‘Dirt’

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On Sunday 24 May 2020, the Rio Tinto mining company destroyed a 46,000-year-old human habitation and sacred site at Juukan Gorge in the Pilbara (‘Rio Tinto blast destroys 46,000-year-old Aboriginal heritage site’). UNESCO compared the act to the destruction of Palmyra by Islamic State. Rio was granted permission to conduct this and other blasts in 2013, under section 18 of the Aboriginal Heritage Act. Amongst artefacts found recently at the site were a 24,000-year-old bone tool and a fragment of a 4,000-year-old belt plaited from human hair. The following week, on Thursday 4 June, in a suburban street in the marginal Federal seat of Eden-Monaro which had been chosen as the location for the Federal Government to announce a home renovation subsidy, the Prime Minister of Australia Scott Morrison was interrupted in midstream by a miffed home-owner asking the gaggle of politicians and press to move off his lawn as he had just had it re-seeded (‘Get off the grass, homeowner tells Scott Morrison’). They meekly complied, realising that there was a certain sanctity in this quiet Australian’s request.
There is an obvious obscenity in putting together these two events but at some level they are indicative of what we were aiming to interrogate at the 2019 ASAL conference on the theme of ‘Dirt,’ which we hosted at the University of Western Australia. As the convenor, I was delighted with the way the conference drew together such a rich range of papers, discussions, addresses, readings and launches. In our thinking about a conference theme we had wanted to explore the way Australian literature and Australian literary studies were working in the contemporary moment and we settled suddenly on the concept of ‘dirt.’ The idea was proposed by my colleague, Alison Bartlett, and our organising committee were immediately taken with it as a concept. It seemed to touch on something essential—in an era sceptical of essences—and material. It reached out into the contested condition of Australian land: dirt as country, dirt as real estate. It reached out into the substance of life: dirt as biotic habitat. It reached out into the source of Australia’s material prosperity: dirt as ore (pay-dirt), dirt as agricultural growing medium (soil). And it reached out into the negative connotation that dirt carries: dirt as scandal, as secret, as abject exclusion.

In this issue of JASAL, I have gathered a small sample of the over 70 papers that were presented at the conference, which the authors have developed into articles. In her Dorothy Green Memorial Lecture, the poet and academic Lucy Dougan reflects on her experience of curating the literary estate of her friend, the poet Fay Zwicky (1933–2017). It was a resonant address, and in it we saw the conference theme re-figured through the trope of the ‘underneath.’ In Dougan’s account of Zwicky, the ‘underneath’ was a chthonic underworld pulsing with a perverse life, and one which made enigmatic and stringent demands on the artist. Richard Nile’s essay ‘The Anzac Legend Didn’t Mention Mud’ begins with the tantalising premise that there exists a fundamental difference in associative freight between the sand and stone of Gallipoli and the middle-eastern theatres of the Great War, and the mud and clay of the Western Front. Looking closely at Australian novels written about the First World War, particularly Leonard Mann’s *Flesh in Armour* (1932), Nile explores the connotations of mud within the mid-twentieth century Australian imaginary. In Jean Page’s essay on James McAuley (1917–1976) she finds ‘traces of dirt’ in his early poetry. Not normally thought of as an earthy poet—but rather one who favoured the austere and cerebral—Page nevertheless shows how dirt is never very far from the surface of McAuley’s poems, whether it is in his echoing of T. S. Eliot’s urban

grime (dirt as the metonym of decay and disorder) or as a vitalist substance secreted beneath Australia's cultural desert. Margaret Henderson's essay on Australian female rock memoir focuses on two iconic rock stars of the 1980s and '90s, Chrissy Amphlett (1959–2013) of the Divinyls and Fiona Horne of Def FX. Henderson brings out the gendered dimension of dirt and examines the ambivalent occupation of abject femininity ('witches and monsters, filth and fury') in these artists' rock personae and their subjective lives. In the final essay in the section, Peter Kirkpatrick reviews the influential verse novels of Dorothy Porter (1954–2008), which are often located within the 'dirty realism' movement in Australia during the 1990s. This essay, like Henderson's, finds an equivalence between sex and dirt, albeit one that is distinctively queered in Porter's works. He also locates the stylistic register of Porter's writing, which riffs off hard-boiled detective fiction, within a certain dirty poetics of 'bad writing.'

As these brief summaries indicate, the concept of dirt operates with a polysemous exuberance in Australian writing. Our conference in 2019 demonstrated this fact beyond any reasonable doubt. The following essays provide a cross-section of case-studies that will hopefully prove generative in scholarly debates that will continue to emerge in Australian literary studies.

WORKS CITED

'Get off the grass, homeowner tells Scott Morrison.' *Australian*. 12.00 am, 5 June 2020.
'Rio Tinto blast destroys 46,000-year-old Aboriginal heritage site.' *9News: Nine.com.au*. 2.55 pm, 27 May 2020.