In the northern Italian city of Trento some years ago, I would regularly catch the 6pm bus at the bus station. A more or less indistinguishable line of passengers, something like a queue, would assemble while the driver leant on his vehicle and had a smoke and a yarn a couple of hundred metres away. The moment he glanced at his watch, flicked his butt to the ground and climbed into the cabin – a sequence covertly watched for by nearly everyone at the bus stop, though some disguised their passionate interest with elaborate shows of indifference – the ‘queue’ would give a dangerous ripple, casting off a few of the aged or unwary by centrifugal force.

As the bus approached, the line would break out in all directions. The feeble and the unready would change their priorities from catching the bus to ensuring they didn’t die under it. Meanwhile, a clog of humanity would jam the doorway. There would be anguished gasps and shouts from even the most genteel of lips. *Merda* and *Ma va* and *Muoviti* and *Togliti dai piedi* (respectively: Shit! I don’t believe it; Hurry up; Get out of the way). I soon learnt these expressions because I heard them at the same time every day.

Australians in general are queuers. Given the choice between Mediterranean riot and Anglo-Saxon discipline, we have gone for the straight and narrow. But we are more light-hearted, more ironic in our
queues than our British exemplars. And when it comes to queues at the MCG, it has to be said, the lines may on occasion be long but unlike the mills of God they move fast as well as sure.

On a game day, an MCG queue may be said to have its source, like a long river, in any one of several distant spots through the city. Young and Jackson’s pub is a favourite starting point, as is the colonial splendour of the porch of Flinders Street station. Although the famous clocks above the entrance to the station have become unreliable guides to anything that might be contemplated, aspired to, intended or neglected by the now privatized rail systems, they remain a part of Melbourne lore as a place to meet in general and as an assembly point for expeditions to the nearby MCG. ‘Meet you under the clocks’ makes sense to any Melburnian. A perhaps more esoteric but still very large coterie would respond instantly to ‘Meet you at the footbridge’, meaning under the plane trees at the MCG end of the old footbridge across the railway line and Brunton Avenue.

You had to be an MCG stalwart to understand that mixture of geography and lore, but of course thousands did, and the old footbridge on match days is always swarming with people waiting for swarms of other people. If you are doing the waiting, you tend to divide your attention between the masses flowing over the bridge – idly reflecting, no doubt, that
you had not known the game had enslaved so many – and the queues forming over at the various visible gates of the Great Southern Stand.

Depending on the day and the game, the ratio of the queue length to the number of minutes your awaited friend is late arriving can drift alarmingly out of balance. There’s probably a formula for it, but no one who goes to the ‘G’ is ignorant of queues or the psychology of queues. You queue to get in, you queue for a beer; you queue for pies; you queue for sauce; and, yes, at big events – any footy final, the Boxing Day Test or the match of the day – you queue for a piss.

The queue was never a place to meet, whether at the ‘G’ or anywhere else. Far better to meet first then join the queue together. That was the case anyway till the arrival of the mobile phone. Even the footbridge – and probably Y&J’s and under the clocks too if the truth were know – has been rendered a much less potent meeting point now that people can simply dial up and tell someone to wave or shout or just say exactly where they are, in which queue or grandstand or wherever. This means you can now actually meet inside the ‘G’. This was possible in the past, and some occasionally managed it, but it was risky. Too often the crowds turned out to be bigger and more crushing and less penetrable than expected, and the directions which seemed so simple when delivered became labyrinthine amid the
alphabetical and numerical signage – the stairs up to this or that aisle or down to that; the levels sealed off and impassable, the paths not taken.

Not any longer. Nowadays, to the pre-game buzzing of chatter and adrenaline-fueled shouts and laughter have been added the trills and pipings and squeaks and shrills of the mobile phone orchestra, transmitting among much else identifications and directions.

‘We’re in F8, Row 13. Where’re you? Near what sign? The Virgin Blue – oh yeah, I see you. We’ll come over . . .’

These days, people meet inside the ‘G’ as a matter of course and without fear of failure. They even arrange to meet inside the ‘G’. It’s easy – just give us a bell. They probably even meet in queues these days, a development you would have sworn not even modern technology could have made possible.

Vincent Buckley, famous poet, leading intellectual, legendary Melbourne University teacher, and Manning Clark, controversial historian, author of the monumental six-volume history of Australia, well known public intellectual, had a famous meeting at the MCG in 1959.

Buckley says, ‘We met at a Test match between Australia and England,’ raising the exciting possibility that they arranged to meet inside the ground and may even have succeeded in doing so.
The 1958-59 Ashes tour of Australia featured two Tests at the MCG, the second and fifth, but internal evidence in Buckley’s account places their meeting at the Second Test, which was played on 31 December 1958 and 1, 2, 3 and 5 January 1959.

England won the toss and batted and were all out for a modest 259, mostly falling to the already controversial fast bowling of Ian Meckiff, who took 3/59 in England’s first innings and 6/38 in the second. Meanwhile, the great Australian all-rounder, Allan Davidson, did more or less the reverse – 6/64 in the first innings and 3/41 in the second. As Davidson and Meckiff, with 18 wickets between them, led the team off ahead of captain Richie Benaud, no one could have predicted the tragic drama soon to unfold, in which Benaud and Meckiff would be the principals and which would end Meckiff’s meteoric career.

So, for all sorts of reasons, there was, as usual, plenty of action, tension and high achievement out on the oval at the MCG the day Vincent Buckley and Manning Clark chose it as their meeting place. Recalling what he refers to as an ‘inaccessible’ quality of Clark’s mind at their very earliest meetings, Buckley goes on:

... early in 1959 I had a phone call from him. He had just been to Russia and had something of the greatest importance to tell me. An insight to which he was sure I would respond. It concerned the true nature of the mental world of Soviet Man. To understand it
was important to the future peace of the world. He would like to meet me and talk about it.

We met at a test match between Australia and England. There, remembering that Clark had been a keen cricketer in his youth, and trying at the same time to watch Harvey belt Lock all over the field, I followed [Clark’s] oscillant movement from one level of the terrace to another and back again, and he talked and talked. The mental world of Soviet Man was in an odd way a religious one, and he felt some urgency in communicating his sense of this religious vision to McAuley and me [James McAuley: poet, intellectual, sometime editor of Quadrant, sometime Professor of English at the University of Tasmania]. For slightly different reasons [Clark felt] we were the two people in Australian cultural life who needed to hear his account. Hence this assignation, so worthy of filmic treatment.

He seemed most agitated, in a state of quite impenetrable anxiety while saying all this. I listened with sympathy and concern (for I owed him both hospitality and help), but there was so little of pertinent particularity about his speech that I could say nothing of use. The one particular claim he did make was of such patent absurdity, advanced with a kind of innocent exultation, that it embarrassed me . . .

I had known Clark as a man of religious preoccupations, prodigious capacities for work, and a generally worried, if witty demeanour towards the world. I had never thought of him as political . . . Nor did he offer his remarks as having the least political significance. His venture was evangelical, its models biblical; the few just men were to be told a truth especially pertinent to them. He must have been taken aback, and perhaps affronted, by my lack of response. I was appalled.

What Clark was with anguish rehearsing for Buckley and McAuley (who also seems to have managed to find them inside the ground) would become the central argument of his book, Meeting Soviet Man, in which Soviet Man is seen to have attained a higher state of consciousness despite the regime but to have at the same time been transformed by the invigorating
sense of purpose and focus endowed by that same regime. If these ideas are held in tension in the book, they are only among several balancing acts. Clark’s passion that day as he tried to tell his story at the cricket emerges in the one-step-forward-two-steps-back prose of Meeting Soviet Man where no proposition, description or speculation is without its corresponding worry, parenthetical subversion or tentative disclaimer.

It must have been an odd scene at the ‘G’ that day: a conversation that never quite got launched because of the weight of Clark’s monologue; the three unmistakably donnish characters pacing the terraces – the leonine, diminutive and intense Buckley; the tall, almost gangling Manning Clark, bearded, disheveled, distracted; the slightly aloof, ironic but amiable James McAuley.

Buckley was right with his throwaway line about the scene’s filmic qualities. Imagine it. Out in the middle, Neil Harvey busy making what would be a brilliant, flawless 167, with most of his team mates falling around him to the pace and guile of Brian Statham, who took 7/57. With Harvey on the attack and wickets falling at the other end, the stadium thundered with rising and falling roars of shock, approval, admiration, overwrought excitement. Like recitative joining bursts of resonant arias, Clark’s hesitant, cultured tones – hard to hear and strangely at odds with the
cacophonous surrounds – drew out his intense, uncanny message. Bending
towards each other the better to hear, the three heads – or one of them at
least – would be raised as another Harvey hook or pull or cover drive came
ripping across the turf, then down again would go the heads to hear Clark’s
apocalyptic pronouncements.

To any of the sun-drenched, squinting people in their immediate
vicinity, it might have looked as if Clark, a talented cricketer in his day, was
analyzing the fine points of Harvey’s magnificent and rearguard knock; he
might even have been trying to fathom the peculiar ‘power’ of the MCG, the
cathedral-like regard in which it was held in and around Melbourne and
beyond, and the correspondingly remarkable, sometimes ‘miraculous’ deeds
that it seemed to engender with stunning regularity and equally amazing
variety.

He *might* have been saying this, but what he in fact was telling his two
listeners was, among other things, that on his travels in the Soviet Union one
of his companions, who knew no Russian, had been able to speak with
ordinary Russians despite their knowing no English. It was, in Clark’s
opinion, the man’s inherent and transparent goodness that enabled him to
accomplish this feat, and Clark gave a number of examples of this gift in
action. This was the proposition that Buckley found patently absurd and embarrassing.

And so this strange meeting rambled through the hot afternoon while Harvey marched on and Lock, as Buckley was able to glimpse from time to time, was carted all over the famous ‘park’, finishing with 0/54.

It is most likely that Clark suggested the venue for this meeting. He was a cricket lover and had been a very good player himself in Australia and at Oxford University. The historian, Geoffrey Serle, remembered Clark as a gifted cricketer and wondered why he had given the game away so early. In his cups, a youthful Clark would boast of having hit Hedley Verity for six, though Serle, a one time a second grade district wicket keeper, remembered a match in which he caught Clark for a duck.

Buckley was a highly rational but implacably loyal supporter of the Collingwood Football Club who rarely went to matches. Likewise, he delighted in cricket but was not a frequent attender. He may have been slightly surprised to find himself at the ‘G’ in a big crowd and the new year scarcely two days old. And if he was surprised, McAuley would have been bemused: *days in the sun* was not his style.

Yet, as all three would have recognised, meeting at the MCG was much like meeting on the steps or in the booming nave of one of
Melbourne’s other two cathedrals. Some important conversations had been conducted in cathedrals, some portentous plans had been hatched and many fates decided. So the MCG was a proper setting for the strange discussion that proved to be a blueprint for the quirky, controversial, euphoric Meeting Soviet Man.

Clark chose the sunlit MCG at one of its characteristic high points of drama and popular pressure to intimate his intuition that ‘Soviet man was different from Western man, different not only in tastes, clothes, leisure, hobbies, but at the very heart.’ Obscurely but unquestionably, he saw a great appropriateness in delivering his message to what he hoped were like minds at ‘the people’s ground.’ His message, delivered with a sort of incandescent, numinous excitement, was about the people, a new people as he saw them, rightly or wrongly. Wrongly in Buckley’s view because as he later noted: ‘Evidence? None. None indeed; for these conclusions are offered as reflections, an “idea” that “darted” on a particular night.’

Nevertheless, it was heady stuff – but the ‘G’, as always, was up to it and Buckley at least, craning and glancing between bouts of attentive listening to see ‘Neil Harvey belt Tony Lock all over the field,’ saw no incongruity in their talking against such an archetypal background in such a totemic place.