

KEVIN MURRAY

A splendid time is guaranteed for all

As you step towards Greg Creek's *Burial in Bendigo*, there are two pictures worth having in mind. The first is Gustave Courbet's *Burial at Ornans* (1849). This painting depicts a graveside gathering in Courbet's birthplace, a small town near the Swiss border. With a little help from old friends, he rustled up a very plain huddle of villagers to act as models for the mourning party. When this painting was first shown in the 1850 Salon, his conjunction of this plebeian mob with the monumental landscape in the background caused a scandal: why spoil a noble spectacle with such crude figures? Who let *them* in?

With Courbet in mind, we notice the Eskdale family to the front of the crowd. They stand as figures of anonymity in front of a sea of individuals whose names are inscribed in history. Creek seems to have heightened this incongruity by dressing them in 'come as you are' clothing and giving them 'matter of fact' expressions. They mourn the loss of a father with sincerity but without ceremony. So where is the scandal?

I think of a stall at the Victorian Market named 'The Dainty Deli'. Here those on city salaries can buy creamy butter from Warrnambool, luscious eggs from Cranhaven, sturdy cheese from Drouin and dark golden honey from Bendigo. But how the product overshadows its source! By contrast with the proud traditions of the French provinces, the Victorian countryside reveals a series of shrinking towns with tacky video hire shops and dusty tourist information centres. It is as though the city has leached the blood out of the country, leaving behind youth unemployment, debt and shame. While we might search high and wide for the 'other' in exotic trickster cultures, this pale minority fades into economic obscurity. Who let *them* in?

The second picture is Peter Blake's cover for *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967). John, Ringo, Paul and George stand in front of a collaged pantheon of famous people. The historical context here is parallel to Courbet's painting, with a postmodern twist. Here the high and low are internalised: the new Beatles in psychedelic gear stand next to their immortal 'fab four' shadows (to achieve a similar doubling today the three remaining Beatles could put out karaoke versions of their previous hits). With the release of *Sgt. Pepper's*, the Beatles turned their imaginations, freewheeling on global fame, back to their home town roots – Lucy in the sky meets lovely Rita meter maid on a day in the life when I'm 64. It seems remarkable that the Beatles chose not to capitalise on their fame with a gesture of worldliness.

With the Beatles in mind, we first notice Creek's postmodern juxtaposition of images from real life, painting, newspapers, television etc. This group shot reduces the singular being of each famous individual to just another face in the crowd. The result is a dense platter of popular culture, easily consumed by those trained in mass media to pick over celebrity.

Before we adopt this painting as a media image, however, we should acknowledge a way of seeing which is peculiar to the record sleeve. There's more mystery in the LP cover. It dwells in the living room, where the eyes like worms plough through the visual snack to the beat of the music – fixing a hole to stop the mind from wandering. Like viewers of Byzantine icons, we are hermetically trained to pick up traces of exchange between this world and the other one. Everyone you see is full of life – except...

Sir Robert Gordon Menzies is what Paul McCartney once was. There's the bare feet and the hand above the head. This symbolic death is the historical resonance to the real death of the country father: Menzies' ghost may be heard as one of his loyal subjects leaves this world. The life that supplants them is heralded by the girl closest to us, whose smock bears the European flag. It is the more inwardly-focused Europe which has left Australia orphaned and seeking adoption from its Asian neighbours.

To go further with *Burial in Bendigo*, we need to make a choice. Do we take the baton and continue the proud traditions of empire, or do we say good riddance to all that and start again? Creek does not make this choice easy. While proclaiming the death of empire, Creek pursues an academic method that is true to Menzies own artistic credo. In the *Argus*, 1937, Menzies claimed: 'Great art speaks a language which every intelligent person can understand. The people who call themselves modernists today speak a different language.' Rather than 'out with the old and in with the new', Creek gathers the old together so that the new can see what it displaces.

What do we see? Not just the heroes – the loudly heralded 'quiet achievers' – but the larrikins and crims. Not just Normie Rowe, but Ronald Ryan. Not just Manning Clarke, but Humphrey B. Bear. Despite divergent moral positions, however, their notoriety seems to emanate from a similar source: a nation which claims a distinct identity in the world. Is that still the case? Perhaps at a time when nationhood is measured in speed, money and information, the question of identity is limited to the box office.

This is one of the many political questions for which *Burial in Bendigo* provides a focus. But as we establish a position towards this painting, let's not deny ourselves the possibility of a metaphysical response. From both a material and formal point of view, Creek's painting appears constructed from layers that bring together the concentric spheres of being that make a life in the world. It's worth taking a moment to concentrate.

A heartfelt conversation with a good friend might seem all that is important, but this is trivial compared to the scale of a human life. The life and death of a single human life seems close to the absolute, but appears a drop in the ocean among the millions of lives that make a nation. The story of one nation's struggle for independence and land for its people could be the ultimate goal, but what is that compared to the growth of western civilisation – of wisdom formed out of necessity. How can the development of one race be compared to the evolutionary epic of life on planet earth. What is one planet in wide blue yonder, anyway? And what is the cosmos compared to her knowing look. Within you, without you.

**Kevin Murray
Brunswick, 1994**