

Jack and George: who owns a life?

A discussion of George Johnston's *My Brother Jack* in the light of two interviews with Jack and Pat Johnston on 29/7/1980 and 20/8/1980. (The tapes of these interviews are held by the National Library of Australia, Canberra, and an abbreviated version of the interviews was published in *Helix*, numbers 11 & 12, combined issue, 1982.)

My Brother Jack is one of the most popular of Australian novels, regarded from its first publication as encapsulating important truths. I was a teacher when it came out, and my students read it willingly. It was about their world, and they liked to discuss its events and characters. They were students from the northern suburbs of Melbourne, and when George Johnston describes Davy and Helen dining with the Turleys in Toorak, with Davy forced to see himself as inferior to his hosts because he lacked their certainties of taste and confidence, my students grasped intuitively why he felt as he did. It pleased them that Jack, the working class Aussie, was the object of praise, but they followed the rises, falls and rises of Davy with an even closer interest because their own paths, they sensed, would have similarities to his. Brother Davy was a man on the way up, and so, they hoped, were they.

This was all very interesting for a teacher, but after a time I began to have doubts. I'd known plenty of Jacks myself, I'd written about some of them in my first book, and it struck me that my Jacks were, in the way I'd presented them, nothing like George's brother.

I wondered what the 'real' Jack had been like; I assumed that he'd read the novel: what had he thought of himself?

Years passed, and I became aware that Jack Johnston had given talks about the novel named for him to students in the Catholic system. I got his address, I wrote to him, then I rang, and he agreed to meet me and let me ask some questions. I combed the book, preparing, I borrowed a tape recorder, and I took myself to 4 Peace Court, Doveton, smiling, as I walked to his door, at the address of the sunburnt Icarus whose life, in his brother's version, had been ennobled by his preparations for war.

What would I find?

Jack Johnston met me at the door, very warmly, looking every inch a Jack. With him was his wife; I was going to call her Sheila but she corrected my thought. Pat. My investigation of the two realities had begun. There was a book, the pages of which I knew well, there was, or had been, realities which had given rise to the book, and there was a denial, a resistance, from within the book to what had been written. They sat me down, they offered me beer, and when I refused it, tea. Pat made this, while Jack chatted to the visitor. He brought to my mind the Christmas gatherings of my childhood, with talk proceeding amicably as if time had no constraint. While we spoke I took in the room, comfortable but cheaply furnished, and dominated, for me, by a photo of Jack the soldier, with his jaw strong, a rising sun badge on the upturned brim of his hat, and a leather band running under his chin. I thought of George's

descriptions of Jack at Puckapunyal military camp and felt a simple concordance between the book and the man.

He looked tough, hard, and very fit. I could not decide whether he looked older or younger, but certainly he looked different. In the open-neck shirt and the shorts and the white gaiters and the white webbing belt, there was a look of absolute rightness about him – I had forgotten his strong, graceful boxer's legs, a deep brown now and dusted with a thick gold down of hair. What had changed about him, I realised, was both subtle and profound: it was almost as if he had been fined down to the "essential Jack", as if this was what my brother really should look like, as if all his growing and maturing had been working towards the presentation of this man in this exact appearance at this precise time. Even more than this, for I saw that this was not only that he looked as Jack should look, but he looked as a proper man would look ... there was an impalpable feeling about him, almost an emanation, that here was a man totally sure of the rightness of what he was doing. I felt good for him, and yet it disturbed me strangely ...

Davy's view of Jack, George's view of his brother, is recalled just before the end of the book, when the brothers watch a march of Australian soldiers through the streets of Melbourne:

They marched as they liked to march, in their slouch hats with the grey-bordered colour-patches on the bleached-out puggarees, in khaki shorts and their open-neck shirts with sleeves rolled up above bunched brown muscles, and the white wide belts and the white canvas gaiters over the brown boots, and on practically every chest were the multi-coloured campaign ribbons of the deserts and the jungles and the

mountains and the islands and the beaches, and they came towards us behind the colour-party with the drawn swords and the hoisted flags and the brave emblazonings of the old-familiar and the new-familiar names. And I had to blink and gulp and fight with the emotion and sentiment and pain that racked me to the very guts.

What pain? It's too soon to tackle that question. The soldiers must march a little longer.

They were going past now in the rhythmic thunder of the boots, with the clip of metal in the sound, beating through the roar of cheering, and they marched, not like Guardsmen, but in their big, loose, straight easy way, the hard brown faces under the tipped-up hats, lean faces with the chin-straps taut and shining on the harsh slanting planes, and the strong brown downy legs above the socks and the white gaiters, the men of the far adventure, the soldiers of far fortune. And the anguish inside me had twisted and turned into an awful and irremediable sense of loss, and I thought of Dad and the putteed men coming off the Ceramic, and I thought of Jack when I had seen him at Puckapunyal five long years before, looking just like these men, hard and strong and confident and with his brown legs planted in the Seymour dust as if the whole world was his to conquer, a man fulfilled in his own rightness, and suddenly and terribly I knew that all the Jacks were marching past me, all the Jacks were still marching ...

Johnston – and I mean George – is good at this sort of thing. He likes a set-piece situation where the reader can be shifted to an emotion that is already *there*, socially validated and strong before the first word hits the page. George knew how to please the men

who ran newspapers. He had a genius for it, in fact, and they sent him all over the world to report, for the people back home, what was being done, on the public's behalf, and for their protection, by their fighting men. Note the possessive pronoun. Politicians love to tell the public that fighting men are theirs: the men, and the policies they are used to enforce, are taken to be indivisible. Parades such as the one we have been reading about enlist the public as well as the soldiers. If I wanted to separate my own view of wars and armies from those of George Johnston, I would begin with those memorable, easily quoted words 'the men of the far adventure, the soldiers of far fortune' ...

... but I was telling you about the evenings I had with Jack and Pat, who were not impressed by the famous novel, and saw George's life as a disaster.

PAT Would you believe that he didn't finish reading My Brother Jack? It bored him.

Didn't you finish reading it?

JACK Oh, I got half way through. I'd sooner read James Bond.

Have you ever finished reading it?

JACK I did, when we started doing these lectures, I went through it. It's too close to me I suppose. It's like reading your life, you know, and saying, well, this isn't right, that's not right, this happened, and you

know, you say to yourself, well, what a lot of bull, you know.

When George was writing My Brother Jack on Hydra, did he communicate with you to check on any material?

JACK Oh no, no. If he had of, I think if he'd left that book and sat down with me, I could have told him anecdotes, and things that happened – see, during the depression, George was always working, he only had a sort of bird's eye view of the blokes in black coats and the out of work. He never went through it – we did. You see, we did, we knew exactly the things we did to live, you know ... if he'd only seen me and we could've talked things over and I could've told him things – he could've made that book a hundred per cent better. He could have really ... But how he came to write it – he was very sick of course with the TB, and there might have been a bit of delirium, homesickness, nostalgia ...

PAT ... I think he thought he might die ...

At the end of my second interview with Jack and Pat I asked them what they thought would have been the best and the worst times in George's life.

PAT I think the best part would really be in those ...

JACK Seventeen and twenty one.

PAT ... late teen years. That would be the happiest time of his life. Not knowing very much of it, but what I saw of it in Sydney, to my knowledge would be the worst of it.

JACK I'd answer it the same. Because we don't know what his life was in Greece, or London, but we know he wasn't happy, he was a sick man and he was dying in Sydney, so it must have been his worst time. And I think between seventeen and twenty one or twenty two would have been his happiest time, when he sort of got out, got to mix with girls, got playing football and mixing with men, got a good job and was going upwards in his job. Now everything was rosy. So I should say, that must have been the highlight at this time of his life.

Jack's answer implies that George must have been happiest when his life was closest to his own. Jack and Pat have no uncertainties about the rightness of everything they've done. The reading public think of Charmian and George as a glamorous couple who had the courage to seek out their far adventure, and live it to the full, but none of this impressed the Doveton couple. Nor were they impressed by intellectuals analysing them on their visits to Sydney, after the publication of *My Brother Jack* had made George famous. Here they are talking about a gathering at the home of Russell Drysdale, overlooking Brisbane Waters, north of Sydney.

PAT There were all these people there, and we were sitting at this big refectory table and they were picking

different parts of your character, weren't they? And this is the typical ocker in him, you know? Typical Australians, you know, their beer and their races and their football is all they think about ... and their womenfolk not treated as women. And I couldn't see what they were getting at, because their women were treated worse than anything I've seen, inasmuch as if they weren't good drinkers with them, they didn't want to know them. Am I right?

JACK Oh yeah.

PAT And they'd drink glass for glass. No, I couldn't do that. It's not that I have any objection to anyone drinking. They can bath in it if they want to. But I can't do that. So I'd sit back. And I can't ... I'm not an art critic. I know nothing about art. I don't like a picture because it's painted by somebody. If I like it, I like it. I don't care who paints it. And I can't pretend that I do.

JACK Didn't I up and tell them all off that night?

PAT Oh yes you did.

What did you do that for, Jack?

JACK Oh they drove me mad. Analysing people and ...

PAT Thomas Kenneally was one of them.

JACK They'd just drive you up the wall. Like I mean you'd think that they were ... like the only brains, the only decent people, the only good people were themselves, you know.

PAT And all you thought about was getting to the races ... In my lifetime, with you, which is nearly fifty-one years, I think Jack's been to the races about six times all told.

JACK Oh ...

PAT But according to George you were there every week, like our racecourse touts, sort of thing. All the scrounging. And this is the way they'd talk and it wasn't true.

JACK No.

Did you feel that you were up there with a reputation around you?

JACK Well that's right. You got a reputation of this and that and, you know, it was getting me down at the finish, you know. I felt, you know, like, dirty amongst'em. I was glad to get away, to be quite candid. Drunk intellectuals.

PAT But are they intellectuals?

JACK Strike me bloody. They'd starve to death if they had to earn a crust the hard way.

A clue to this anger, perhaps humiliation, felt by Jack and Pat can be found in the passage from *My Brother Jack* quoted earlier: 'All the Jacks were marching past me, all the Jacks were still marching.' The narrator is David Meredith, and his brother Jack is beside him, watching the march instead of being included in it because an injury has robbed him of the soldiering he felt was rightly his. All the Jacks, when the 'real' Jack, the embodiment of what it means

to be a Jack, is there beside him in Bourke Street Melbourne in the 1940s, and beside him still at the Drysdales' in the late 1960s. It's not entirely clear to me, after much reading of Johnston's work and interviewing his actual brother, how sharply George had separated the brother from the type. I feel that when writing the book he must have switched freely from one to the other. Jack, in the novel, is a device to show the reader what Davy is not, he's the contrapuntal line, kept deliberately simple, that shows the complexities of Davy's line, running above and below, around and responding to, Jack's line. As a writer's device, it works splendidly, but newspaper man as George was, there's a fair amount of journalistic cliché in the portrait, however memorable. So the Jack and Pat that I met in July 1980, when the book had been in circulation for sixteen years, were still uneasy with it, accusing it of being wrong, of not representing them as well as it should, taking issue with points of detail (as if the book was meant to be an accurate picture of them) while at the same time rejecting it because they felt their lives had been quite other from what George had shown. To look into this a little further, let us take their differing accounts of the 1930s depression.

George's version begins with an exhausted Jack, his feet in tatters, collapsing into the hall of his parents' home when his mother opens the door. A doctor is called but holds out little hope – 'malnutrition, pneumonia, total physical debilitation, considerable loss of blood ...' Mum, who has nursed many a dying soul, puts him in the front room, and amazingly, Jack recovers. His odyssey, when the family get it out of him, takes up a page. Finding no work in Victoria or New South Wales, he has gone as a deck-hand on a

Chilean freighter, has worked on a pipeline in the Chilean Andes, and when that project fails, he is shipped out of Valparaiso as a 'distressed British subject', to be landed back in Australia. 'Not knowing where to go to be given help – or perhaps too proud to plead for it – and without any money for the fare, he set out to walk home to Melbourne.' As we will see, Jack's account of this return differs so widely from George's that I feel the need to call in two explanations of George's account. The first, and simple, one is that George wanted a story to summate, in an epic way, the horrors and indignities of every Jack (and Jill) who experienced the depression. The tale George tells incorporates all the Jacks and all their stories. The second explanation I would offer for the discrepancy I wish to show is that Jack's return to 'Avalon', the parental home (page 175 of the book), embodies, carries, some of the pain and distress that George himself had to undergo in writing his finest book; he was bringing himself home as he brought Jack down the eastern coast of Australia, tramping day and night through the dark forests of southern New South Wales and eastern Victoria.

There were of course occasional kindnesses. A timber-splitter near Cape Disaster fed him and sheltered him in his crude bark humpy for nearly a week: the lighthouse-keeper at Gabo Island looked after him for a day or two: near Orbost a dairy-farmer's wife gave him a bed and hot food during a storm that lasted forty-eight hours. But after Bairnsdale, which was still a long way from Melbourne, he never remembered anything of his journey home. Somehow the bloody pulp of his feet and the indomitability of his spirit carried him on.

This account, for George, is another set piece, and he makes it one of his finest. One feels that he's humbled by, and proudly admiring of, the composite figure who is his brother Jack, marching through his pages with the courage and determination of a whole generation who knew they were beaten but knew also that you were only finally beaten if you admitted defeat. Jack – and this time I mean all the Aussie males and their women who were betrayed by the ruling financial system, which discarded them and didn't care – was clutching his triumph even as he fell to the floor.

The man himself tells it differently.

JACK He took fellows he'd read about and heard about, and built me round them. I think when we go to these lectures that kids expect to see a big tough, scarred yobbo or something. You know what I mean. It must be a terrible let down for them!

What about heading off to South America, and walking home from Sydney to Melbourne, and collapsing in the front hall on a wild and stormy night?

JACK Now, this is where another thing comes in. One time ... a fella I met up in Horsham, was the Minister's son, he was out of work and so I was a bit homesick, so I came home, and brought him with me, because I used to stay at his place of a weekend, when I got into town, so I brought him down home you see, and we went fruit picking, up to Shepparton, and the fruit ran out – one thing and another – during the depression

time, and there's dozens of blokes there and of course, they couldn't sell their fruit, so they had to put us out and we didn't have much money, and what we had – we had a few beers and had our fare back to town you see. So we walked from Melbourne to Elsternwick, home, a matter of about 6 or 8 miles, and of course, a hot day, and we land at the front door and you know how you put it on – aaaah – you know like, and George, being younger, remembers this, you know, well, we must have looked dirty, bedraggled, and tired and one thing and another, so he gets that little bit which stayed in his memory and builds a story around it. Follow what I mean?

The discrepancy between George's epic account of the depression and Jack's disclaimer is very important in my mind. George wanted, and wrote, a summative passage, and it makes his brother uncomfortable. It simply isn't true, to Jack. Pat went on:

PAT When he said about how he gave us fifty pounds when I was so sick, do you know, it would have been, I suppose, all the years we were married, he'd been in our house twice – he'd go past in his beautiful little car and everything, and he wouldn't even call in and ask his brother if he had anything to eat.

JACK He had a guilt complex at the finish, because he thinks he should have done something.

PAT He knows that he should have come ...

JACK He was earning about ten pounds a week then, when the working man, you know, tradesman, was getting about four pounds, so he was on big money.

PAT You see Jack was out of work for three years and in that time, we had two children and at the time, I think, yes, there was a third one on the way, and we were managing all right. I mean, Jack would do anything to get a few bob, you know.

Jack's story goes on to describe his twice-weekly trips from the Victoria Market, in Melbourne, to Port Albert, in Gippsland, starting at 3 am with a load of vegetables bought at the market which were sold as he and the owner of the truck, a man no longer able to drive, made their way down what is now the Princes Highway to Traralgon, then over the South Gippsland hills to the port where they picked up a load of fish to sell on the way back. 'We'd have a day's rest and down we'd go again, and we'd make about thirty bob each out of it. But it was enough to keep the family going.'

Survival was the name of the game for Jack and Pat. They had no money for firewood, but the man who read their gas meter was a friend, and he showed Jack how to unscrew the pipes from the meter and rejoin them with a piece of bicycle tube ...

PAT ... and it didn't register, and you could have all the gas you wanted and all the heat, so we used to light the gas stove up ...

JACK ... open the door, the oven open and everything ...

PAT We'd have every gas jet lit, and the children were beautifully warm, the whole house was nice and warm, and I didn't feel a bit guilty about that. My children shouldn't die with cold!

As I listened to Jack and Pat, back in 1980, I found myself torn. I was myself a writer and had to concede, at least to myself, that George, like any other writer, had the right to alter, and if necessary, fabricate in order to make his novel work as he wanted it to. I'd suffered from people claiming that things I'd written in my first book weren't true. (Obviously I thought they were!) I was aware, as perhaps Jack and Pat were not, that truth was usually relative, and that to get at one level of truth it is commonly necessary to alter the realities on another level. One may have to invent, or even falsify, in order to create the imaginative truth that needs to be expressed. And yet, defend George as I might in my mind, I could feel from Jack and Pat's insistence on their understandings that they were doing more than quibbling over details. They knew very well that writers change things, which is only a step away from knowing that writers often have to change things. Their objections were larger, however. They believed in the story as they knew it. It had more truth in it than George's version, which they distrusted. They couldn't see why he'd had to invent when the realities – their truths – were right before them and ever so obvious. What was wrong with him? For that matter, what was wrong with everybody who'd accepted George's version and made him famous, a prizewinner, a man quoted and sought after for interviews, further writing commissions, and so on? Remember Jack's observation, quoted

early in this piece: 'If he'd only seen me and we could've talked things over and I could have told him things – he could have made that book a hundred per cent better. He could have really ...' Jack meant those words. He and Pat believed them. Their lives, as they understood them, were better than any novel.

So why do people write novels? Is it to entertain other people, not as sure, strong and confident as Jack and Pat?

Why did George write *My Brother Jack*?

To put ourselves in a position to deal with this question, we have to say something about the marriage of George and Charmian. Since this takes us beyond the scope of this essay, I refer readers to Max Brown's *Charmian and George: the Marriage of George Johnston and Charmian Clift*, Rosenberg Publishing, Sydney, 2004, and also to another treatment of the couple's life, *George Johnston: a biography*, by Garry Kinnane, Nelson Publishers, Melbourne, 1986. From these accounts we form an impression of two people, each of whom believed in his/her own glamour, and with the capacity to make others believe in it too, who seized on each other, fell on each other when they first met, and set off together as if their dangerous partnership would lead to heights beyond conjecture. The paradox of this couple is that while it is quite true to think of them as a pair of opportunists prepared to seize on any possibility of displaying their glamour, it is also true to say that each had a measure of greatness which they were only inadequately trained to use. Charmian's *Mermaids Singing* is a lovely book, and George's David Meredith trilogy – or whatever is the word for two and a half books! – prove that they did exist, for a time, on the levels they aspired to. But how

hard was it to find, and sustain their lives at these peaks!

Again I refer the reader to the biographies by Max Brown and Garry Kinnane. Chapter 10 of Kinnane's book gives a harrowing account of George's decline on the Greek island of Hydra. He'd written trash, he hadn't written as well as Charmian, he was forever preoccupied with the peripheral activities of publishers – deals, reputations, royalties, profitable ideas – and Charmian's sexuality, rich and richly expressed, somehow over-rode his own. He smoked, drank, talked, and smoked. His lungs couldn't stand it. He became seriously ill. They weren't earning enough money. They weren't attending to their children. Too many people knew about their island retreat and they were too available. They were all reputation and hollow at the centre. George seems to have realised this before Charmian. He despaired. He'd gone wrong somewhere, he told himself. There must, somewhere, be a path that didn't take him, repeatedly, to the bottom of the pit.

There was, he believed. It was the path he'd left, scornfully, all those years before. He'd go back to his beginnings, and find another way. He did. He'd tell the truth this time, he told himself, like the reformed alcoholic who knows there's a bottle in the cupboard. He'd go back to those beginnings, and tell it like it ...

What should the next word be? Tell it like it was? No. Like it should have been? Perhaps. Tell it in the way that gave him a cure for the misery he felt when he was truthful enough, with himself, to see where he'd brought himself?

Ah!

He wrote *My Brother Jack*. It begins with the writer reaching

as far back as he can into the times and places he'd pushed behind him. Like many a writer before and since, he's recapturing time past. When he recovers the times and influences long denied, there are things that displease, and things that fascinate. There's darkness and light. It is his own health that's at stake so he, George (in the persona of Davy), must be the centre of the book. He's in search of a healing truth, so there must be positives around him. He's a deeply troubled man, lurching on the edge of failure, after having his hopes ever so high, so there must be an untroubled figure or figures near him to give him contrast. He's rejected his family, his old way of life and his country, yet they have been going on without him, behind him, out of sight. What were they like, all those years while he was away? His own anxieties and self-doubts have been destroying him, so his portrait of all he left behind must have no uncertainties. Jack, as created by George, is *doubt*-less, a natural man, spontaneous first and last. In George's own words, 'He looked as a proper *man* would look ...' and '... here was a man totally sure of the rightness of what he was doing.' The real Jack was confident enough, even at the end of his life when I met him, but I doubt if anybody in the world is quite as sure of him/herself as Jack in the book. Jack in the book is what George on Hydra needed, and so he came to be written. And as I have been trying to show, Jack in Peace Court Doveton thought it was all a bit much.

I have already referred to the way in which Jack and Pat felt they had not only a better grip on reality but a better reality to grip on. This came out powerfully towards the end of my second interview, when they began to detail the lives of their children and

grandchildren. Pat and Jack had great pride in them all, summed up by Pat: 'We've got a very good family, and they're a very united family. If one's in trouble, they're all there to see what they can do. And that's very gratifying when you look back.' Pat is referring, of course, to the unwillingness of Jack's parents to acknowledge her, or her children, in the early years of their marriage, to George's unwillingness to inquire about the welfare of his brother in the terrible years of depression, and, as much as she knew of it, to the incapacity of George and Charmian to hold their own family life together.

Jack and Pat had two last surprises for me. The first was that Jack (who in the novel looks down on Catholics) had become a Roman Catholic late in life:

PAT He used to always take us to church and sit outside. And whenever I was sick, which was seldom, he'd take the kids and see they went and then wait for them ...
... so it'd be three years ago and it was Christmas Eve. And we were going to Mass, my daughter and us, up in Lilydale. And I think you'd been down the pub with some of the boys and came home and you said 'Can I come to Mass with you tonight?' Well we nearly fell over ...
... so I spoke to the priest up here and he said ... 'Do you think he wants to or are you pushing him?' I said, 'Oh fair go, you wouldn't be able to push him.' And

he said 'Well how do you feel that he understands it?' I said, 'Better than I understand it.' Because I used to hear him talking to the kids about Confession and all this sort of thing. They'd ask me a question and he'd answer it ...

... he (the priest) asked him how he'd explain the Holy Trinity, that's right. He said, 'Oh, there's God the Father, and there's God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. He said, 'Well, how would you explain God the Holy Spirit to a child?' And he (Jack) thought for a minute and he said, 'Well, I think that it is God's love coming down to all of us. We all have love in our hearts. And it's the spirit of God coming into us.' And he looked at me and he said 'I couldn't have explained that better than that myself. How do you explain the Holy Trinity? We can't. And he said, 'Oh I think he's alright,' so he's been a Mick ever since.

JACK I went into it thoroughly first. Forty-eight years! Studied it very thoroughly at first hand. But I thought 'Well, if I can't beat 'em I'll join them.'

A little later in the same evening Jack surprised me, and his wife, with a moment of unexpected grace. I have already referred to my questions to Jack and Pat about the best and worst times of George's life. I put the same questions to my hosts, and both Pat and I were surprised by what came out.

And your life, Jack?

JACK The happiest time of my life was the last fifty and a half years.

PAT Isn't that nice!

That's very gracious of you Jack.

JACK Yes, oh it's good to be in love after fifty years.

PAT Well that's, you know, it's terrific.

(pause)

PAT George once asked me ...

(pause)

George asked you?

PAT How I would define a happy man.

Yes?

PAT And I ... because they were intellectuals. I'm not. And I thought, well I wonder what he means. But in my opinion a happy man is a man whose family are waiting for him to come home.

I turned off my tape recorder at that point. There was nothing more to say. My hosts had put on record the most important contents of their hearts, and had shown more completely and convincingly than I ever expected the differences between the two brothers, and in so doing had shown me, also, that the real Jack was more, much more, than the historical and personal simplification that George had needed to create in order to complement his own persona, Davy, in the novel which made him famous. Neither

Jack nor Pat ever had any urge to write, but they had submitted, modestly enough, to fate, history, God's will or simply the events of their period – call these things what you wish – and in doing so they believed, or so I suspect, that life spins a better, truer, story than any novelist. I count my two meetings with them a high point in my life.