

# STILL OCCUPIED

Investigative journalist John Lyons has set his sights on his most formidable target yet, writes **David Leser**

**J**ohn Lyons is no stranger to controversy. When I first met him on this newspaper 33 years ago, the debate around him, at least among some of his older colleagues, was whether, at the age of 24, he had the maturity to serve as chief of staff for the country's national daily.

To no one's great surprise he proved he had both the mettle and the brains for the job, and over the past three decades he has gone on to an impressive career in Australian journalism: editor of *The Sydney Morning Herald* at 33, national affairs editor at *The Bulletin* at 37, executive producer of the Nine Network's *Sunday* program at 42. And in between New York correspondent for *The Sydney Morning Herald* and Washington correspondent for *The Australian*.

In the process he has earned numerous accolades, including three Walkley Awards and, in 1999, the Graham Perkin Award for his "groundbreaking and outstanding reporting on national affairs".

Along the way this Catholic-born son of a working middle-class Melbourne family has frequently created a storm — sometimes in a teacup but more often than not of the kind that roils the atmosphere and creates outbursts of feeling that never quite dissipate.

In the late 1980s supermodel Elle Macpherson made herself look like a super chump in the pages of *Good Weekend* when she told Lyons, "I never read anything I haven't written myself."

A few years later in a profile of Malcolm Turnbull, Lyons incurred the wrath of his subject — not hard to do, mind you — by dissecting the menace behind the young lawyer's charm. "My tentacles spread to New York," Turnbull told Lyons, smiling, just before Lyons moved to that city where, soon after, at a gala dinner he almost came to blows with Richard Butler, Australia's then ambassador to the UN. (Butler was incensed by a story Lyons had written.)

Nick Whitlam, son of former prime minister Gough Whitlam, sued Lyons and Nine over an interview Lyons did with him for the *Sunday* program — an interview that, in 2001, won Lyons one of his Walkleys.

Four years later Paul Keating was enraged when Lyons penned a piece for *The Bulletin* in which he cast the former PM as a foul-mouthed, embittered and at times unhinged recluse.

Lyons often courts argument the way game hunters pursue their next kill. The bigger the better. I know this because, as a friend and colleague over the past three decades, I have watched, sometimes with a mixture of wonder and astonishment, as he takes on his next size target.

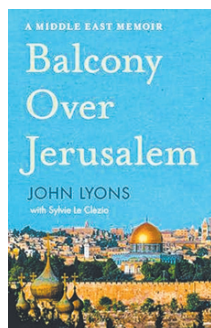
Now, even by Lyons's own headline-grabbing standards, he has managed to outdo himself. In his new memoir, *Balcony Over Jerusalem*, based on his six years (2009-15) covering the region, Lyons has achieved the uncommon feat of not only excoriating the state of Israel for its brutal treatment of Palestinians but also one of the most powerful lobby groups in Australia, the Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council, and one of his own former senior colleagues as well.

Let's start with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that has raged on and off for the past century. For exactly half this time, since the 1967 Six-Day War, the Israelis have ruled over the lives of millions of Palestinians on the West Bank of the Jordan River, aided and abetted by

## Balcony Over Jerusalem:

### A Middle East Memoir

By John Lyons, with Sylvie Le Clezio  
HarperCollins, 374pp, \$34.99



successive Israeli and American administrations, pro-Israel lobby groups and billionaire political donors such as American casino mogul Sheldon Adelson, all in defiance of international law and expert opinion.

During that time the number of Jewish settlers, fired by a messianic belief in their right to settle ancient Israel, or the "Promised Land", not to mention cheap housing subsidies from the Israeli government, have grown from a few hundred early pioneers to more than 420,000 and counting — and that's not including the more than 200,000 Jewish settlers in largely Arab East Jerusalem.

It is this ceaseless military occupation and land grab, together with the daily humiliations, large and small, meted out by Israeli soldiers and Jewish settlers to a desperate people, that Lyons directs his considerable firepower towards.

*If the whole world could see the occupation up close, it would demand that it end tomorrow. Israel's treatment of the Palestinians would not pass muster in the West if the full details were known. The only reason Israel is getting away with this is because it has one of the most formidable public-relations machines ever seen, and enormous support from its diaspora communities.*

Lyons's memoir is not solely concerned with the perpetual entanglement of Abraham's children. He also ventures to Libya and Egypt during the height of the Arab Spring (where in the latter case he finds himself blindfolded and interrogated by Egyptian soldiers); Iran during the rigged elections of 2009; Syria before and after the catastrophic civil war erupts in 2011; and Iraq briefly in the summer of 2014. He does all this with a fearlessness and derring-do that have become his hallmark.

But after arriving in Jerusalem in 2009 with his wife, Sylvie Le Clezio (whose arresting photographs feature in the book), and their eight year-old son, Jack, it is Israel's vice-like



grip on the West Bank that absorbs much of Lyons's attention.

Early on we share his distress as he witnesses an elderly Palestinian woman with a trolley overloaded with belongings waiting at a military checkpoint to cross into Israel from Jordan. An Israeli security guard walks by and kicks the trolley, causing the contents to spill.

In another incident Lyons is shocked when an old Palestinian man in a wheelchair, his leg bleeding from a recent car crash, is denied medical help at the same security crossing. Lyons intercedes on the man's behalf and has his journalist's visa revoked soon after. (His work status is later restored.)

It gets worse. Lyons then revisits a story he wrote for *The Australian*, and later in a joint investigation for the ABC's *Four Corners* (titled *Stone Cold Justice*). Palestinian children, some as young as 12, are arrested in the middle of the night, taken away for interrogation, and in some cases tortured into making false confessions.

"If police or soldiers in Australia took Aboriginal children from their beds at three in the morning and did what Israel does there would be uproar," Lyons writes now.

The *Four Corners* report, which won the 2014 Walkley for investigative journalism, incurred the wrath of Australian Jewish leaders, as well as *The Australian's* foreign editor Greg Sheridan. "I have the greatest respect for John," Sheridan wrote later. "He has produced some outstanding journalism in his time ... However the *Four Corners* program was a disgrace, a crude piece of anti-Israel propaganda that revived some of the oldest anti-Semitic tropes."

Lyons hit back: "Why can journalists put the Australian Army or federal police or US Army through the ringer, but if we investigate the most powerful army in the Middle East it's anti-Semitism?"

Lyons continues this theme in *Balcony Over Jerusalem*, setting out the confronting nature of what is one of the longest-running military occupations in modern history. He looks at the unlawful seizure of Palestinian land, the growth of Jewish settlements, the constant intimidation

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JOHN LYONS





Israeli border guards detain a Palestinian youth during protests against security measures at al-Aqsa mosque last month; John Lyons with Sylvie Le Clezio and their son Jack outside Cairo in 2009



of Palestinians by armed settlers, the demolition of Palestinian homes, the encircling of Palestinian villages, the security wall that has severed Palestinians from their land (and each other), the indefinite imprisonments, curfews and deportations. The constant indignities.

He also details an "apartheid-like" system in which Palestinians are subject to 101 types of permits so that their movements can be identified, monitored and, ultimately, restricted.

"There are business permits, permits for religious purposes and permits for spouses of Palestinians who live in Jerusalem," he writes. "There are permits for hospital visits, permits that a doctor needs to travel and permits to escort sick people in an ambulance. There are permits to travel to a wedding and permits to attend a funeral, permits for work meetings and permits for court hearings."

At one military checkpoint between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, Lyons's wife sees an old Palestinian man carrying a pink bag containing hot food that he is hoping to share with his daughter in Jerusalem. "The soldier said he couldn't pass," writes Lyons. "A valid permit

didn't make any difference: the soldier had decided no, and in a military occupation the soldier is the law."

Le Clezio watched the old man shuffle away with his pink bag, causing Lyons to observe: "This incident made me realise that the tyranny of the occupation comes through the power of 18 or 19-year-old soldiers. These checkpoints are daily incubators of hatred, generation after generation. As long as there is occupation there will be hatred. And in some cases a desire for revenge."

The Australian Jewish lobby didn't much like Lyons's reporting when he was based in the Middle East, and will certainly not like what he unleashes now. In a chapter titled *The Lobby* he paints a picture of sustained criticism, and at times flagrant interference, by AJAC, among others, while he was covering the region.

This reached its apogee when Colin Rubenstein, the head of AJAC, sought to circumvent *The Australian's* then editor-in-chief Chris Mitchell after he refused to take his calls. As Mitchell would later tell Lyons: "Sometimes with Colin Rubenstein I'd say, 'Send a letter or write

a column', but other times if I wouldn't take his calls he'd go behind my back to Nick Cater [then editor of *The Weekend Australian*]. I got upset with Colin when he rang me and attacked [the late] Australian reporter Elisabeth Wynnhausen as a 'self-loathing' Jew. I thought it was inappropriate for him to be making that kind of comment about one of my staff. For some time after that I stopped taking his calls."

And while Mitchell stopped taking Rubenstein's calls, Cater stopped running Lyons's stories. As Lyons writes: "He [Cater] told me that 'the Middle East is such a complex part of the world that a correspondent should spend the first 12 months learning about the area and just writing news'." (Lyons says Cater declined to be interviewed for his book.)

It is this writer's opinion that Cater has a point. Not that a correspondent should refrain from writing features and analysis pieces until he has absorbed a year's worth of knowledge, but that the Middle East is a hellishly complex place. Every aspect of history is contested. Every word is loaded.

I've reported on this conflict on and off for 40 years, including in the pages of this newspaper in the late 1980s. As a journalist — and as a Jew — I've anguished endlessly over Israel's subjugation of the Palestinians and deplored the way the pro-Israel lobby sometimes sides with the most politically conservative elements within Israel, while all too readily dismissing Israel's critics as "anti-Semitic".

I've argued with family members over this issue, and lost Jewish friends in the process — all because I believe, like Lyons, that the occupation is a moral stain on both the Jewish state and the Jewish soul.

I have discussed this issue with Lyons for more than 30 years and I admire his nerve — indeed his audacity — in taking on this subject with such passion and determination. My concern is that for all the rush of understandable anger he directs at Israel, his book is mostly devoid of sympathy for the multiple internal problems and frailties that Israelis face, not to mention the wild diversity of the country's immigrant survivor population.

"I'd always found it strange," he writes, "that a country exercising military authority over 2.9 million Palestinians in occupied territory could be a victim. This would make Israel simultaneously an occupier and a victim."

That's right. Both are true at the same time and Lyons fails, in my opinion, to handle this with the subtlety and moral poise it deserves.

Throughout history Jews have been despised, displaced, vilified, persecuted and, ultimately, exterminated for the fact of their Jewishness, and they have carried this collective trauma — this epigenetic inheritance — into a murderous neighbourhood where they are both a minority and majority at the same time. A tiny minority among hundreds of millions of (mostly) Muslim Arabs and a majority when it comes to the Palestinians.

That, along with countless wars and acts of terrorism over the past 70 years, is what has driven the psychopathology of victimhood and its inevitable — and terrible — consequence: oppression.

The Israelis have needed a powerful lobby group (as have the Palestinians, although the latter is no match for the former) because both sides are historical victims — victims who have suffered at the hands of outsiders, and at the hands of each other. That is the deadly chemistry, the fire and kerosene.

Lyons could also have captured better the warmth and candour of Israelis, something I know he feels, as well as the redemptive roar of secularism that rises up in a city such as Tel Aviv, in defiance of Israel's past, its fate and its perilous condition, particularly now that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu seems to have killed whatever slim chances for peace once existed.

That being said, *Balcony Over Jerusalem* is a potent, fast-paced rendering of a region in convulsion, as well as a jeremiad against Israel, designed and programmed for maximum effect.

Lyons should brace himself for the storm that's coming.

**David Leser** is a journalist and author. He is a former Middle East correspondent.

## a pair of ragged claws



Stephen Romei

I know most readers turn to this page first, so a note about this week's cover story. It's on the *Treehouse* triumvirate Andy Griffiths, Terry Denton (the mad ones) and Jill Griffiths (the sane one). I spent a day with them in Melbourne and it was a lot of fun. It was illuminating to discuss the tensions between an author, illustrator and editor. And it was charming to see Jill and Andy as such a connected, loving couple. We don't see this of authors that much. A lot of interviews emanate from their garrets. It's nice at times to be reminded they are ordinary people, with living rooms and kitchens and so on. The story begins on Page 8. And if you think interviewing people responsible for books about berserk bums is child's play, think again. Below is what happens when you ask the tough questions.



After last week's mention of my disorganised library, Robert Drewe kindly offered to send me a copy of *The Savage Crows*. I thanked him but said I had indeed started the reorganisation and unearthed my copy, a 1986 Flamingo paperback with Robert Dowling's painting *Tasmanian Aborigines* on the cover. It was nice to skim through it, as someone who now vandalises every book with underlining, comments and folded page corners. This copy has only two words in it by my hand: my name on the first page. How we change.

I also made a start on catching up with the literary journals that were starting to look like a fire-starting kit beside my bed. I like Barry Humphries's June 23 *Times Literary Supplement* review of *The Australian National Dictionary*. He focuses on the Australian slang included in the two-volume lexicography. He's full of praise, delighted that the mallee root "merits a learned entry". Though he's disappointed that the epitomising of a "thirsty man" (or woman, I add) is not included: "I'm as dry as a Pommy's bathmat." I'm surprised the *TLS* subeditors left that in. Humphries thinks the editors "have magnificently recorded what must surely be the richest vernacular in the history of human utterance". "If you don't believe me," runs his spirited final line, "you can stick your head up a wombat's freckle." That made me laugh, doubly so when I Googled "Barry Humphries up a wombat's freckle" to check if the piece was online (it is) and was asked "Did you mean: Barry Humphries up a woman's freckle?"

When I think about the best stage performances I've seen, the same three come up every time, which probably means I don't go to the theatre enough. Anyway, the three are Ralph Fiennes in *Coriolanus*, Mel Gibson and Warren Mitchell in *Death of a Salesman*, back in 1982, and Philip Seymour Hoffman and John C. Reilly in Sam Shepard's *True West*. Shakespeare and Arthur Miller have been off this mortal coil for a while and sadly Shepard joined them this week, aged 73. **The quote of the week** comes from his 1977 interview with *The Paris Review*: "I hate endings. Just detest them. Beginnings are definitely the most exciting, middles are perplexing and endings are a disaster ... The temptation towards resolution, towards wrapping up the package, seems to me a terrible trap. Why not be more honest with the moment? The most authentic endings are the ones which are already revolving towards another beginning. That's genius."