

Interlude 3: Marshall and Porter, Alan and Hal

My next two essays are about two men, both of them solitary yet highly social, who decided, quite early in their lives, that they would become writers. This raises the question of whether those who aspire to be writers have much idea of what it is they want to take on and I think the best available answer is that it is the path that seems compelling even though its destination, and its route, remain unknown. Marshall and Porter are not usually coupled together, but I think they belong in each other's company, not least because they knew each other at the outset of their careers, and maintained the link for a time by letters.

Both took their early steps towards writing when they frequented Melbourne's cafes in the last years of inter-war prosperity and early years of the depression which began in 1929. The same or similar cafes and café personalities can be found in their early stories, then they went their separate ways. Porter took himself into the Strzelecki Ranges to do his writing (see 'On the Ridge' in *A Bachelor's Children*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1962, and also various sections of *The Paper Chase*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1966). They wrote to each other, and Marshall's letters to Porter were among the letters that Mrs Tretheway reads while her boarder is away from the house. The Marshall letters are now held by the National Library; what Porter wrote back I cannot say, but here's what he said of his friend in *The Paper Chase*.

... the admiration is there. This is not because Marshall has been crippled by infantile paralysis, and doubly crippled

because he has been thrown from a horse, and is "brave" about it, but because he is a sensitive, alight and centralized human being. He does, however, as the first physically crippled man I get to know, teach me something strange. It is the same thing that one learns from a beautiful woman. Cripples and lovely women, somewhere along the highway, both tire of being looked at as though they had but one quality, tire of being picketed by observation. Each learns, therefore, to return a deeper look, a clearer look, against the mere stare-stare-monkey-bear look. Once upon a time Marshall's problem may have been – but I don't really know – when he was younger, a youth, a boy, a problem possessing the refinements of difficulty it needs refinements of acting-a-part to level out. To stand with ease and nonchalance on the deadly straight line between appearing tragic and appearing wilfully brave is a feat of social balance so complex I should not like to have to rake in the solitary dark for the super-organization necessary to accomplish it. I prefer idly to be fond of people or, if they are not my cup of tea, selfishly to be passer-by indifferent to them, rather than to be dazzled into sit-about respect and admiration. Marshall is, however, one of a mere handful of men and women I admire and respect to the point of love, that treacherous and rabies-ridden emotion.

Hal, we cannot help noticing, is being 'Hal' in those last words. One of the points where these dissimilar men come close to each other is that Marshall, too, was known by his first name: he was Alan, or *Alan Marshall*; the surname alone made him too distant

for a man whose voice entered thousands of households via his writing.

This didn't come about easily, as his autobiographical works (especially *This is the Grass*) make clear. There were endless steps between the boy crippled early on and the confident writer of later years. His writing shows him taking some of these steps, most obviously and perhaps most entertainingly when he gets dressed up to tell people's fortunes; in the fairground tent scenes of *In Mine Own Heart* (Marshall peeping out to get a look at his next customers before they get a look at him!), we have the paradox that people are paying money to have truths about themselves revealed, while Marshall takes both money and the opportunity to study humanity presenting itself. This is learning and teaching at its most bizarre, but something wonderful develops from it, as we will see in Marshall's later books such as *Hammers over the Anvil* (Nelson, Melbourne, 1975).

Porter, meanwhile, was forging an entirely different style, approach, subject matter, and readership. It's tempting to say that the two men could hardly have been more dissimilar, yet the bond between them is there. Opposites can express two sides of the same thing, and can be peculiarly attractive to minds swinging about in search of certainty, as we see – or used to see, not so long ago – with communists embracing catholicism, or vice-versa; when the first faith was found wanting, away they swung to the opposite. I have a feeling that Porter and Marshall are often talking about similar things, or perhaps it's merely the fact that they wrote in the same country at the same time, so that features

of the culture, or lack thereof, that surrounded them crept into their work regardless of their intentions.

I shall leave my speculations at that point and move to the writing of these two men, Marshall first, then Porter, or shall I say Alan followed by Hal?