

What Dreams May Come...

Visionary director Vincent Ward transports Robin Williams to the Afterlife.

How do you define the term “visionary filmmaker?” Director Vincent Ward is understandably reluctant to supply his own interpretation of the label most often applied to him. Ward, now 42, has just had his fourth film, *WHAT DREAMS MAY COME*, released by Polygram Pictures. He hails from New Zealand, where he trained for six years as a painter at Ililam School of Fine Art in Christchurch. His work is strikingly original, intensely visual—that much is evident from the films themselves. So what are critics getting at when they pigeon-hole Ward with this term?

When pressed, Ward offered, “My films are often about

By Joe Fordham

places and realities that are on the periphery of the intangible. They often have a metaphysical element that’s overt in *WHAT DREAMS MAY COME*, but normally not so overt. The films often have some sort of predictive quality to them, like *THE NAVIGATOR* for example, and they often follow threads that are not just one moment in time but perhaps sometimes give a sense of a larger trajectory than is necessarily the norm. It’s not just a visual thing.”

Ward’s interest in fantasy began as a boy growing up on an isolated farm in the south of the

north island of New Zealand. An active imagination led to painting; film-making came out of the Fine Arts program at Ililam at age 21. “Most of my student films were very short animation films that I could never afford to take to the optical stage, but I made two other films that won awards. The first was a fifty-two-minute drama called *A STATE OF SIEGE*, based on a novel by Janet Frame. This won a Golden Hugo at the Chicago Film Festival and the Grand Prix at the Miami Film Festival, even though it was fifty-two minutes competing against full-length features. It was released theatrically as a feature throughout the main cities of New Zealand. That was a big turning point. But then I went away, perversely, for two years and lived in an isolated Maori community. It was just a personal thing, something that I wanted to try to come to grips with.”

An odd choice perhaps for a young man raised by an Irish-Catholic father and a German-Jewish mother, with no Maori blood in him at all? Ward explained, “A lot of New Zealanders are concerned with identity, perhaps because it’s one of the more recently-formed countries. I realized there was a key part of my country’s culture that I really didn’t understand, so I went to live in the most traditional heartland of the Maori



Above: director Vincent Ward int

community, where the last of the Maori’s wars were fought, where many of the people haven’t forgiven the whites.”

The experience would spin Ward’s life around and ultimately forge with his visual imagination to empower him as a filmmaker. “It was an incredibly primal experience, very harsh. I lived in an area where there was a one-way gravel road going into the bush. There was no running water, no electricity; people still had corrugated iron open fire places in their huts. It was like the wild west. There were a lot of guys with rifles, a lot of shooting accidents—serious ones, where people died. A lot of people were either seeking refuge there because they didn’t fit into what we called the Pakeha, the white world, or they were hunters.

“It was both a terrifying and a fantastic experience for me. I literally nearly went crazy. I had my hair shaved off; I had ringworm, conjunctivitis; one time I nearly drowned. I was the only white guy in the community. But there was a kind of honesty and down-to-earth quality that

Annabella Sciorra plays the wife that Williams must rescue from Hell.





faces with the computer generated heaven of **WHAT DREAMS MAY COME**. Below: Chris Neilsen (Robin Williams) and his wife (Sciorra) in the painted world heaven.

you never get in a white European community. People responded very directly to their emotions. I was from an Anglo Saxon heritage where I was taught not to respond immediately to situations, to cover my emotions. I learned things from this ancient culture where parts of life are at the same time sacred and profane—both extremes. For example, the old lady I was living with, every part of her life was this mystical thing. She'd pray over a bottle of water before she drank from it; she'd sit in the back of my van and pray in the way the ancients used to when they travelled over warring tribal lands. Then there was her son who was a paranoid schizophrenic. He would smash up the house with an axe. One time he came after me with an axe. He was the complete opposite of his mother, completely profane, but very funny, very bright."

The experience lead to Ward's second, longer film, a documentary, **IN SPRING ONE PLANTS ALONE**. Ward describes the results as "a very quiet, gentle film about the



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PAINTING HEAVEN

Digital techniques realize the unreal.

We wanted to shoot something live action that wasn't a nuisance on set. In most films where they're acting against blue screen, it's really boring for the actor, and it's never as alive. We wanted to shoot this as if you were shooting just a normal hand-held camera."

That was Vincent Ward's brief for the artists and technicians at Mass Illusions in creating Chris Neilson's intensely personal, fluid, living 'painted world' vision of the afterlife in *WHAT DREAMS MAY COME*. Ward had worked with Mass Illusions digital effects supervisors Joel Hynek and Nick Brooks on *MAP OF THE HUMAN HEART*, but visual effects producer Ellen Somers could see they were onto something. "There really was an incredible insight about how to develop a technique to execute what he was looking for, throwing away the traditional standards of how you approach visual effects and the demands that we usually lay on people."

Creatively and technically, a lot was hinging on the technique. Somers elaborated, "If you did not believe, when Robin Williams comes to life in the painted world, that it was a real living world, with life forms that have natural complexity and feeling, then that moment never would have played correctly. If you felt that you were in something that had been gener-



Robin Williams examines a dream-like Rembrandt-inspired heavenly vista created by digital computer technology.

ated with a computer, it never would have achieved that feeling—that 'Oh my God, I'm dead, but, hey, this isn't so bad' feeling. It was also critical to the conditions of the locations in which we were shooting that everything had to be free-flowing, free-moving. This was not stage work. We were standing like mountain goats on the side of mountains."

National Glacier Park, Montana, was chosen to represent what

Richard Matheson's novel dubbed 'Summerland.' A beautiful environment, yet as Somers noted, "There's virtually not a background there that hasn't been enhanced in one way or another." Mass Illusion's solution to the logistical difficulties was a combination of techniques. Vincent Ward explained, "The first tool they used was a combination of laser and radar, called Lidar, which could scan from about 200 yards. The Lidar crews would go in at night and map in three dimensions the area we'd been filming during the day. When you fed that information into your computer, you could move the camera anywhere around an object even though you only shot it from one position."

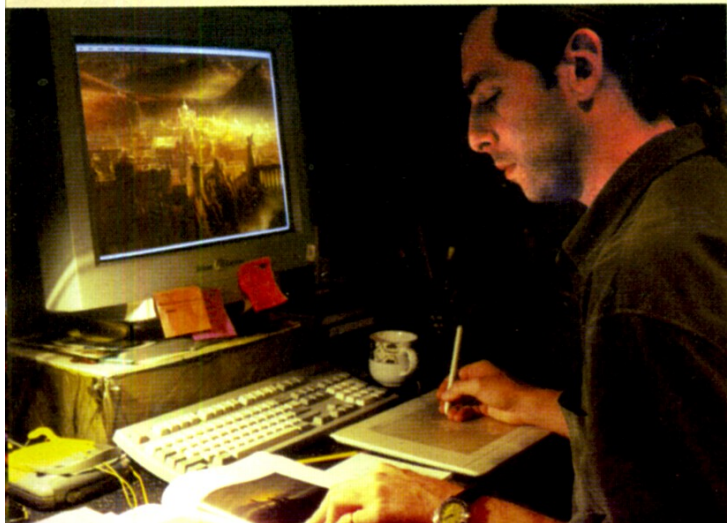
Lidar was not a new technology; it was used on *STARSHIP TROOPERS*. The most valuable tool developed by Mass Illusions software engineers Pierre Jasmin and Peter Litwinowicz was a tracking technology, Optical Flow. "This is basically an edge detection technique," Somers explained. "It allows the camera to follow pixels in the two dimensional film frame where they move in space." Take a point on an ob-

ject, track it as it moves. "Then, using the data recorded from the Lidar, reconstruct it to create 3D geometry." Somers calls Optical Flow a "spatial matting system." It allows the artist to create a mind's eye third dimension in a two dimensional film plane. The result: you can break an image down into 3D layers, as many as you want, which can be manipulated individually. "Each shot in the painted world had an average fifteen to twenty layers," Somers said, "although we had some that had over a hundred layers."

Ward explained that the next element of the puzzle was "to add the texture of oil paint: the way that light moves on oil paint, so it has moving light surfaces; the way it looks viscous; in some cases in post production making the oil paint stick to his feet as he's moving, even though he's just walking across mud on set."

This was achieved with Motion Paints, "a particle system built into the 3D layers that actually created brush strokes," said Somers. "They developed a library of brush strokes based on a lot of reference to classical artists, but they could control the attributes of each paint

Animator Deak Ferrand at work on the eye-popping computer-generated effects for *WHAT DREAMS MAY COME*—the most effective use of CGI to date.



stroke as well, creating surface, style, etcetera, compositing these as layers."

Once they started playing with these new tools, with the assistance of Mike Schmidt, 3D supervisor at Giant Killer Robots, and Karen Amsel, CG supervisor at Mobility, the digital artists found they had to sit back, ask some basic questions and relearn old techniques. For instance, the light source: Were we looking at a painting, lit by light from the viewer's point of view, or was this a painted world, lit by an internal light source in the world?

Another more influential question, not obvious at first: "A painter starts with his blank canvas; he lays down his washes of color, then starts to build on top of it. Breaking down the scene, we found we had to start with base grading first, then add layers on top of that. Just adding layers before the base didn't create the feeling of a painting. It was something we discovered as a combination of Vincent, Eugenio and Nick all trying to figure out how to make it feel more like a painted world."

The practicalities of shooting allowed Vincent Ward free-rein in Montana exactly as he'd hoped. Digital artists covered hillsides by day with orange tracking balls. Lidar crews scamped mountains by night, armed with only flashlights and "bear spray." Forty shots were realized, sometimes in what Ellen Somers refers to as "Chinese chopstick effects," a second unit camera shooting bits and pieces of clouds and skies to be thrown in later. It was as creative and un-mechanically-minded an experience as anyone could have wished.

Additionally, Digital Domain contributed the painted bird sequence, the cliff fall and poppy race, and the hauntingly surreal defoliating "autumn tree," all included in and around the Summerland section of the film.

In a philosophical vein, as the crew were looking back on the experience, Ellen Somers reflected, "We were laying all bets off on what you can do with a camera. I did not always agree that we could push the technology that far, but it wasn't necessarily like I had a choice. That's just Vincent's cinematographic style, how he feels about presenting a movie. If he doesn't do that, then it's not his film. It's a question of priority. Sometimes we don't care that it's not perfect; we care that the overall mood is what's necessary. You may want it perfect, so you just beat your head in trying to make it perfect later on." **Joe Fordham**

"If I ever give up film, that's all I'll do," said Ward of his love for painting. "I find it very similar to filmmaking in that it requires a similar sort of concentration."



A fine artist in his own right, director Vincent Ward provided this illustration of the graveyard ship seen in the self-imposed hell of guilt-ridden souls.

sybiotic relationship between this 82-year-old woman and her 42-year-old paranoid schizophrenic son. I lived with them for two years; then I wrote the screenplay for VIGIL."

The sacred and the profane, the modern western world colliding with the ancient—these were threads that would run through Ward's work to follow. "There were certainly elements of autobiography in VIGIL. I have sisters; I relate the lead character to them; but I also relate it to myself. I'd always hoped there would be girls of my own age around when I was a kid; there never were. Making this film was like inventing an imaginary sister."

Ward's debut feature was well received in Los Angeles and London. His next project would be inspired by a similarly exotic personal experience, though one not directly related to his Maori experience. Ward recalled, "I was in a motorized canoe travelling up the Amazon on the perimeter of Ecuador. The Indian navigating the canoe told me a story how many generations ago an old Indian guy had a vision of a glittering city just around the corner, long be-

fore the whites were there. Then an amazing thing happened. As the guide was telling me this story, with the sun setting behind us, we rounded the corner and the light shot onto this large corrugated iron city, which formed a sort of natural mirror. So this city that his ancestors had described had become a reality, a glittering corrugated iron shanty town. This started me thinking, 'What if ancients come into the 20th century, how would they envisage it? There would be an irony between what they saw and what we knew of it, an irony and a kind of dry humor.'"

The idea became THE NAVIGATOR, the first film to introduce Ward to fantasy and science fiction viewers; but Ward did not approach his subject matter from a necessarily fantastic point of view. "I actually tried to tell the story of a medieval visionary who sees the 20th Century, doesn't know what it is, but sees it as this visionary place, a place that for all he knows exists in the same time frame. It could be some distant, ancient city. I mean there are medieval accounts of fabled places that are written as

if they are facts—they describe elephants, and they're nothing like what we know of an elephant, but because information has been passed on, it has some measure of truth to it."

Ten years after its release, NAVIGATOR holds up. It is powerful, magical, and unique as much for its human qualities and off-beat sense of humor as for its poetic visionary qualities. Ward elaborated, "I tried to get a gritty, medieval quality, to show aspects of the middle ages that people hadn't seen. We did a lot of research from books written in that time showing how people lived in these mining communities, how many people there were, how much they were paid, what you do when a sheep falls in the mine. The humor is underplayed, but it's there."

A scene memorable for its pathos and humor occurs when the medieval travellers first encounter cars. This was another key image that inspired Ward to make the film, "I was hitch-hiking in Germany with a heavy backpack and very little money, and I crossed an autobahn. There were three lanes on one side, four on the other side. When I got to the middle, I was nearly killed. I stood there like an automaton, feeling like I had been dropped there from outer space. Out of that came that scene with Olf trying to cross that motorway."

Once he had entered the fantasy arena, Ward next found himself drawn into a very different world of film-making, writing ALIEN³, his first encounter with the studio system. Ward came away from the project with story credit and a philosophical attitude about the experience: "I felt that we were developing something that was unique. I suppose all writers feel that way. When I saw that my ideas were quite quickly being emulsified into just a repeat, obviously it was time to leave."

Ward confirmed the setting for his story was a wooden monastery in outer space. "It was a kind of Bosch-like wooden space station with some sort of technology at the husk. I've been asked to do the same story since then, in fact, by the same people that I was working with back then, because I think the

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REVIEW

Like watching a dream come true.

WHAT DREAMS MAY COME

Polygram Films presents an Interscope production, in association with Metafilms. A film by Vincent Ward. Produced by Stephen Simon, Barnet Bain. Directed by Vincent Ward. Screenplay by Ron Bass, from the novel by Richard Matheson. Cinematography: Eduardo Serra, A.C.E. Music: Michael Kamen. Editors: David Brenner, A.C.E., Maysie Hoy, A.C.E. Production Design: Eugenio Zanetti. Costume design: Yvonne Blake. Special Effects supervisors: Joel Hynek and Nick Brooks, Mass Illusions; additional effects, Digital Domain. Executive Producers: Ted Field, Scott Kroopf, Erica Huggins, Ron Bass; co-producer Alan C. Blomquist. 10/98, PG-13, 106 mins.

Chris Neilsen.....Robin Williams
Albert.....Cuba Gooding, Jr.
Annie Neilsen.....Annabella Sciorra
The Tracker.....Max Von Sydow
Leona.....Rosalind Chow

by Steve Biodrowski

Richard Matheson's *What Dreams May Come* is such a wonderful novel that one approaches the filmization with a combination of anticipation and dread: anticipation, because there is great potential for an excellent film; dread, because there is so much room for disappointment.

For the first fifteen minutes, dread begins to outweigh anticipation. Whereas Matheson got to the main point of his story (killing off protagonist Chris Neilsen and placing him in the afterlife) on the first page, the screenplay by Saul Bass begins with a scene of Chris (Williams) and his future wife (Sciorra) meeting on vacation, followed by the death of not Chris but of his children; only after several scenes of the grieving couple getting their life back together does Chris finally step over to the other side, thanks to a terrifyingly staged automobile accident.

The good news is that, once the transition is made, the film lurches almost immediately toward greatness, dazzling the viewer with a spectacular view of heaven that is not only beautiful but also profoundly moving, grounded as it is in the emotions and personality of the character experiencing it. Not only that, but those first fifteen minutes actually pay off in the long run, introducing plot elements that will be recalled later in the narrative, often to tear-inducing effect. (Apparently, this material was originally to be part of the film's flashback structure, but the studio wanted this part of the exposition to be more linear. There is



Searching for the self-imposed hell where his wife resides since committing suicide, Williams seeks guidance from Max Von Sydow and Cuba Gooding, Jr.

a chance that Vincent Ward's director's cut will restore this structure for home video release.)

The most amazing thing about the film is how it distills the essence of the novel while adding numerous touches of its own that make it work, cinematically, on its own terms. This is not merely a great adaptation of a book; it is a great film, period.

Bass's script adds layers of texture with back story elements that add dramatic weight to the plot. Abandoning the almost technical manual approach to the afterlife of Matheson (himself a true believer in the subject), Bass emphasizes the grand romanticism inherent in the story, while also tarnishing Matheson's picture-perfect portrait of family life. Not that the Neilsens are turned into a dysfunctional cliché, but they have some genuine hurdles to overcome, before and after death, that make the film more than a storybook fantasy.

Likewise, Ward's visualizing of the story is nothing short of brilliant. The book's approach to the wonders of the afterlife was straight-forward, almost matter-of-fact—which worked on the page, to be sure. For the film, however, Ward has invested every frame with a kind of magic that goes right past the frontal lobes and

lodges in the deepest part of our universal subconscious. It's as if we're seeing something new that is yet somehow strangely familiar. He may not convince you of the reality of an afterlife, but by the time the film is over, you will find yourself thinking, *If it does exist, it must be like this; otherwise, it will be a big disappointment!*

Williams is excellent in the lead. Without resorting to his trademark wackiness, he brings a glowing good humor to his Everyman role that makes the pathos ring all the more true. Sciorra adds immeasurably to her character, making visible the grief and agony that drive her to suicide (the character came across a bit pathetic, rather than sympathetic, on the page). Cuba Gooding, Jr. and Max Von Sydow are alternately endearing and funny as Neilsen's guides in the afterlife.

Technical credits are excellent across the board, including the best use ever of computer-generated imagery to create the painted world heaven in which Neilsen finds himself. But what's most amazing is the way these virtuoso visual stylings have been integrated into a stylistic whole, working together and never standing out on their own. Despite its shaky start, this film is like a dream come true. □

concept is still strong. It was a good combination of coming at something from left field, while also retaining the muscularity of Sigourney Weaver's character. The alien itself also fits very well into a religious community as they'd see it as some sort of devil-like creature."

One of the criticisms levelled at the film was the way it immediately disposed of Newt, the little girl rescued by Ripley in the previous sequel. Ward admits that Newt had no place in his plan: "No, I never liked her. I killed her off before the front credits were over," he laughed. "She was d.o.a.!"

As for his feelings on the finished film, Ward remained complimentary of director David Fincher's work, but confessed, "It was a kind of sad experience for me. Disappointing and sad. I thought there was something interesting I'll never get the chance to do." However, an intriguing taste of Ward's alien imagery that didn't make it to the screen in 1990 can be seen, eight years later, in his latest movie. Ward explained, "The upside-down cathedral in WHAT DREAMS MAY COME was something I'd had in mind for ALIEN³."

1993 marked a departure and a return for Ward: a departure from fantasy and a return to a more personal form of story-telling. "The story for MAP OF THE HUMAN HEART came from a number of different things: it came from my experiences as an outsider living in the Maori community, from living in the Arctic for a while before I started writing the story—actually while I was writing the story; it came from having a Spanish girlfriend that wouldn't return my phone calls"—he laughed—"but it mostly came from my parents, although I didn't really want to tell their story head on."

Like the half-Eskimo boy and the half-Cree Indian girl in MAP, Ward's parents were displaced aliens of mixed descent who met while serving in the field of war. Ward reiterated, "I identify strongly with people living on the perimeters, and this was a story of people who are culturally completely different, who had to try and overcome enormous personal and

cultural differences.”

MAP stands out from Ward's other films in that it is the most grounded in reality. Ward authored the story, which was scripted by Louis Nowra. It teamed him with director of photography Eduardo Serra for the first time, who would go on to photograph *WHAT DREAMS MAY COME*, and had a cast that included Jason Scott Lee, Anne Parillaud, Patrick Bergin, John Cusack, and Jeanne Moreau. This was big time movie making, shooting on ice floes in the Arctic; cast and crew were sometimes flown out to location by helicopters one hundred miles from the nearest community. Ward's canvas was growing bigger, yet there was no doubt we were in familiar territory. MAP is an enormously romantic but painful story combined with unexpected moments of humor and occasional sequences of a nightmarish intensity. The night bombing of Dresden is a spectacular example of expressionistic lighting and sleight-of-hand miniature work, a visual harbinger of hells to come in Ward's next film.

“As it's worked out, it's often been four or five years between films, so *WHAT DREAMS MAY COME* is more or less on cue.” It is easy to sense antipathies between Ward and the Hollywood movie-making machine as he reflects on his recent years working in Los Angeles. “I've found it an adaptive process. I used to always think that if something's good it will be made. This may be true in Australia, but now I think how good a project is and its chances of being made are almost in inverse proportion when you work out of California. Those films that you feel most passionate about...”—he sighed—“it's very hard to get them made.”

While writing and developing projects of his own, Ward turned to acting to gain another view of the film-making process. Ward's performances include one of the four leads in *THE SHOT*, an independent film in 1994, and two cameos for his friend Mike Figgis. “I had a brief scene in the beginning of *LEAVING LAS VEGAS*. My high point was as a sleazy businessman with Eliza-

“DREAMS embraces cutting edge technology but only at the service of a potent emotional story that exists in an intangible metaphysical zone”



Ward directs Robin Williams in a scene from *WHAT DREAMS MAY COME*.

beth Shue in the opening title sequence,” he laughed, “but we probably shouldn't mention that.” This was followed by an appearance as a pickle salesman in *ONE NIGHT STAND* in 1997. “I really enjoy acting. I feel like a lackey when I'm allowed to do it, like I'm being irresponsible, but at the same time it's very demanding.”

Equally demanding, Ward observed, is his original passion, painting, for which he now has little time. “If I ever give up filmmaking, I'll go to some remote part of New Zealand with a bunch of canvasses, and that's all I'll do. I find it very similar to film-making in that it requires a similar sort of concentration. I've sold stuff, but I've never had an exhibit.”

Still, in pre-production for *WHAT DREAMS MAY COME*, Ward supplied an Erewhon pencil and Staedtler pen rendering of the ship's graveyard in hell. “It's drawn consciously in the style of 19th century engraving, a little like William Blake. Normally, I only ever allow myself about two to three minutes on any drawing to communicate in the quickest way possible to the storyboard

artist what I want; but when I get the time, I can do something a little fancier. The most important thing for me is to communicate the emotional story as viscerally and visually as possible.”

This visceral, visual style attracted the attention of German filmmaker Werner Herzog ten years ago at the Hos Film Festival in Germany. A friendship developed between the two film-makers that brought Herzog a small role in *WHAT DREAMS MAY COME*. Ward confirmed, “Werner was living in San Francisco when he asked me if I would put him in one of my films. That's him in close-up in the sea of faces. He's in makeup to look older, because he's meant to be Robin Williams' father. I hope you got the story about him and his glasses.” (See *CFQ* 30:9-10)

Ward is reluctant to draw parallels between himself and Herzog, but if any other filmmaker can be regarded as a mentor, Herzog may be one. “Certainly, the traditions Werner draws on are some of the traditions I draw on, which are expressionist theatre, expressionist film, German romantic painting. I have an interest in

that culture because, as I said, my mother's German, so I've always kind of tracked German painting, German artists like Kathe Kollwitz. It's more an interest in the same roots, I guess. I also like Wim Wenders' work a lot, and Orson Welles, his earlier work particularly.”

Despite the struggle, despite the labels and perhaps a variance with the mainstream film-making community, Ward remained animated and optimistic about his latest work. “I suppose the most exciting thing about *WHAT DREAMS MAY COME*, which is very rare, is that, with the exception of obviously the mountain photography and a few grand sets—the aircraft carrier, the library, part of the Marie stairs—most of the world has been created in post-production. After we finished shooting, we had nine months of editing in which we were able to create these vistas that didn't exist, particularly in the painted world. We've turned what was essentially an intimate drama into something that's really an intimate epic.”

WHAT DREAMS MAY COME is without a doubt Ward's most ambitious project to date, a film that embraces cutting edge technology and pushes it to new levels, but only at the service of a potent emotional story that exists in an intangible metaphysical zone. “It's an amazingly different way of working than I've ever worked before,” Ward observed. “Only half the film is put on film while you're shooting; the other half you get in post-production. I think it must be very frightening for production designers and directors of photography, particularly if they don't have a visual background.”

Given the choice of a set with actors or another unlimited virtual palette for his next film, Ward cannot foresee a choice: “I like the intimacy of working with actors and what you receive from it as a director, but I like both ways of working. They're just totally different.”

The real question posed by *WHAT DREAMS MAY COME* will be answered by box office receipts. If that is the case, then let us hope that Vincent Ward will be allowed many more opportunities to answer us himself. □