

So what was this experience? The tense years of their intimate collaboration are well documented in *Your Most Obedient Servant*. They were the years of the rise and fall of the DLP, the decline of the Movement (“my failure”, according to Santamaria), the expansion of the National Civic Council into Asia and its retreat, a growing demoralisation in the church, disenchantment with the education system (“one of the worst things we did was to win State Aid for Catholic schools”).

Throughout these years the two friends complemented each other. For McAuley, Santamaria personified not only an adamant anticommunism but also the total commitment to the containment of modernity which he had once vainly sought in the Eastern religions. He also had a genius for analysis, strategy and organisation which was well beyond McAuley’s powers and which he profoundly admired.

Yet McAuley also brought something of great value to the collaboration. He was more than a poet. He had a prophetic gift, a sense of the crisis of civilisation that sustained his readers and brothers-in arms.

Together, in collaboration, through all the struggles, victories, defeats, retreats, reflections, and reconsiderations, they developed a far-reaching critique of Western civilisation and modernity—the most comprehensive that has yet been heard in this country. McAuley provided the poetry and music and many of the ideas, but it was Santamaria who articulated and expounded their

critique, day in day out.

He continued to develop it in the twenty years after McAuley’s death—that third stage of his life. Patrick Morgan senses “a whiff of tragedy” in these last days. I agree with Morgan, although I would add that there always was a certain whiff of tragedy, almost from the beginning. Santamaria had no illusions about Australia and his countrymen. By the end, even his pride, if not his faith, in the church was blunted. (See his moving letter to Robert Stove about “the Lefebvre matter”).

No one will agree with everything he wrote. The 800-pound gorilla in the corner is his economic policies, especially his hostility to the free market and free trade. (I recall hearing him deliver a speech on the economy to a sympathetic audience in Melbourne in the 1990s. It lasted two hours. It was very Old Labor. It did not convince many of us.) Yet even when he was not persuasive, he was always a compelling polemicist.

He was a prodigious journalist. But more than that, he was a sage, seer and visionary. He was a great Australian.

This selection of his letters, superbly edited by Patrick Morgan, will inevitably renew public interest in his amazing achievement.

*Your Most Obedient Servant* was launched at the University of Sydney in February by Cardinal Pell, Fr Edmund Campion and Peter Coleman. This review is based on Peter Coleman’s speech on that occasion.

## CHICKENS IN CHARGE

by James Franklin

*The Triumph of the Airheads and the Retreat from Commonsense*, by Shelley Gare:  
Park Street Press/Media 21 Publishing, 2006,  
\$29.95.

SHELLEY GARE is affectionately remembered by Australian intellectuals as the founding editor (1996–98) of the *Australian’s Review of Books*. Just for once, the feuding classes put away their backbiting and resentment to admire a publication that commissioned a wide range of high-quality writing on ideas and paid *a dollar a word* for it.

*ARB* was widely read but lost money and could not last. Gare herself moved on to edit the *Sun-Herald/Age’s* lifestyle magazine, giving her hands-on experience in the parade of airheaded culture she excoriates in *Triumph of the Airheads*. She wrote for the magazine an unexpectedly successful column purportedly written by her cat, and when her position as editor was made “redundant”, she was allowed to take the cat’s intellec-

tual property (if that is the correct phrase) with her. The column continued successfully elsewhere, only to be outmanoeuvred by a rival column written by a chicken.

But chickens, as she says, don’t just write columns, they come home to roost. Gare argues that the bloating of newspapers and other media with enormous lifestyle supplements and celebrity trivia is a symptom of something that has gone seriously wrong across the board. Airheads, people without general knowledge or common sense but with an eye for hype and the main chance, have moved from the decorative fringes of society to the centre. They have taken over, in business, government, the arts and education. And the youth are being corrupted by imitating them.

This is a book of examples, not of graphs and statistics. And very readable examples they are—this is one of most snappily written non-fiction books in recent times. Many of the horror stories are lined up in the margins of the page under headings like “Omigod” and “Whatever”. “Sydney’sider Tony Keep went into David Jones to buy a jumper. A young salesman showed him one, and Keep asked him if it was wool. The salesman looked at the label and said, ‘No, it’s pure merino.’” An *AFR* ad for the Porsche Cayman S: “Porsche’s new baby. An excellent reason to delay yours.” (Supposed to be a joke, no doubt,

but ...) From the Body + Soul supplement, *Sunday Telegraph*: "'Laurie touched different areas of my body and asked every organ what it needed,' she says. Now ... she checks in with her organs on a daily basis to ask them what they need."

Very funny. But there is analysis behind the stories. Gare fingers two culprits, postmodernism (widely understood) and economic rationalism. Those two bodies of ideas are not normally attacked by the same people, but Gare argues they form a pincer movement that shreds decent human values and coherent thought processes. Most readers of *Quadrant* will probably agree with her views on postmodernism and appreciate her examples of its effect on the education system (Australian Education Union branch president: "I would hate to see this debate turn into an absolute prerequisite that all teachers have to pass spelling bees. Literacy is more than just learning how to spell."). They may warm less naturally to her criticisms of the doings of capitalists, but her evidence gives cause for concern.

According to economic theory, businesses are subject to a "reality principle" (unlike, say, literary theory) in that they have customers to satisfy and have to do it as efficiently as their competitors in order to stay in existence. A nice theory, and no doubt true in the long run, perhaps even in the short run for the corner delicatessen. But as in the parallel case of biological evolution, for more complex organisms there can be detours through a lot of peacock tails and overgrown antlers on the path to extinction. The distance from market "signals" to management accountability is illustrated by one of the more satisfying stories in *Triumph*. A subeditor sacked through Lachlan Murdoch's decision to close down the *Australian's Review of Books* chanced to meet him in the lifts:

"You're the bloke who's made me lose my job," she said upfront. "Are you sure you don't want to change your mind about closing the *ARB*?"

"We had to close it," said Lachlan. "It was costing us a million dollars a year."

"Really," replied the sub quickly. "Well, if you hadn't put your money into One.Tel, we could have kept it going for another 500 years."

To all appearances, executives fired for spectacularly bad decisions are as rare as hen's teeth. Unless you count those CEOs paid vast sums to go quietly, which again does not inspire confidence in the process for weeding out airheads at the top.

Some of what Gare has to say resembles the critiques of "managerialism" found from time to time in the pages of *Quadrant*. The particular aspect where she is both most informed and most angry is the rise of Human Resources. "One moment, there was a pleasant, greying man in a cardigan in Personnel, dealing efficiently with

everything from pay to annual leave ... and doing it so that we, the workers, could get on with our jobs." But now ... 100,000 HR professionals and HR managers spend their time hiring more HR managers, getting in the way of workers hiring people with the relevant skills, issuing compliance documents, and ensuring the workplace is full of "team players" and "culture fit".

A question Gare treats only briefly is: were we really less airheaded in the past? Is the sky falling or was it always down around our knees? She is very much what the ancients called *laudator temporis acti*, one who praises the simpler virtues of the Golden Age. Those virtues—the sober pursuit of serious reading, attention to grammar, concern for others, fairness, thrift—certainly existed. But how widely?

When Gare writes, "My parents were serious people. It was expected of their generation," the first statement is more clearly true than the second. Her mother was Nene Gare, author of *The Fringe Dwellers* (1961), the first novel dealing with urban Aborigines, her father Western Australian Commissioner for Native Welfare. Family backgrounds do not come more serious than that. Perhaps someone differently placed in the order of society might have a different memory. Gare does provide some evidence that serious written culture was spread quite widely, for example the frequent family ownership of encyclopedias, but surely we can all remember many primary school classmates with levels of ignorance almost unimaginable in today's television and internet society?

And as for airheaded celebrities and their cults ... The Princess of Wales was short of a few neuronal pathways, certainly, but surely she was outclassed by the Prince of Wales and Mrs Simpson? The rich between the wars were hard to beat for the combination of vacuity, hyperindulgence and sense of entitlement that make up an airhead icon, and Paris Hilton will need to have herself videoed extensively, maybe cuddle up to Kim Jong-Il, to be in the same ballpark.

Still, whatever the past has to be ashamed about, it is no excuse for the present. Something has gone wrong with what prosperity has delivered, even when all its good points are admitted. The men and women of Chifley and Menzies' day had a noble vision of a future for their children and grandchildren—upstanding young people free of poverty, well-fed, making the most of their opportunities for education and personal development, generously contributing to a better society. The youth are well-fed going on obese, well-off, and airheads. The old vision of virtue has disappeared. As they say about many another bright hope of yesteryear: cock o' the walk today, feather duster tomorrow.

*James Franklin's book Catholic Values and Australian Realities was reviewed in the July 2006 issue.*