EACH time I cross the Victoria Bridge at the top end of Queen Street I see, in an involuntary flash of memory, the Little Lampshade Ladies who used to stand there long ago, awash in brilliant sunlight, waiting for a tram.

It was the mid-1960s and these elderly ladies were a distinctive feature of the Brisbane landscape, as distinctive, they seemed to me, as the giant fig trees that punctuated the suburbs and created mysterious deep-green grottoes in the city’s very heart. They were ladies by virtue of the fact that their flat Australian manner had been softened by training in Victorian gentility and suburban respectability, Lampshade Ladies because of their invariable dress: a floral frock worn well below the knees, neat white gloves, handbag over the right arm, sensible shoes, and a large, head-encompassing hat woven in the exact shape of an old-fashioned lampshade.

The ladies’ common devotion to this style expressed, I presumed, fidelity to standards of dress and decorum instilled in their youth, which must have occurred some time around the Great War. Their steadfast resistance to change across half a century made them seem terminally quaint amidst the garish innovation of the sixties. To a self-obsessed, present-obsessed generation they were simply harmless relics, easily overlooked, a compliment the ladies returned with their blithe indifference. But for me, recently down from country Queensland, their manner of perfect belonging in the great sunstruck city seemed reassuring. Brisbane, viewed in imagination from the Darling Downs, had loomed as a bustling metropolis of intimidating dimensions and rampant crime, but I could hardly feel unsafe when the Little Lampshade Ladies navigated it with such calm self-possession.

In fact the city proved surprisingly amenable, with the incomparable advantage of a cinema in every suburb. A compulsive cinephile, I frequented its many ‘picture houses’ even to the remotest reaches of the bay, and it was largely because of this abundance that Brisbane remained in my imagination great. Not until I’d travelled to Sydney and Melbourne (even better provided with cinemas) did I begin to look at its low-built skyline, dominated by a handsome but modestly proportioned City Hall, and see just a big, sprawling, country town.
Certain emblematic experiences began to confirm my revision. One day, after parking my car in upper Queen Street (when it was a street, unmetered, and one could simply, unthinkingly do that), I walked past a pub with broad doors opening directly onto the pavement. Glancing inside I saw a long, brass-railed bar receding into a dim interior, and arrayed along it, leaning casually against it, a dozen or so tall, lean, muscular men in Akubras and cowboy boots, drinking frosty beer. The image was so cinematically striking I’ve sometimes wondered if I saw it at all, but there it is, imprinted on my mind as an enduring motif of a Brisbane that is now gone.

And that big old Brisbane was as deeply conservative as any other country town, as I realised when the furious motions of the sixties began to wash against its resistant ramparts. Youth revolt startled the uncomprehending city establishment out of habitual complacency into ferocious reaction, making the town appear irredeemably, violently backward to the outraged, equally uncomprehending young – myself included.

THE SIXTIES! ONE could both love and loathe their ideals and excesses even as one was carried away by them. An enduring irony of the era – dedicated as it was to liberation from all established authority, determined to ‘drop out’ from the conformist workaday world, scathingly condemnatory of western materialism – was how its wildly inflated bubble was borne aloft by the post-War affluence it affected to despise. Yet for all its fatuousness and hyper-unreality it was a genuine age, spontaneous and irresistible. It blew away the fog of the fifties and taught us that sex was natural, that women were oppressed, that Aborigines were despoiled and deprived, that doctors and psychiatrists were merely human, that the words of officialdom were often deceptive, and that assumptions of authority were frequently humbug. It made everything new – music, drama, film, literature – and promised that the whole world could be recreated anew, that humanity itself, inspired by a gospel of liberation and love, could renew itself and find its way back to Eden. It was an age of too-easy moral certainty in which self-indulgence was happily identical with exemplary moral action, but also of moral fervour that could impel self-indulgent youths to put their bodies on the line to protest a cruel, close-at-hand war – or, in Brisbane, simply to protest about the right to protest – confronting thick-bodied, thick-headed Queensland coppers who delved in with brutal fists and boots to bruise and scatter those bodies as they sat defiantly in Roma Street.

It seems odd now, given the colour, shock and glamour of that formative age, that I so seldom recall it as I travel the altered Brisbane streets, that it should be instead the Little Lampshade Ladies who arise unbidden. For some reason it was they who infected my callow mind with the mystery of time and continuity, as did, on a grander scale, the majestic Moreton Bay Figs. But if the trees enchanted me with their endurance and indifference to time, the ladies were more poignantly of a
season that overlapped my own. At any rate it is they who most insistently link my here-and-now to my youth and back to their own early twentieth century, mere points on an infinite line stretching from an indistinct past toward an uncertain future, connected simply by the fact of place.

At the close of the sixties I deserted that place and took my restless longings abroad, as many had done before me. It was a cusp of time, though I didn’t know it, when the traditional Australian presumption that uncommon ambition required removal overseas was about to be up-ended. Of course, Australians still go abroad in search of larger fields to conquer, and succeed there in ever greater numbers. Hollywood executives, it seems, can no longer make a film unless they can guarantee at least one Australian in front of camera, or behind, or in the director’s chair. Yet the general sense now is of Australia as a fertile ground for talent, an ideal site for commencing an international career in whatever field, not of a place one must leave if one is to hope to launch at all. This development, and the consequent fading (if not quite disappearance) of the old cultural cringe, is a sign that Australia has changed, that it has become an integral part of a culturally-connected world.

Change came more slowly to some parts than others, of course, certainly to my own Queensland. I stayed away a long time but came back occasionally for family’s sake. By the close of the seventies, the Little Lampshade Ladies had disappeared from Brisbane’s streets as had the trams they used to ride, the tracks torn up by a mayor who (regrettably) placed all his bets for the future on the motor car and the highways needed to support them. Under his stimulus the city spread rapidly beyond its former confines, like a giant amoeba devouring the surrounding arable lands. I was astonished at the rate of expansion yet soon realised that development did not necessarily mean change. The dramatic wave of the sixties seemed to have entirely receded from the city leaving little noticeable effect on its soul. I found myself driving up familiar streets with their depressingly familiar wooden houses, boxed-in and blind to the brightness of the world, feeling as though I had never been away, that nothing had changed, that I hadn’t changed, that a decade abroad had been a dream.

THIS WAS IN the middle of that long period of conservative Queensland government when the Nationals played out their comic opera of a quasi-authoritarian state to derisive laughter from the south – and from farther abroad, too. The London papers could reliably provoke hilarity by covering the latest doings and sayings of Joh Bjelke-Petersen and his mob. In fact Joh, the Lindy Chamberlain affair and Dame Edna Everage were about the only things Australian to impinge firmly on the British consciousness at the time, creating a generally bizarre impression (one that lasted, I think, until Neighbours came along and mysteriously transformed the image). It was hard for an expatriate Queenslander to know whether to share in the general bemused amusement or be thoroughly embarrassed.
Observed from close-up, though, the reality seemed more chilling than comical. I recall on one visit seeing a particular government minister, corpulent and crude, declare on TV that the solution to ‘the Aboriginal problem’ was to put sterilising chemicals in the drinking water. Most remarkable about his remark was how unremarked it went.

Thus have things changed, even in Queensland. They had already visibly changed when I returned for Expo 88, in a prelude to a final homecoming. I had a definite sense that Brisbane had at last slipped its parochial moorings and joined the great world. City Hall no longer dominated the skyline but was daily more diminished by the skyscrapers mushrooming around it. The derelict old South Bank, former habitation of indigent indigenous families, had been cleared (no doubt with the regime’s customary ruthlessness) and transformed to create a site for the Expo festivities, thus laying the foundations upon which a later, progressive government would build a jewel of amenity in the city’s very heart. The river, once regarded as a nuisance because of the way its complex, serpentine path divided one half of the city awkwardly from the other, was now acclaimed an icon. And the newly-christened River City did indeed appear exotically, subtropically beautiful to eyes grown accustomed to the scruffy streets of London.

Ironic that Joh, whose legacy as premier was then under fatal examination by the Fitzgerald Inquiry, should be the champion and instigator of these changes – as he was of all the relentless development that created a booming Queensland in which he and his ilk no longer had a place (unless it be jail). I noted with wry surprise that, whereas on my previous visits I found few to criticise Joh, now I could find hardly anyone who had ever supported him. The harsh past was dissolving as Brisbane began to acquire some of the gentler attributes of (dare one say it) civilisation. Many things were the same but everything had changed. Even the Aussie accent had shifted, though no one seemed to realise it. Under the stimulus of rising prices and developing tastes, the old blind wooden boxes were being opened up with decks and doorways and sold as renovated ‘Queenslanders,’ offering eager buyers the comforting glow of tradition without the traditional inconveniences. The old cinemas were disappearing fast – a melancholy change, I thought, until I realised that even I would no longer frequent them. The streets of Brisbane, once entirely populated by sunburnt white Australians, now displayed, with no particular signs of tension, a polyglot diversity that would only increase as the century rolled toward its close.

I CLEARLY HAD some catching up to do, though re-acclimatisation proved unsettling. I had originally gone to Britain thinking, strangely enough, that I was ‘going home’. A ‘Ten Pound Pom’ by origin, I had from early childhood treasured memories of a deep green land that made the cracked, dry Queensland countryside seem permanently alien. Only when I arrived ‘home’ did I realise I was actually
Australian. I was suddenly, joltingly aware of my broad accent, my purposely restricted vocabulary, my Aussie male habit of forcing my voice way back in my throat while holding lips immobile and keeping all emotions well concealed.

The discovery made Australianness seem suddenly a puzzle to me, one I pondered while retraining my locutionary habits so as to be better understood by the English. I soon realised I could spot Australians on the tube train even before I heard them speak and wondered what I was unconsciously recognising (save once, when a suntanned subject’s combination of blue dress-suit and thongs precluded misidentification). I’d sidle down the aisle till I was close enough to pick up the accent, so familiar yet so strange. I eventually concluded, contrasting out-of-place Australian faces with those of Londoners in all their common variety, that it was guardedness I was noticing, a brittle defensiveness betraying a suspicion that someone, anyone among this foreign horde, might be about to sneer or condescend. I see that look less and less as years have passed, marking one more, perhaps profound, sign of change in the old country.

Yet change presented new puzzles for a re-immigrant immigrant. Having started out a wee Scot, I had grown unconsciously Australian then modified my Australianness to adapt to a different clime, only to discover that, no matter how comfortable I felt abroad, my only unbreakable sense of belonging was to the place where I had formed the intense, instinctive attachments of youth, during the stormy passage from childhood to adulthood. Now I had returned to find that that place, in effect, no longer existed. Unchanged features of it were everywhere but they seemed survivals of another time, much as the Lampshade Ladies had been in my own. I was ‘home’, but home hardly recognised me, or I it. I had to adjust to a new Australia, one changing even further about me as I sought to carve a place for myself and my family within it.

Admittedly this new Australia felt in many ways more comfortable than the old despite having succumbed to the contemporary world’s law of perpetual motion. Australians (or at least the Queenslanders I was amongst) seemed generally more comfortable in their own skins, perhaps an effect of the ‘modernisation’ that had been underway in my absence. Though I’d failed to notice from afar, the country had been in the process of intentional transformation for years, driven by governments determined to drag it into modernity. Oddly enough, the reforms were intended (at least as I interpreted them retrospectively) to make Australians feel more uncomfortable rather than less. The diagnosis informing them was that Australians had grown lazy riding the sheep’s back behind defensive tariff walls, assured of a comfortable living without needing to exert themselves overmuch or having to be particularly inventive. But with artificial fibres replacing wool, and the terms of trade turning against commodities, indolence was no longer affordable. Australians had to slough off old habits and shape up.
I DON’T BELIEVE, incidentally, in the myth of Australian laziness, even though Australians, with their beer and barbeques, long weekends at the beach or racetrack, innumerable strikes, and rigorous insistence on taking their full quota of ‘sickies’, used to like to cultivate it. I met employers in Britain who would hire an Australian before any other nationality, certainly before the English, because they knew they’d get an honest day’s work out of them. What’s more I had grown up among Australian working men and, as a bookish boy, been astonished and sometimes appalled at the vigorous energy with which they would clear a swathe of land, or load a semi-trailer and drive it a thousand miles into the bush, or lay down an acre of concrete, or erect a building in a trice out of stumps, planks, nails and sweat. Nor did I ever see Australian women idle, except when they put up their aching feet for a cup of tea and a Bex after hours of domestic toil. And Australians, though they liked to think of themselves as ‘easy-going’, put the same energy into their pleasures and pleasures as into their labour. Laziness I never witnessed, save in myself.

Yet if Australians weren’t lazy, neither were they entrepreneurial. That was the rub. Australia was a developmental country but development was mostly state-led, as it no doubt had to be in an unforgiving land of slender population. Having partly grown up on a farm, I had myself witnessed the customary crushing cycle of drought and fire, storm and flood. It used often to be noted that Australians seldom insisted on their individual rights against the state (at least until they started watching too much American TV) but instead habitually looked to the state for support and protection. Since this was generally forthcoming, they could afford to be industrious without being entrepreneurial: no need to be competitive when wage rates were nationally fixed for the sake of ‘fairness’ and one could be assured of sales for inefficiently manufactured goods thanks to tariff-inflated prices on superior foreign products.

The policies of financial and labour deregulation and the whittling down of tariff protections were meant to dismantle this old, inefficient Fortress Australia. Government – a Labor government, amazingly – hoped that the winds of international competition blowing unimpeded through the economy would brace the Aussie spirit rather than snuff it out, creating a business culture able to stand on its own feet and perhaps take on the world. It was a bold experiment, when you think about it: to break the old social contract and throw tens of thousands out of moribund industries with no real guarantee that the desired transformation would occur. Yet it seemed to work – more or less. Industries were reconstructed and Australians themselves were changed in the process, assisted by occasional stimulating booms in property prices and the interconnective forces of modern communications (along with the growth of generations born to master them).

I arrived in the midst of all this, a returnee needing to relearn how to be Australian yet no longer quite sure of what being Australian meant. Maybe it was just the shock of separation and re-entry that made my experience seem peculiar, for
renegotiating an identity seemed an issue for all Australians in their era of change. The question was whether one could have change but keep a thread of continuity, undercut traditions while preserving the values they supported – a difficult trick. I recall the lambasting John Howard received in 1999 for his abortive attempt to introduce a new Constitutional preamble that mentioned ‘mateship’, condemned now as too lustily masculinist a concept for modern Australia. Yet the furore obscured the fact that Howard had purposefully juxtaposed old values with new ones, specifically with liberal freedom and enterprise: ‘We value excellence as well as fairness, independence as dearly as mateship.’ The intention seemed less to preserve old values than to weaken their power to obstruct the advance of Australian entrepreneurialism.

I’d been astonished on my return to find so apparently insignificant a figure as Howard leading the Liberal Party, a misjudgement that paid unwitting homage to the man’s cannily deceptive style of Aussie ordinariness. Dedicated to private enterprise and the final destruction of unionism yet steeped in the Australia of cricket matches, Sunday lunches and British monarchism, Howard proved an emblematic leader in the effort to maintain identity amid purposeful transformation. He sought to drive the nation forward while keeping it much the same.

Did he succeed? I used to think his legacy would be minimal once he left office, now I’m not so sure. After all, he succeeded in squelching the burgeoning republican movement, probably for a generation. He also managed to persuade young Australians – seeking reasons to be Australian – that Gallipoli was their battle, Kokoda their trail, worthy of pilgrimages to honour the sacrifices of Diggers long gone. It amazed me to see scores of young people marching proudly on Anzac Day, a memorial I’d experienced in childhood as both mysterious and alarming for suggesting that the shedding of blood (my blood) in a futile, faraway cause was necessary to confirm an Australian identity.

Yet even this acknowledged political master encountered contradictions of change and identity. If historical identity was affirmed through the Anzac tradition, it was effectively denied by refusing to say Sorry to the ‘stolen’ generations. In arguing that present-day Australians could not be held responsible for acts of colonial forebears, Howard seemed to imply that history didn’t matter, while his simultaneous rejection of the ‘black armband’ view of history implied it mattered very much indeed. Meanwhile in foreign policy he pointedly rejected the Hawke-Keating Labor government’s attempt to overcome old Australia’s most fundamental fear through a policy of positive ‘engagement’ with Asia, favouring instead a ‘little Australia’ policy that looked to a national interest conceived in narrowly self-interested terms. Despite such constricted ambition, Howard would eventually commit Australia to faraway wars and find himself dragged willy-nilly into traumatic regional issues, from which he would emerge (perhaps as much through good fortune as wisdom) with some glory. Indeed, his unexpected
success tempted him to re-present himself as bestriding the region like a foreign policy colossus (or at least deputy colossus), an uncharacteristic lapse into hubris that provoked satirical scorn.

When Howard lost office, my daughter, born and raised here, was astounded to learn Australia could have any other Prime Minister. His eleven years had made his own person seem a source of continuity. He emanated an authoritative sense of having forged Australia in his own image (critics would say shrunk the nation to fit his image) so that nothing could or would really change while he was in power.

Yet changes did occur during the Howard years. I found it hard fully to notice them until they were thrust upon me, absorbed as I was in rebuilding a career and raising a family. I was as surprised as anyone when Queensland turned out to be the place in which the pain and strain of national transformation finally produced political reaction in the shape of Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party. It was soon clear that this was a movement more than a party, one that touched an authentic chord of resentment among regional folk aggrieved at being left behind in the rush to modernisation. Its brief ascendancy may have been simply the last, impressive gasp of old, defensive, wilfully ignorant White Australia, but before it expired it delivered a sharp shock to the Australian political system, imparting a harsher edge to the ongoing experiment in national reconstruction by pushing Howard’s coalition sharply rightward on issues of race and immigration.

But when this atavistic flurry had subsided, Queenslanders resumed their accustomed habit of looking ahead, supplemented now by a tendency to look outwards toward markets for minerals, tourism and tertiary education. Brisbane was growing apace, fed by internal immigrants exchanging southern unemployment for a Queensland no longer derided as ‘different’ but desired for its sunny clime and cheaper housing. And eventually out of the state came Howard’s successor, a Mandarin-speaking lad from country Queensland with an ambitious take on Australian possibilities.

IF HOWARD HAD had to learn the hard way that parochialism was no longer possible, that our renewed nation had unquestionable, if not clearly defined, responsibilities in the wider world, Kevin Rudd came already armed with these facts as with an opportunity. Whatever people may think of Rudd’s extraordinary up-and-down career, they can hardly doubt his commitment to sculpting a role for Australia that is more-than-commensurate with its size and power. We may be on the periphery, Rudd thinks, but need no longer be peripheral in terms of influence. He sees Australia as a strategically located Western democratic outpost in the most dynamically developing and potentially contested region on earth, able to link its singular great ally across the Pacific with developing countries in the region and the rising power of India across its western ocean. And Rudd’s ambition extends
beyond embedding Australia in a prudent regional architecture. He has worked relentlessly to secure it a temporary seat on the UN Security Council, as well as ensuring it a place in a refashioned Group of Twenty nations that he hopes may have the capacity and legitimacy to tackle an unsteady world’s most urgent issues. These are grand visions indeed, probably only dimly appreciated by most Australians but surely relevant to the theme: ‘What is Australia for?’.

Of course Australia is not, in an instrumental sense, for anything, any more than are you or I, its citizens. Like us, though, it must inevitably be something, and what it is will determine whether it can truly be for something in a principled sense. Rudd imagines what Australia might do in the world, but what it must be to do those things is less than clear. What indeed can it be?

I ask this from a position of semi-detached attachment, the result of my own peculiar trajectory from alienation to absorption to separation to never-quite-complete reintegration. The question of what Australia was, is, or may be is inevitably entangled in my mind with that of who I am – a matter of no particular philosophical interest but pointing to the fact that, as I had learned, Australia had made me as much as I had made myself. No doubt the so-called imagined community we call a nation half-makes us all and is half-made by us all, with whatever materials we find historically at hand. None of us, therefore, can be expected to judge wholly ‘objectively’, yet we should try to take stock after our extended season of change.

There are surely reasons for concern. It’s true that we rode out the booms and busts of the nineties and noughties and stayed well afloat, that we remained the lucky country even when the biggest boom of all floundered in the GFC swamp. Yet Australia’s relative prosperity and apparent immunity seemed to rest on conditions charged with irony and danger. Having spent decades on a political project to create an enterprising nation no longer fatally dependent on a single product, we have ended up crucially reliant on extractive industries feeding the seemingly (yet not dependably) insatiable maws of the world’s rising powers. Nor can we be any longer quite assured, lacking the protections of Fortress Australia that made profit serve equitable distribution, that a majority will reliably share in the windfall gains of a minority (the real meaning of a ‘two-speed economy’). In a further irony, our new biggest trading partner, the one that more than any other has kept us riding high, is one we do not fundamentally trust and against whom we hedge with strategic manoeuvres and enhanced defence capabilities. Notwithstanding such mistrust, we pray for that nation’s continued growth, knowing our intense vulnerability to the moment when its economy stumbles in the midst of its hectic, headlong rush. I doubt we have a Plan B.

These are merely economic matters, to be sure, but they are and always have been fundamental. White Australia behind its tariff walls nurtured a national culture dependent on capital yet not subsumed by it, a famously democratic culture
devoted to sport, beer and a fair-go for all, with a legendary larrikin spirit and an unyielding insistence on egalitarian informality. The abrasions of time and reform have eroded some of the rougher features of that old Australia – its racism, masculinism, and anti-intellectualism – but they have also exposed previously disguised tensions between profit and culture. Openness, competition and ideology have transposed the economy from the base to the very heart of our socio-economic system, transforming it from the supporter of our culture to its dominator, making it difficult to say what Australia is for beyond the demands of production, exchange, profit, distribution and consumption. When Qantas – ‘the Spirit of Australia’ – recently went into shutdown, its status as ‘national carrier’ was revealed to be in deep conflict with its identity as an enterprise whose interests might be better served by transferring operations overseas. Qantas, once heavily subsidised as a symbol of national identity and prestige, must now obey purely commercial imperatives and can no longer truly embody the national spirit. Nor can any other brand, not even Vegemite.

Such is the depth and breadth of our economic dependency that it seems difficult to say precisely what the national spirit now is, or even whether it is, or if it is whether it is worth sacrificing for. On the Darling Downs, scene of my childhood, corporations await the go-ahead to expand their mining of coal-seam gas even at the risk of contaminating, perhaps for many generations, perhaps forever, the underground water on which farming there depends – a go-ahead they will surely get from a Queensland government desperate for funds. It seems right to fear that our whole land, despite our sentimental evocations of it, will become nothing more than a vast mine-site serving the interests of global development. But if Australia is to mean something more than this, to be for something as Australia, must it not define a unique perspective resting on values of place and belonging which, if never believably independent of economics, are not simply reducible to them? Is such definition achievable? Is it even any longer conceivable?

If it is, it must involve, I think, rebalancing our fundamental attitudes to time and change, finding a way to expand that infinitesimal space we call the present inside a longer rolling wave that links past to future.

SOME TIME AGO, standing on a peak overlooking Cunningham’s Gap, I was reminded of a sketch in the Queensland Art Gallery drawn at the time of Allan Cunningham’s expedition of 1827, a broad landscape of tree-covered hills with, here and there, wisps of smoke ascending from Aboriginal campfires. It was almost possible, looking out over a dense canopy concealing all signs of the contemporary world, to imagine oneself back across that blink of God’s eye to a moment before white settlement had really begun. Almost – except for the telling absence of those smoky coils betokening a people living as they had lived for millennia within their mythological timelessness and who, we must suppose, could have gone on living so
for millennia more had we not descended so abruptly and unaccommodatingly into their world. What we brought to that timeless world, as part and parcel of our ideas, technologies, claims and ambitions, was precisely historical time, the arrow of which goes only in one direction. We cannot go back to Aboriginal Australia, nor to the protected Australia of mates and boiling billies, nor to my Brisbane of cinemas with canvas seats, nor even to that more recent time when we could fly Qantas with some sense of national connection.

There are surely things that most of us (and certainly I) would not want to go back to even if we could. It is of the essence of our idea of change that it always aims at something better, which is why we make a god of ‘Innovation’. We are, after all, an antipodean fragment of a grander culture devoted to permanent development, a devouring culture whose other great god, ‘Growth’, must be served at all costs, including the cost of any culture that stands in its path and fails to adapt. It takes Talibanic fanaticism even to think of opposing it, and then most ineffectively. Its most effective check is our own cack-handed and imprudent handling of the great machine of growth which, when it falters, we are desperate to start up again lest the world it founds falls utterly apart. We cannot survive without growth, which means we are changelessly wedded to continuous change and thus also to inevitable, irrecoverable loss. In our endless forward motion we inhabit our own form of mythological timelessness, forever caught in a past-annihilating moment of becoming-never-to-be, our present merely an instant consuming our past in the interests of some indeterminate future, an ever-unspooling narrative without prospect of resolution, raising issues of identity and meaning that may be strictly irresolvable.

This is a matter of faith, of course, or lack of it. We no longer, as a culture, believe in any telos, religious or secular. We have endless means but no ends. I am not sure that it makes sense in this condition to ask what any of it is for, including our own Australian part in it. It is probably true that we cannot, as a minor nation, any longer domesticate our economy to make it serve a culture that embodies ends-in-themselves. If that is a possible project it must be a global one that takes seriously the theoretical challenge of a global economy, which is perhaps the direction in which the ambitions of a Rudd, in reality, point. Yet this would seem to require a fundamental rethinking of all our means and ends and the relations between them, one that can absorb but move convincingly beyond the old shibboleths of Left and Right. It is possible to be pessimistic about the chances.

ON JUNE 20, 2011, chainsaws on Eldon Hill, Windsor, in inner-city Brisbane brought down three great fig trees, visible from as far away as Mt Gravatt and Mt Coot-tha, to make way for private development. This was done despite the vigorous efforts of outraged residents protesting the vandalism or incompetence of Brisbane City Council, which had removed a vegetation protection order over the property.
Commercial values had again trumped people’s sense of place and their attachment to the things that lend a place distinctiveness and dignity beyond any calculation of dollars.

For my own part I felt a pang that the venerable trees had proved as transient in their way as the Little Lampshade Ladies, as impermanent a marker of place. Their fall triggered, once again, the memory of those ladies – forgotten now by everyone but me, perhaps, yet redolent of a Brisbane once vivid, now vanished – setting in motion this chain of reflection and remembrance, this sequence of surmise and speculation that is also an attempt at minor preservation in defiance of the very theme of time and change and loss. I dedicate it now to the long-gone ladies and the city they once so comfortably inhabited, an act of memory that is also a meditation on who we were, are, or might be, and on what it might mean to mean anything at all.