

Story by DAVID LESER
Photography by BRUCE MILLER

To some, Cassandra Pybus is the fearless, vigilant outsider, a bold exposé of cant and hypocrisy. To her enemies, still reeling from bruising encounters, she is an arrogant troublemaker. Even the writer herself admits to being high-handed. Stand by for her latest literary missile.

The bomb-thrower from Lower Snug

SOME THINGS YOU CAN'T UNDO, EVEN from a place that sounds as mercifully benign as Lower Snug. You can't take back the poisonous things that were said. You can't withdraw the writs. You can't wish away the deep, cold enmity that still roils in people's hearts. Then there's another obstacle to your craving for intimacy and forgiveness: how do you change who you are? How do you recast your character so that you no longer feel like the little girl in the playground whom everybody shuns.

At 52, Cassandra Pybus is a writer of sometimes controversial books about, often, complex and difficult men. Her first book,

Community of Thieves, was about Tasmanian genocide and the fraud of official history. At another level, it was also about the humanitarian but puffed-up 19th-century figure of George Augustus Robinson, the governor-appointed envoy to the Aborigines.

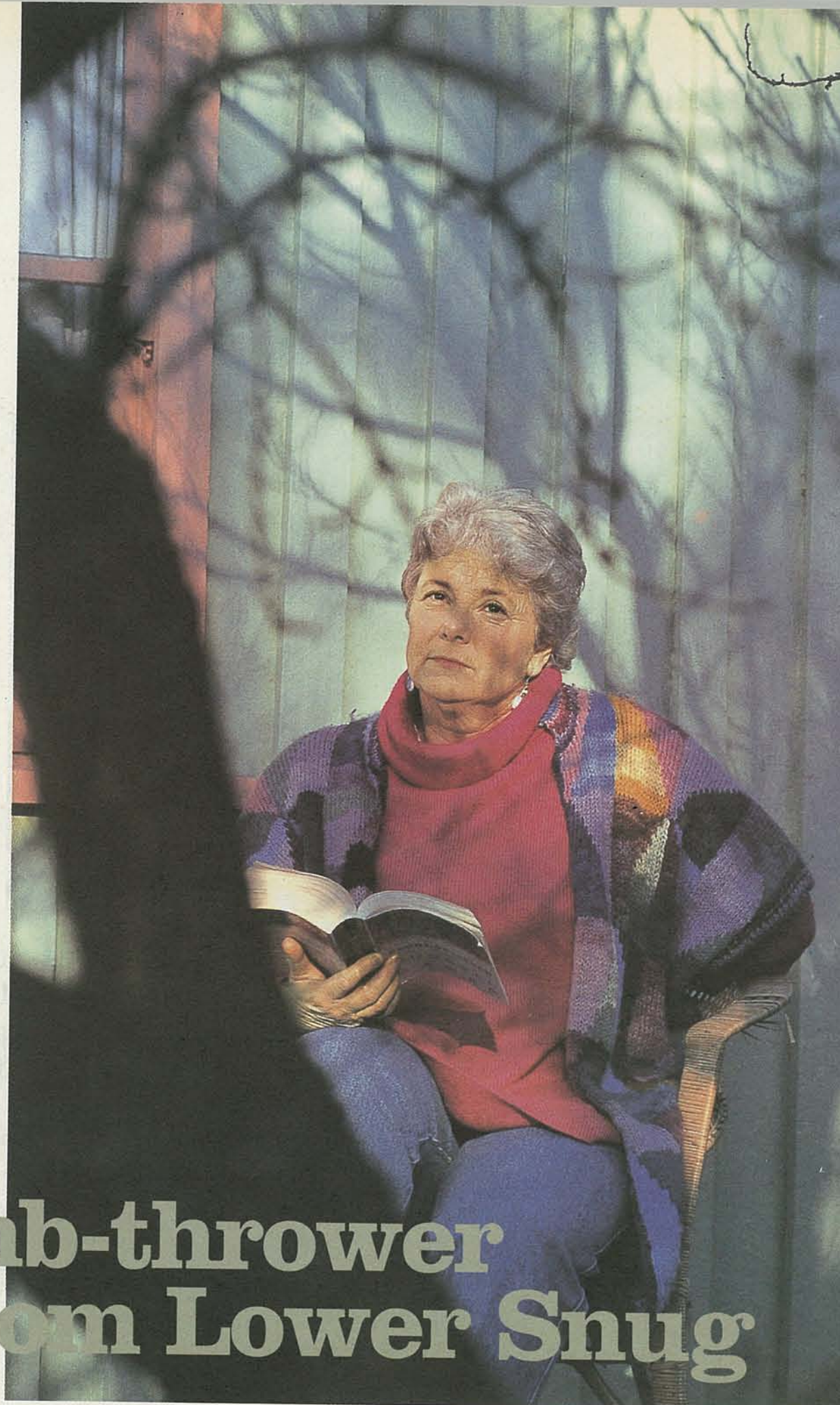
Her compelling second book, *Seduction and Consent, A Case of Gross Moral Turpitude*, revolved around the sensational dismissal from the University of Tasmania of Professor Sydney Sparkes Orr in what had become, during the 1950s and '60s, the most celebrated sex scandal in Australian legal history. Published two years before Helen Garner's *The First Stone*, the book, despite its obvious merits, sank virtually without

trace, except in Tasmania where it polarised the intellectual community.

Her latest book, *The Devil and James Mc*, will throw more fat on the fire, given that it presents a less than romantic picture of a man many would prefer to canonise as a giant of Australian literature.

Her next book, well, that might be about Kerr, the much vilified but, in the opinion of many, much misunderstood former governor-general.

In other words, Cassandra Pybus likes taking risks. A few years ago she set out on a solo 10-kilometre journey from the west coast of Canada up through Alaska and the Yukon and down northern British Columbia. She was enamoured



of the idea of endurance and determination.

In her native Tasmania she has needed a lot of both to contend with the hostility towards her from the literary community. As she'd be the first to admit, many despise her. Says one writer, who prefers not to be named: "I don't think that what happened to Cassandra has anything to do with a small community. It is entirely due to personalities interacting. This is a writing community that has had its differences, but they are differences which have been mannered. The only axis of division here is the one that exists with Cassandra."

On the mainland, people such as author Robert

literary community back in 1994 and still send shudders through it today. The first was the attempt by Pybus in late 1993 to register the Salamanca Writers' Festival in her own name, an act of marginal significance in terms of world peace, but one considered so provocative in Hobart that to this day local writers patronise or shun either of the city's two leading bookshops depending on the position the owner took during The Troubles.

And so today, even though Cassandra Pybus might be regarded by some as the person – apart from Richard Flanagan, of course – who put Tasmanian writing on the (big) map, here on the

home because no other school would have her.

Given her abiding hatred of teachers, it was with some perversity then that she decided to become one herself. She went to Wollongong Teachers' College but was expelled because of repeated absences. She ended up in San Francisco smoking hash pipes and reading books on social revolution and sexual liberation.

Despite her abysmal educational record, Pybus was very bright. As a teachers' college student she'd enrolled part-time at university and done so well she ended up with a Commonwealth scholarship. After completing her undergraduate degree, she embarked on a career as a self-styled "femocrat", becoming an expert in affirmative action. (At the University of Sydney, she later earned a PhD in American history, concentrating on the lives of her two literary heroes, William Faulkner and Robert Penn Warren.)

In the early 1980s, Dr Pybus was holding down a senior management position with the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, writing papers on gender in the labour market and policies on equal opportunity. "I was loathed [by my staff], she says, again with breathtaking candour. "They resented my jackboots approach."

Not surprisingly, she was deeply unhappy. She drank too much and walked out on every man she cared for. She was, in fact, still licking her wounds over a boyfriend who'd left her for one of her friends. She described her reaction to this rejection in her collection of essays, *Till Apples Grow on an Orange Tree*, published last year: *I screamed and wailed till the neighbours pounded on the ceiling. I tore at my hair and face. I opened the windows and let the rain beat on the furniture. I smashed the record*

she had given me and tore her poetry. Nothing could quell the terrible sobs which tore out of me till my chest ached. I found all the photographs of Duncan and Chloe and burnt them with my cigarette lighter. One by one.

By the mid '80s, Pybus was still "profoundly unhappy". An eight-year relationship had collapsed in mutual recrimination and her job as a senior policy adviser with the Victorian Government had been blighted, once again, by poor staff relations.

"There was the staff I employed who were loyal

to me and the staff already there who didn't want this noisy bitch coming along telling them that what they were doing wasn't worth a pinch of shit," she says. "Same problem – bright ideas, lots of energy but no people-management skills."

Eventually Pybus realised her life was out of control and although she had always been reluctant to see a psychiatrist, in desperation she turned to one. The psychiatrist urged her to follow her passion and return to Tasmania to write books and grow vegetables.

Almost simultaneously, Pybus's first boyfriend, the former naval officer Michael Lynch, arrived on her doorstep with her gate in his hands. (It had come off its hinges.) She hadn't spoken to him for 20 years. His first words were: "Your father tells me you have never married."

Pybus was flabbergasted, but not unmoved.



To this day, Richard Flanagan, Tasmania's best-known author, refuses to discuss her at all. Apparently he's afraid of what he might say.

Reshaping history: Pybus says she has rediscovered bucolic bliss in the Tasmanian countryside where she was born.

Dessaix respect her intellectual combativeness: "She is a very powerful and outspoken woman from an old family, who is going to be resented in a small community. But I think she is an exceptionally good thing for all of us because although she pushes her own barrow openly ... we need people like that in our literary culture who are not afraid of what people will say about them. She is a bit of a bulldozer ... she will let nothing stand in her way."

Even some of her friends, while speaking of her passion, loyalty, intellectual curiosity and networking skills, acknowledge Pybus's capacity to alienate. "At some stage she has offended nearly everyone," says Gail Cork of the Australia Council's Literature Fund. "We had our own falling-out. She does tend to blow up and then reconcile."

If she can. Five years ago, she sued three local writers – novelist Richard Flanagan and poets Margaret Scott and Andrew Sant – after she was sacked as editor of the prestigious literary magazine *Island*. To this day, Richard Flanagan, Tasmania's best-known author, refuses point-blank to discuss her at all. Apparently he's afraid of what he might say.

Margaret Scott, another in an impressive line of local literary talents, and more recently a fixture on TV's *Good News Week*, also treads gingerly. "I just have a horror of this whole thing," she says. "It was appalling. It took a year out of my life. It was a hideous experience – I feel extremely nervous with a person who will never forgive us."

Pybus's legal action was the second of two political explosions that rocked Tasmania's

(little) island, her abilities with the pen are often overwhelmed by her propensity for being almost as controversial as the people she writes about.

In literary terms, as well as in real life, Cassandra Pybus is the bomb-thrower from Lower Snug.

LONG BEFORE THIS fifth-generation Tasmanian took up her career as a public intellectual and literary gadfly, she was a person at odds with the world.

At primary school in Hobart, she felt abused and bullied by teachers, probably, she says now, because she was so rude and offensive to them. In high school, she fared no better. She was expelled from Heidelberg High in Melbourne for truancy and then North Sydney Girls' High for the same thing. Arguably, her truculence was as much a problem as her truancy.

Reciting the litany of her bad behaviour at school, she tells me that on one occasion a teacher grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her, saying: "I don't know what they are doing letting a girl like you into this school." Pybus's reply was, well, vintage Pybus: "Get your hands off me, you lesbian bitch." Pybus was forced to complete her leaving exams from

Within two months she had decided to marry Lynch and return with him to Tasmania.

LOWER SNUG IS A SIGHT FOR SORE EYES AND, ON the face of it, troubled souls. To get there you must head south-east from Hobart, following roughly the deep blue of the Derwent as it flows past the odd broken-down hamlet and a disused carbide factory, before tapering down into North West Bay and the finger of water that separates Lower Snug from Snug itself.

This is Channel country: where the D'Entrecasteaux Channel, the Derwent River and North West Bay



There's no stopping destiny: Pybus with her first boyfriend, Michael Lynch, whom she would marry more than 20 years later.

collide and are perennially cooled by the Arctic currents; a place where dolphins venture in summer and sea eagles swoop; and where, at low tide, you can still dig for flounder in the shallows and shadows of the Mount Wellington Ranges.

This is where Cassandra Pybus has rediscovered her "heart's country", together with husband Michael Lynch, in a house formerly owned by her uncle, Ken, right next door to where her feisty feminist of a mother, Betty, now lives. It is in this exquisite landscape of mountain and water that Pybus was born, and from where she creates her particular kind of mayhem.

From her sunroom overlooking North West Bay she wrote *Community of Thieves*, her deeply personal account of the land grant given to her great-great-grandfather, Richard Pybus, on nearby Bruny Island and the subsequent dispossession, exile and murder of the local Nuenone people:

Another horrific episode involved his [Mangana's] youngest daughter, Truganini, her betrothed, Paraweena, and another male friend. All three were being taken for a boatride across the channel by sawyers from the government sawmill when, without warning, the men were thrown overboard. As they clung to the gunwales their hands were chopped off at the wrist. Truganini, helpless and stunned, was taken to the beach and raped repeatedly.

FROM HERE, TOO, PYBUS WROTE *SEDUCTION AND Consent, A Case of Gross Moral Turpitude*, which examined for the first time issues of seduction and sexual harassment on an Australian university campus

as it related to the case of Professor Sydney Sparkes Orr.

In typically contrary fashion, Pybus bucked the prevailing view among the intellectual left that Orr was Australia's Dreyfus, a hounded and publicly humiliated figure who'd never had an opportunity for a fair hearing. Instead, she revealed him as a scoundrel and liar, a man who, long before coming to Tasmania from his native Ireland, had breached his fiduciary duty to his students by using his tutorial room as a sexual hunting ground.

The book infuriated all those who'd spent years defending Orr and justifying the black ban placed by the academics' union on his chair of philosophy at the University of Tasmania. Their support for Orr, Pybus claimed, was based on the wrong intellectual arguments.

It was this book which – despite its poor sales, especially compared with *The First Stone* – gave Pybus a certain gravitas in literary circles as well as a platform to later publicly attack Helen Garner. It is yet another brawl that Pybus has come to deeply regret.

It is from this hidey-hole, with its Judy Garland records, its vases of purple wallflowers and bottled jams, that she issued those writs against her three former colleagues and launched her audacious attempt to wrest the name of the Salamanca Writers' Festival away from its organisers. (She believed the festival she had co-ordinated for the previous four years had become a shambles.)

"I have to admit it was a very high-handed thing to do," she says now. "There were elements of hubris about it. I could have been more conciliatory and subtle about the way I went about it."

"I have to admit it was a very high-handed thing to do. There were elements of hubris about it. I could have been more conciliatory and subtle."

Why weren't you? "Because I was contemptuous of some of the people's intense parochialism. I have never subscribed to Van Diemenian particularity."

This must be what Pybus's friend Marion Halligan means by "the bucolic and acerbic" sides of Pybus's character. One minute she is all skivvy, grey hair and twinkling brown eyes, showing me the sloping, converted chook shed with the complete works of Robert Penn Warren and William Faulkner lining the shelves, and then the garden with its flowering japonica, lavender and heath, its fruit trees that in summer burst with quince and apricot and Kentish cherries, its vegetable patches full of rocket, silverbeet

and soon-to-be-planted pink-eye potatoes. Then, in the next breath, she's dismissing her detractors as wannabes. "I certainly alienated a lot of people who would call themselves Tasmanian writers," she says.

But now, in the quiet of her home, Pybus appears to want to put the debacle behind her, to get over the form of post-traumatic stress she seems to be suffering from. "I was completely devastated by it [my sacking from *Island*]," she says. "It was probably the worst thing that had ever happened to me. It was like when Duncan [her ex-boyfriend] left me – uncontrollable sobbing, except this went on and on and on and on and on." The last Pybus in the Channel country picks ferociously at her fingers and stares out the window into the shimmering blue of her dreaming.

There are almost as many versions and reasons given for Pybus's sacking from *Island* as there were protagonists and witnesses. What few would contest is that for five years *Island* was her power base, a lively, intelligent publication which seemed to offer proof that magazines of national importance could be published outside Melbourne and Sydney. After the controversy in early 1994 over the Salamanca Writers' Festival, however, Pybus found herself almost totally isolated from the rest of Tasmania's writing community.

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In June 1994, after returning from an overseas trip where she'd been working on her next book, *The White Rajahs of Sarawak*, Pybus was called to a meeting with the board members at the well-known Hobart pub, Knopwood's Retreat. Before she'd taken even two sips of her beer, she was informed she was out of a job. Pybus was appalled. She stood up, walked out into the creeping chill, got into her car and drove straight into a stationary truck.



"I called Michael and he came and picked me up and after I told him what had happened he told me to sue [for unfair dismissal]. I said to him, 'You can't sue.'"

Oh yes you can. Two weeks after Pybus had penned an article for *The Sydney Morning Herald* about her sacking, *Island's* managing committee – Richard Flanagan, Margaret Scott and Andrew Sant – published a response containing imputations about the magazine's finances. Pybus issued writs for defamation. The case dragged on for a year until Pybus was finally given money in an out-of-court settlement.

Pybus says now through clenched teeth that she will never forgive Margaret Scott, but that she is prepared to make her peace with Flanagan, especially given how much she admires him as a writer. To that end, she even had a hotel concierge put a congratulatory note under his door after he won an award for his first novel, *Death of a River Guide*. Flanagan was contemptuous of the gesture and never responded.

"Richard Flanagan is a tough cookie," says a close friend, "but this knocked the hell out of him. He suffered nightmares and insomnia for a year."

Pybus says she is happy here now in Lower Snug with her retired naval officer husband. (Michael Lynch is a well-known environmentalist, heading the Tasmanian Conservation Trust.) However, it is hard not to feel that she has suffered at least as much at the hands of her own personality as others seem to have.

"I was replaying my childhood," she says of the contretemps with her fellow writers. "I was the little girl who wasn't made welcome in the playground – the eternal outsider – and it was like a self-fulfilling prophecy: my high-handedness was typical of the behaviour that I had shown all through my career at school. It was almost like, in coming back to Tasmania, I willed the same thing to happen again."

CASSANDRA PYBUS IS BRACING HERSELF NOW FOR a new onslaught with her penetrating work on James McAuley, to be published next week. It is not a reverential picture she has painted. McAuley was a towering and dazzling figure, one of Australia's most

gifted poets and writers of hymns. He was also, with Harold Stewart, responsible for the Ern Malley affair, arguably Australia's greatest literary hoax.

Pybus has focused on him more as a political ideologue, Catholic convert and Cold War warrior. It will not please his widow, Norma McAuley (she refused to co-operate with Pybus), nor those who regarded him as easily the cleverest, if not most charismatic, figure they'd ever met.

"I became interested in his demons, really," says Pybus. "I feel really very sorry for James McAuley. I think he was a deeply troubled man who lived at a time when the intellectual fashion didn't provide him with the right support mechanisms – like having a psychiatrist or taking Prozac."

Pybus and I have driven down to Oyster Cove in her car with Frank Sinatra singing "When somebody loves you..." on the car stereo. Oyster Cove is the old convict station across from North Bruny Island where 46 Aborigines – Truganini among them – were brought in the late 1840s, having somehow survived massacre and disease. It is a damp and bitterly cold place.

But there is a pub nearby, where we have decided to lunch and where our talk has turned to the very public fight she had a few years ago with Helen Garner following the publication of Garner's book on the Ormond College sexual harassment case. Pybus felt Garner had missed the point – that the Ormond College case was about institutional power, not sex. And so she ripped her to shreds, first in a radio interview and then in a literary review.

Today, she reproaches herself for what she said, mainly, it would appear, because, as with Richard Flanagan, her respect for Garner as a writer now

outweighs any ideological disagreements she has with her work. "Some people will get pretty miffed at my saying this," says Pybus, "but I regret what I wrote and I would take it back if I could. It was so personally hurtful. I have tried to make up for it."

Indeed she has, in her own way. Earlier this year, she sent Garner a fence-mending letter to which Garner eventually replied. It was a small step. It will take more than one exchange of letters, however, to repair the damage.

As it will with the publican of this Oyster Cove pub. Upon our arrival, he attempted to show Pybus the new sculptures which had been placed strategically in the gardens around the hotel. There were many of them and as time was short and we were hungry, Pybus told him after a few polite minutes that we needed to press on.

We thought nothing further of it until, midway through our meal, the same man walked up to our table and started rebuking Pybus for insulting him half-an-hour earlier. "Cassandra, I have never belittled your art and I don't appreciate you belittling mine," he said.

Pybus tried to explain that she'd never meant to insult him, that she'd been hungry and in a hurry, but our good publican was in no mood to hear her excuses. "You see, I can't win," she said to me forlornly after he'd gone. "This is a small place and people who live here never go anywhere else. It's a problem with someone who is high-profile [like me]. Your role is to affirm everyone else and if you don't, you belittle them."

Perhaps. But such are the demands of life – and the burn marks of war – when you're the bomb-thrower from Lower Snug.

"McAuley lived at a time when the intellectual fashion didn't provide him with the right support mechanisms – like having a psychiatrist or taking Prozac."

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