motor mower, like the clothesline, is an Australian invention, exported to the rest of the world. Part of a cultural cross fertilisation with say, Oklahoma, USA, the state that invented the parking meter and the shopping trolley. In the Kirkpatrick Centre, Oklahoma City, there is a statue of a Mr Goldman, the shopping trolley inventor. I haven't seen or heard of such a mark of respect for our neglected mower inventor, Mr Mervyn Victor (Victa) Richardson.

With the tank filled and blades set, I started the mower and carefully pushed it up and down the yard in straight lines. This ritual is one I recall my father and my grandfather repeating for many years. It seemed that a lot of other Australian men had received the same schooling, if what I saw in my neighbours' yards was indicative. In my mind's eye, I could picture, all over the country, millions of Australian men on millions of suburban blocks pushing their mowers and *taking control* of their yards. Their yards, not their wife or partner's, *theirs*. Australian mythology eulogises the Australian man as a bushman. We find most Australian men today living in the suburbs, yet maybe the bushman spirit is still alive.

Despite our discussions on how we would share the

jobs inside and outside the house, my partner and I had evolved a system, I suspect almost unchanged from our parents', where I would mow, edge cut, wash the dogs and clean the car, while she would dust, vacuum, and do the grocery shopping. The yard, I suggest, is the place where men express their relationship with themselves, with their wives, and with nature. That is why he does not cook in her kitchen but is the recognised master of the BBQ. It is *his* BBQ.

While mowing, I noticed the length of grass left by my fellow Australians, my mates and soul brothers. To be blunt, their lawns were subdued, cut to just above ground level, with any blade of grass serious on photosynthesis cut off at the knees like a lopped tall poppy. Some of the trees had suffered the same fate; pruned would be one description, butchered would be another. As each man is master of his own yard it was not, I thought, for me to judge his work. However, I found myself reflecting on the appearance of these Australian suburban yards and comparing them to ones I saw in the United States. I remember being struck at how the Americans allowed their lawns to grow long and lush. This contrast challenged me to realise how a simple activity such as lawn mowing might be revealing of aspects of Australian culture as a whole; a symbol of a people. Australian culture, with an apparent emphasis on taking control and subduing an environment. American culture, with a more limited intervention in the growing environment. Propagation, perhaps, as opposed to pruning?

Keep the Calf and the Cow will Come Home

Jack found out about Mary having an affair.

He had had several affairs during their marriage. Mary described a lonely marriage. Jack described an 'OK' marriage until Mary's affair.

Jack evicted Mary from the home to sort out 'her problem'. He kept the farm and 'the boy'.

Mary is uncertain that she wants reconciliation. Jack denies access to Jason for Mary. 'She's not a good mother ... She's immoral ... A bad influence.'

Mary attends for access. Can't see Jason. Can't see or hear any of her animals.

Asks Jack

'Where's me chooks?'

Jack smiles.

'Where's me rabbit?'

'In the freezer.'

'Where's me dog?'

'In the freezer.'

'Where's me ducks?'

'In the freezer.'

'Where's Jason?'

... ?

Historically we can recall the immigrant Americans 'as men of adventure [going] where money could be made'

(Samhaber, 1963) and as asylum seekers, like the Pilgrims of the 'Mayflower'. The immigrant Australians, in contrast, were the unwanted, rejected convicts and later, Irish deserters and dissidents (Kociumbas, 1992). The American settlers were bound for a new world and new opportunities for economic and religious freedom. The Australians were transported, oppressed, without the power to resist their enforced eviction from Great Britain, simply moved from one form of penal confinement to another.

The American colonies of course contained 'transported' Africans, so both societies had unequal and stratified populations of gaoled and gaolers, empowered and powerless, but the North American settlements did not start life as penal colonies for whites. It is also noteworthy to recall the unequal number of women and men in the Australian experience, this factor promoting what we call 'mateship' (male intimacy), and the role of convict women in contrast to the Puritans of the Mayflower. The apt title of Summers' (1975) *Damned Whores and God's Police* sums up the early roles assigned to women in the Australian experience. Often I hear men today describe their wives, when courting, as wonderful, lovely girls, but after separation, as emasculating, spiteful bitches. Rescuers and persecutors: God's police and damned whores?

The early women settlers of the American adventure, although obviously limited in their options by the gender prescriptions of their time, were not confronted with such a restricted choice of roles. Instead they initiated the early elements of the heritage of 'God, Mom and apple pie.'

Whores and Madonnas

John, administrator of church homes for the aged and Deacon of his own congregation, in a marriage to Sue for twenty years. Emotionally and verbally abuses Sue and their three daughters. Has multiple affairs.

She leaves after physical abuse. Takes the girls. John angry. Blames Sue. States, 'I don't believe in divorce. The Bible doesn't allow it.'

John states, 'She's a whore. Slut. Jezebel. If she does the right thing and comes back, I'll forgive her.'

John blames Sue for the elder two girls refusing contact. That too is 'Sue's fault'. 'She's badmouthed me. Brainwashed them.' John cannot accept that the girls could, of their own volition, reject him.

In close proximity to each other on the Barbican in Plymouth, England, are two stones. One marks the departure point of the Pilgrims of the Mayflower. The other, of the First Fleet to Australia. Geographically the starting point was the same; however, even before the start of either epic the travellers were continents apart.

What of the early experiences of each set of peoples? The Americans found a challenging but fertile home of

The Husband

Strewth. It was a long time ago.
She was 16.
She was warm, friendly—
A little girl. I was attracted.
I loved her. Obviously I still do.

It was never smooth. We're stubborn
want our own ways
Like others.

I always wanted Jessica.
The best moment.
Nothing can beat it.

I'd lost respect for her. The bitch.
I was devastated. She took Jessica.
And here we are today.

The Wife

He was tall, dark, handsome
He was easy to get on with.
Because I was young, I didn't know
I saw Mum put Dad down
I'm a bit like her.

Upon reflection I see things differently.
He left and I loved him.
I had Jessica.
I wanted her.
But we fought over her even then.

Looking back, our history and my
loneliness kept us together.
Hated him caging me in. Resentful
I left.

Keith Sedgman

familiarly European beauty. The Australians landed in a strange landscape, of uncertain and totally alien appearance: the Antipodes. Australians clung and still cling to coastal Australia, to become one of the most urbanised populations of any country. The Americans spread north, south and west. Cliches summarise their developing experiences. For the Americans, it was 'Go West' or 'On to Oregon', to States later named in recognition of landscape features—Montana (mountainous), Colorado (coloured)—or with words of non-English origin (Texas is from the Indian word 'Tejas', meaning 'friends'). 'Go West', has become synonymous with a positive, optimistic spirit; by contrast, the Australian expressions 'go bush' or 'outback' are far more ambiguous. Even if a convict escaped to the wilderness, he would have 'Buckley's chance' of survival. Our closest approach to optimism is 'she'll be right' or (more recently) 'no worries'.

For Australians, the move outwards was from New South Wales—named for Wales in the Old Country—to territories later named *Queensland*, and *Victoria*. Except for *Tasmania*, our other state names resolutely ignore even other European cultures involved in early voyages of discovery. Consider for a moment this semantic branding iron, with its total rejection of the worth and identity of the indigenous landscape. While the American colonists were no less hostile to their indigenous peoples, they at least assimilated into their titles for new regions the names of some of the existing indigenous nations (Dakota, Iowa, Massachusetts). The Australians even in naming their colonies depended upon the English experience, as they relied upon Mother England for food, sustenance and culture—or should I say sport? A dependency in multiple senses upon a Mother. 'Mother England'.

The Americans achieved separation through a War of Independence in which they were assisted by their

French allies. A separateness of nation, identity and culture. One which facilitated a healthy self esteem (even if a little inflated at times). As an Australian, by contrast, I remember classrooms with large impressive maps on the wall and globes on the teachers' desks. These maps and globes were part of the days of Empire, of imperial measures; pounds and stones; pounds and shillings. The pink areas on the globe signified England's Empire. Australia was an outpost of this 'Empire upon which the sun never set'. Australian men referred to England as home. They volunteered to fight Afrikaner Boers, German 'Huns' and then German Nazis for God, King or Queen, and Country. Men who had never seen England were homesick for her.

Australians were transplanted Europeans with a White Australia Policy towards Asia, and a denial, until the 1967 referendum, of Aborigines as being Australians. Theirs was an attempt to build a home like the home they hadn't been home to. These attitudes are found even in some of our Prime Ministers such as the Anglo-ophile Robert Gordon Menzies, who is quoted as saying 'I did but see her passing by/Yet I shall love her till I die ...' in reference to Queen Elizabeth II. Menzies was born at the small wheat and sheep town of Jeparit in country Victoria.

More recent historical debates in Australia, as initiated by then Prime Minister Paul Keating, have been:

Australia as a Monarchy or a Republic?
Keep the Flag or change the Flag?

Current debates fanned by Independent MP, Pauline Hanson include:

Is Australian culture multi-cultural?
Open Immigration or selective Immigration?

These unresolved national issues stand before us individually and collectively. Blainey's 'Tyranny of Distance'

could apply as much to gender, culture and relationship as it does to geographical distance and closeness.

The 'Australian Legend', to borrow Russel Ward's (1963) title, is inexorably enmeshed in people, places and events—the Eureka Stockade, Burke and Wills, Ned Kelly, Gallipoli and Phar Lap—that mystify, celebrate and iconicize defeats, tragedies and doomed heroes. How might the behaviours of the contemporary Australian male reflect these icons?

Eureka. The man, well defended in his stockade. With his mates, perhaps clustered around a BBQ, talking about the separation, overrun by the legal system. Like Ned Kelly, he comes out firing against all the odds, his heavy armour of denial and anger protecting him from the bullets.

Burke and Wills. Lost, weary. On his own. In a desert (perhaps called Counselling). An unfamiliar territory of sadness and depression.

Gallipoli. In the trenches. Dug in. Retreating in order to advance, rather than 'flogging a dead horse' (I had to mention Phar Lap somewhere). Gallant in defeat, but defeated, nonetheless.

Statistics tell us that in two thirds of Australian separations it is the wife who leaves the husband, the woman who leaves the man. The women relate that:

'I told him we've got a problem.' He said, 'No, we don't.'

'I told him it's serious. Let's get some help.' He said, 'It's not that that bad.'

'I told him I'm leaving him.' He said, 'You can't. No. Let's get some help, go somewhere.' 'I told him, it's too late.'

Let him down Lightly

Family Court Counselling
I want to make an appointment
The marriage is over
I don't want to hurt him
Just let him down lightly

I've told him it's over—
Well I've made a few noises—
Not too directly I guess
I don't want to hurt him
Just let him down lightly

He's really quite helpless—
He's just a big kid
Leaving him, it's not easy
I don't want to hurt him
Just let him down lightly

If I tell him in counselling
You can help him understand
I know he'll need help
I don't want to hurt him
Just let him down lightly

Leaving without hurting
Being dumped with no pain
Supporting him is a strain
Can I give him the power
To decide his own pain or gain?

Peter K. Jordan, 1989.

In my work with men who are separated or involved in disputes over children, I hear them say things like: 'It's not as if I hit her.' (In fact the statistics I gathered on one particular counselling circuit indicated that over 60% of the couples attending had domestic violence issues involved.) Or, 'I always come home with a full pay packet, not like some blokes.' 'She's had it good with me. I don't drink or smoke.' 'It's not like she starved or missed out on nothing.'

These men define themselves, and relationships, in terms not of positives, but rather in terms of *the absence of overwhelming negatives*: their message is '*I did enough not to be rejected*. What more can be expected of me?' If my interpretation is correct, these men are merely reflecting in these words their understanding of an evolved definition of Australian men, and Australian men in relationships. The laconic cliché 'She'll be right' is indicative of the historical, cultural, gender and environmental heritage of Australia.

My focus in this paper—at times metaphorical, at times sociological and historical—is that in working with the Australian man, I attempt more fully to understand the various factors that impact on him and help define him: the historical, the cultural, the environmental, the gender influences that make him unique but still allow me to value him. I accept that I am talking here in gross generalisation, but generalisations can still be helpful in understanding the individual.

I have come to the belief that just as family therapy attempts to understand the component and interacting parts within the family system, so we can benefit from understanding the many parts that go to make up the Australian man within the context of Australian history. I propose that because Australian men construct their self images and conduct their relationships within these influences, we, as practitioners, need to be more sensitive to these factors. In closing I say two things: firstly, whether out of personal horticultural interest or as a joining move, ask your male clients, 'How do you cut your grass?' And secondly, would you please forward to me your donations toward a statue for our neglected motor mower inventor, Mr Mervyn Victor Richardson.

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