

Gippsland's first great book

Some thoughts about Eve Langley's *The Pea Pickers* (1942), Eve herself, and what happens when life is turned into art.

My heart is heavy as I begin this essay, yet something tells me I should be exultant because many readers won't have read *The Pea Pickers* – such a modest title! – so they won't know what's in store for them. I say 'in store' knowing that it's an ominous-sounding expression, and knowing, also, that it's appropriate for Langley's troubled life, with its wretched, solitary end.

I'll start with my first encounter with this book. I was teaching in Bairnsdale, East Gippsland, and the town's librarian was Hal Porter, Gippslander *extraordinaire*. He spoke highly of *The Pea Pickers*, so I read it. I knew its places, and I understood its crops well enough to appreciate that roaming bands of pickers were needed for the harvest. I'd explored for myself any number of half-settled and previously-settled areas so I understood what Eve was talking about when she wrote:

We ... collected all the old boots around the hut, finding about twenty. They are the flowers of the Australian forest. In some places you won't find a blade of grass, but you'll always pick up an old boot, as hard as stone, its little round tin-metal-edged eyes gleaming malignantly at their bad treatment.

I was at the time too much a high-culture person to see this as literature, but it was amazingly vital, and I was pleased that I'd encountered her little curio, as I thought it then.

It cannot have been much later that I listened to Hal recounting a day he'd spent with Eve Langley, revisiting her haunts of thirty years before. He describes Eve and this day in *The Extra*⁽¹⁾. Have a look if you want to enjoy one master's account of meeting another. (The male version of the noun is appropriate for Langley, as we will see.) Listening to Hal's description of the day, I noted how important it had been for him, and became aware of literary tradition as something alive and close to me.

Years passed, I wrote about Gippsland myself, and, after living in Melbourne a few years, I felt a need for another reading of Eve's book. I took it much more seriously this time, since I too was looking back on a period which, for me as for Eve, would never come again. I remember thinking about this second reading that it hadn't helped me 'place' the book. That is, perhaps, the problem I want to tackle with this essay, but let us see ...

When *The Extra* came out in 1975, I read Hal's account of the day he'd spent with Eve. 'The bravura of her style enthrals me,' he says, 'but most inspiriting is the stance she takes.' He's a fan of her book, 'and not merely because it's about the part of Gippsland I lived in in the 1920s.' I don't think I realised it at the time, but Hal is pointing to there being at least one other way of reading the book, a reading in which Gippsland is not so much central as the *location* of the central drama of Eve's life. More of that later.

At a literary conference a few years later, I heard Joy Thwaites⁽²⁾ giving a talk about the last part of Eve's life, her wretched existence

and eventual death – alone, alone – in a hut not far from Katoomba, in the mountains west of Sydney. She showed us photos of the dwelling, such as it was, which Eve had named Iona Lympus. We saw Eve when young, and in her last years. The face had filled with madness and despair. I thought of Hal, years before, mocking himself as he shaved before a mirror: ‘Is this the face that launched a thousand ships?’ How could the writer of *The Pea Pickers* have been brought so low?

Having recently reread the book for the purpose of writing this essay, and having reread Joy Thwaites’ biography, also by way of preparation, I find myself asking, ‘How could anyone brought so low (mostly by herself) ever have climbed so high?’ Surely *The Pea Pickers* was beyond the capabilities of the woman whose life was one long spiral of confusion, delusion, and incapacity to deal sensibly with relationships, children, cooking, or anything else?

Readers may wonder at this point which of my various readings of *The Pea Pickers*, or observations on the book and its writer, I am asking them to consider. My answer is that I am trying to lay out the various reactions I have had to the book in order to ask myself why I now think it is so wonderful, and - even more difficult - to try to establish the best way of reading this improbable work.

Where shall we start?

We could start with Macca, because he is the soul of Gippsland, or the feature of the region which/who becomes focal in Eve’s/ Steve’s need ... for whatever it is she is needing.

Or we could do it more simply, by saying that once upon a time there were two young women who wanted to find adventure far

from home, so they called themselves Steve and Blue, they dressed as men, they left their mother (Mia) in Dandenong and travelled by train to Gippsland. They were going to be pea-pickers. From Bairnsdale, they caught a little steamer down the lakes to Metung, and they worked in the fields around the Gippsland lakes. They were poor as church mice, they shot rabbits occasionally, they stole from the cupboards of other pickers, they ate puftaloonies (!) or anything else on offer in the homes to which they were invited, and they were, at least on some levels, wondrously happy. Their mother, Mia, had been a Gippslander, but she married an outsider, they never had any money, he died, and she was both poor and excluded from such family inheritance as she might have had. Thus Steve and Blue feel that they are Gippslanders as well as outsiders, or, to put it another way, they are spiritual Gippslanders even if they possess no more than a few of those old boots in the bush.

They are in search of all the things that the young go looking for – adventure, fortune, love, experience, identity, characters to bounce against, and, in Steve’s case, the sensations and the moments that will feed her yearning for materials to weave into the miraculous fabric which she wants her writing to be. Steve (Eve) is writing as she goes, and the book is full of poems or parts of poems that she dashes down.

She meets Macca, he’s fascinated, he quotes Adam Lindsay Gordon to her, he hangs around, as we say today, and, if we may try to see things in his way – hard to do when Eve is writing about Steve – he wants to be her lover. Macca is both insightful, and conventional. He loves Steve for her poetry, yet he isn’t looking for

the life of a poet, even to be joined to. His way is what most people think is the natural way, and it leads, as Steve (or Eve) puts it ...

... to perambulators.

Steve is not having this. Neither is Eve, the writer. She tells Macca, 'I wish to circle above things, unhurt and not hurting anyone.' Then she asks this man who does, in his way, love her, or at least is deeply curious about her, 'What are the women like, whom men love?' and he answers, 'They're different Steve. They know more; they can hide themselves. In fact, they have a hold on themselves and you haven't.'

The strange thing about these words which Eve puts into the mouth of Macca – or perhaps the real Macca said them to her, years earlier, for the happenings related in *The Pea Pickers* took place in 1927-28, and the writing of the book appears to have been done between March and May of 1940 – is that Eve, the writer, shows awareness of what she is and why people find her so problematical. Perhaps this is only possible because the book is a reflection on a summer well over the horizon. And yet there is an amazing immediacy in the writing: this is the miracle of the book, yet we have to wonder, after reading Joy Thwaites' account of Eve's life between the idyllic summer and her chaotic situation at the time she started the book, how she found sufficient distance, objectivity of a wildly fluttering sort, to create the perfection – or perhaps the necessary improvement of reality – she wanted, once and forever, and only once, to set down.

I think it best to introduce at this point another complicating factor, namely the nature of the writing that went into *The Pea*

Pickers, and the editorial work done on it before it became a book. Joy Thwaites again:

It was a task she loved, a journey into the past, into the magical Primaveras of health and youth, a collation of old letters and journals, cherished for years and now painstakingly cut and pasted together, the 'broken bits' ... of memory re-forming in her imagination, re-creating her old life, her beloved Gippsland, her image of herself as free, masculine and poetic, a vivid contrast to the hapless Mrs Hilary Clark and the trials and tribulations of a shaky marriage.

Eve was a notoriously messy writer, able to type away with an almost ink-less tape in her machine, on pink paper, her work single-spaced and double-sided, to the despair of the editors at Angus & Robertson in Sydney, the famous trio of whom Joy Thwaites has this to say:

She worried, too, that Angus & Robertson would mutilate her treasured story with sub-editing. Indeed, the manuscript in the hands of Nan McDonald, Beatrice Davis and Rosemary Dobson, had to be submitted to skilful and sympathetic reshaping. Langley had been correct in assessing its rough state ... but now she feared to have it altered. It took a long and tactful correspondence to produce the final edition.

The A&R editors were famous in their day and long afterwards for their skill, tact, and delicacy, but also for firmness in maintaining their company's standards. Even the most insistent authors found them daunting. They worked in an age when few households possessed a typewriter, and editors were used to coping with

masses of handwritten pages, possibly chaotic in nature, produced by writers who weren't experienced in the processes of publication. One imagines that many of the manuscripts handled by these editors wouldn't even be considered by modern publishers, but the famous trio were acknowledged by almost everyone who knew them as the very heart of their company: indeed, they oversaw most of what was called Australian literature in their day. I am reminding the reader that if we delve into *The Pea Pickers* of 1942 we have to imagine a pile of paper thrust together by the chaotic Eve to be sorted out, tidied, by the famous A&R editors with all their skills of stitching, snipping, and threading things into a coherent whole. I have never seen the original manuscript, and I think I am content to read it as the famous editors gave it to the world, even though, in general, I think writers should not be dependent on professional improvers ... but that's an argument for another time.

It's time now to look at what Eve and her editors produced. Here we go!

I raised a handful of the dust to my nostrils and smelt it. "Ah, that aboriginal smell! We tread on the soft black dust of lost Gippsland tribes, Macca! Yes, I should like a bit of land and some stock to drive slowly to the Bairnsdale yards every week or so, and I would become soaked in the old traditions of Gippsland. The heroes of my *Odyssey* should be Thorburn, Baulch, McAlister, McDougal, Frazer, Bill Grey, Alec Cain, Jack the Packer and old Blind George. Gippsland, Gippsland, I love you. I want to make you immortal, and die in you and be loved by you."

As I sit smiling over this passage, conscious of how my own efforts to describe the same region also drew on family names with their memories and associations, it does not escape my eye that the passage is impeccably punctuated and 'Odyssey' is italicised, something that I don't think it would have occurred to Eve to do. Her editors, unobtrusive as they aimed to be, are not entirely, not absolutely, out of sight! Eve again, on a train, this time:

In the corner by the landscape window sat a frail young man, with his white chin in his bony hand, drawn along, dreaming, through the dawn which had lit a fire for itself on the edge of the country and was sitting around it, warming a pair of cloudy hands.

Naturalistic description, we can see, is not her way of dealing with things:

A hotel, long, dark-browed, silent under a drooping brown hat of a roof, returned the look of travellers with as great a variety of malevolence as could be achieved by odd doors and windows. It seemed that the early colonizers had felt some need to declare the place a township and had made their statements in sentences composed of wooden rails and vine-like houses to which bits of leaf clung. A gentleman called Dust, who could be imagined as sailing up the main street all summer, had taken to bed and lay moist under a sheet of water on the roads, through which local sulky wheels splashed and into which rain fell sadly.

Here's Steve with Macca, watching as men burn the carcass of a dead horse in a fire which they've started a little too close to a tree:

From the pyre, the flames had run and caught hold of the lowest branch of the dead tree. One little flame, shaped

like a hoof, laid itself on the bough and took hold of the trunk. It beat there in a rapidly galloping movement for a few minutes, while the men shouted below. Then one long foreleg rose right out of the fire, and a great head, maned with fire, shaking bridles of flame, rushed at the tree. The fire followed, laying hold and galloping up the dry white wood. It rushed to the top, light and airy, breaking into restless reeling shadows down on the ground. The entire fire in the shape of a blazing horse leapt up the tree, crackled from the craggy top in neighing defiance, and, shaking its mane, set to work to graze a little nearer the stars.

It may seem to the reader that treating the fire as an embodiment of the dead horse is fanciful, but Eve, once alight, can move her images well enough:

“The horse beat them after all,” said Macca.

“Ah, if only you loved me,” I mourned. “Yes, when I am gone, it will be the end between us. Last night, the gold-robed heavens married us, but what has it meant? You teach me how to keep a firm hand on my love. You will not even kiss me.”

“Because you don’t understand life, Steve. To you, it is a dream of poetry. To me, a kiss might mean, as you said once, ‘a procession of perambulators’.”

“Then you do love me?” I asked, wrestling with the ancient hold of women to extract the final cry from him.

“Yes, yes, oh yes.” He sighed. “My poor cara sposa ... my Steve Hart, I am poor; but my love is rich as the sea. If you

had a net you might gather it; if I had a net I would gather it for you. But nets are dear, and we are only pea-pickers, Stevie Talaaren.’

When Eve wants to embroider new meanings onto her name, she calls herself Steve Hart, after the bushranger; Macca calls her Stevie Talaaren, the name is a decoration, a piece of embroidery in endless creation, like life itself, like the wondrous time, the days of 1927 and 1928, after which everything is an aftermath. The wonder of the book is that readers can’t help following Eve, drawn into the magic she perceives in a time before most of us were born. Eve, who was there, testifies that there was once a time when poetry was the norm. Here’s a passage where she sums up some snippets she’s been quoting:

A poet named Francis Ledwidge wrote that. Dead, too. You don’t know how I have mourned for them. I came out into the world expecting to find all men like the poets I loved; that’s the reason for my madness and confusion, you see. The world is here, but the poets have fled it.

As we walked through the moonlit bush, the plovers high in the sky cried in thin Russian (as I fancied) their song of the silver shower and the little bell. Down fell their voices like the ghost of rain, and in a hollow among the fern the curlew wept alone, saying piercingly “Eo ... Eo ... Eo!” so poignantly I stood still and was heart-broken by the sad wild cry. Oh to be loved!

A moment later, Steve rushes inside to find her (stolen!) copy of the *Aeneid* and reads a few lines to Macca, commenting, “Those are words for you!” He asks for the translation and she shows him;

Macca is surprised to find correspondences between his own world and the one in Virgil's verse. He says he can't get over it. Steve is terse, because such links are the way her world is put together:

"Well!" (The usual Australian "Well!") "Macca, I must go to bed. We'll be out late tomorrow night. Jim has found his long lost uncle at last. He is a fisherman, I believe, and we have been invited out to tea with them. His name's Edgar Buccaneer and, like Jim, he is of Nordic blood. From what we've heard of him from Jim, he's rather a grand figure."

"I must get to know them, too, Steve."

"Good night then, Macca!"

"Good night, Stevie, ... Stevie ... Talaaren." His voice broke into the rollicking cry of the peewits.

Thus one section of the book ends, to continue, a line-space later, with 'In those days, we were almost inseparable' and Eve's narrative surges on. This makes it time, I think, to speak of shape, or form, and the work of Eve's trio of editors. *The Pea Pickers* as we have it today falls into four parts, and each part plays its role in relation to the others with a discipline, an objectivity, which I am inclined to believe may be more the editors' work than Eve's. I stress that this is no more than surmise on my part. The first part is called For the Best! For the Best! and is all about the excitement Steve and Blue feel about taking their lives in their hands and heading off on youth's search. The second part, the core of the book, and perhaps Eve's life, is called The Glitter of Celtic Bronze Against the Sea, and I don't imagine that that title came from anyone but Eve. This second

part tells of the awakening of Steve's love for Macca, their unsexual but poetic intimacy, the season when their love is ripe and ready to be harvested, except for Eve's wish to live on a level far above the ordinary, something she achieves for a hundred and seventeen magical pages. In the third part, No Moon Yet, she is working in the north-east of Victoria, out of Gippsland, though Macca's still in the holy place, and she holds out hope of resuming their love when she returns to Gippsland ... in the spring.

The fourth part is called Ah, Primavera! Spring has returned, and with it, the reckoning. Macca doesn't come back, he's working at Black Mountain, to the north, far from the lakes and the flats surrounding them. Their great shared experience is behind them, is now no more and no less than the magical thing that Eve has created. Her heart cries out for Macca, but he has seen, as she has not, that their love has limits, and, having run its course, can run no more.

Except that it does, of course, in Eve's (Steve's) restless mind, and in the pages of *The Pea Pickers* forever. Joy Thwaites quotes Hal Porter:

She writes incessantly about that time as though she had been bewildered like a princess – you know, fallen asleep for a hundred years, bewitched in that era.

... it was always Gippsland about the 1928 period, stuck there forever.

Hal may, when he says 'stuck there forever', be thinking of what I shall call the sequel to Eve's famous first book; twelve years later, in 1954, Angus & Robertson were prevailed on to publish

White Topee⁽³⁾. This has the same locale as the earlier book, but the mood, the preoccupations, are not quite the same. Eve had been sending piles of pages to Angus & Robertson, and her editors felt that none of this work equalled what she'd done before, but eventually they yielded, and published the sequel, even accepting a strange passage about the birth of Oscar Wilde, whom Eve had adopted as another of her personae. Oscar Wildes, as readers will observe, if they read the Eve Langley pages in Porter's *The Extra*, may be found everywhere! By the 1950s Eve was a disturbed figure; she'd been incarcerated in Auckland's Mental Hospital for seven years, had been released, re-committed and released again, and was unable to get back to the captivating, if strange, woman she'd been. Nonetheless, her writing did carry her forward; at the end of *White Topee* she is about to ride a horse out of Gippsland and through the alps, the great dividing range, to the north-west of Victoria, a locale she and her readers visited in the period of *The Pea Pickers*. I understand that this journey is described in one of her never-published manuscripts. Other, even later manuscripts take her life further on again. So it is both true and not true to say that she was stuck in the period 1927-28. I think that Lucy Frost⁽⁴⁾ would say that it is we who are stuck in that time because publishers have kept her later work from us, or perhaps because we, as readers, have been unwilling to accept her working methods and follow her explorations into her later life. Eve Langley is a difficult writer to come to terms with. My feeling about the three hundred pages of her New Zealand writing edited for us by Lucy Frost and offered in *Wilde Eve* is that while the writing is interesting it rarely rises above

what I shall call compulsive writing (for oneself) to become artistic writing which may be done for the writer's self but is pitched at an aesthetic level where the public can engage with it too. I think she only ever achieved this in *The Pea Pickers* and why this should be so and why she was only ever able to do this once is, I think, the question I am trying to answer with this essay.

The Pea Pickers is unique. The A&R editors knew this and did their best to discipline the wonderfully unruly, spontaneous surge of its writing just sufficiently to stop Eve from distracting readers with her own interpolations on herself, if I may put it that way. I think they worked out the function of each of the book's four parts and ensured that the writing worked at all times to clarify, to support and to fly with those aims in mind. Books have minds of their own and I think the A&R editors gave *The Pea Pickers* its freedom from its author-mother, whose mind was chaotic, however inspired.

And yet, something in me warns me not to take this line of thought too far, for one has only to catch the book in flight to want to join it, on the winds, by the ocean, swirling with the prose through that endangering element known as time. Eve is ever aware of time passing, time receding, being lost, vanishing, in disguise almost, into moments. Huge chunks of time may be appropriated, consumed, by those with scope, and reach, to use it well, but time may also prefer to show itself in tiny morsels, like glitters of gold in a prospector's pan. Here are Steve and Macca, getting ready to part.

"No. I shall not see you here when I return. We are parting now forever. And you don't grieve at all. You don't mourn for all that I stand for, although it is passing. Don't you

see that I am not woman, but youth, your youth, and it is passing. With me will go some of the safety and happiness and innocence of your life. Why are you not grieving? 'Why art thou silent?' Well, I shall never marry. You will all marry; yes, that's true. I feel it. Blue will marry; Jim will marry, and you too. But I, no, I shall never marry. All my years shall be dedicated to mourning for our youth."

Macca has this to say in reply:

"Our love has been pure; I've clung to that word ever since we spoke it together. And now I haven't any more love to give you. What I gave was rich, as rich as the sea, and as pure as the long-awaited Gippsland rain. But now I'm emptied of it, and your love to me seems too sickly sweet and sentimental. I want a cold feeling from a woman, for a change."

Their discussion goes on; it is the heart of the book. Steve again:

"... I have been thinking that when, at last, you die, I shall hear and not care. It will have been too far away and long ago. That's really terrible ... terrible to think that all our self-importance is just really self-preservation gone mad. Every day that I have spent here I have used up my entire mind in an effort to chain this part of my life to me so that I shall never lose it. I cling to every moment with a pitiful passion. A certain grain of earth, a peculiar wind blowing, a look on your face, the very sole of my shoes, with their polished edges, haunts me. I am astounded by the intricacy of their being. Don't you feel all this, too?"

Macca replies with surprising honesty:

"Steve, I have never heard anyone talk like that before."

This interchange takes place a few pages before the end of Part 2 of the book ('The Glitter of Celtic Bronze ...'). The lovers who haven't taken those steps that lead to perambulators (!) are about to part. They see each other a last time. She takes him by the arm, but he withdraws, telling her he's been in Bairnsdale lately with a girl he knows, and he can get that sort of love from her. 'But from you I want the pure perfection of the mind.' He says he will write; she says, 'I am content.' But is she?

They have both to be up early. It's time for him to go. She walks with him as he leaves, and, ever the writer, she records her thoughts as they walk this final time:

Even so, in the old pioneering days, my grandmother walked beside my grandfather in this country of Gippsland. Have I failed them? They walked through life together, facing it gamely. They married early, at eighteen and nineteen. My grandmother had two children when she was my age. She had fifteen before she was finished. And here I am, anxiously, honestly, wanting to walk through the hard days of our country, in just such a fashion, with this Gippslander, but I'm not wanted. It's true. The Gippslanders don't want me. Gippsland doesn't want me. I am despised because I work in her fields, and her sons cannot understand me. I bewilder them, and they weary me.

This is not the self-pitying passage it may seem, because Eve has another layer to reveal:

I wept as I walked with him across the soil of Gippsland, and through my eyes I saw the Southern Cross glittering, and the luminous fire of the Milky Way above seeming to roar aloud

in the heavens, to be spuming and foaming over with light.
My heart ached. O Time, how vast you are and how pitiless.
Well, fly then with me to the end, and from these human eyes
blot out the moon and the stars and the human faces I have
loved. Surely I shall find escape in the spirit!

At the end of the book, Steve's sister Blue accepts a proposal and she goes home to be married. Steve stays in Gippsland. She says goodbye to her sister, she returns to the hut where they have been living. It's night, and 'the galvanized iron walls of the hut went "Spink ... spink" as they contracted after the heat of the day. I opened the door and went in. I was alone.' Her book is ended. She has mapped out the rest of her life, has considered it, and as best anyone can, she has, I think, accepted it, intellectually and artistically at least. That is why *The Pea Pickers* is such an extraordinary book: it is a record of a writer facing her fate. This is why, I believe, it's important to consider how Eve achieved it. Her marriage was in parlous condition in 1940 when she turned to her past. Something in her remembered how much joy she'd known, in that journey to her mother's past, with her beloved sister Blue; something told her, back in 1928, that this might be as good as it would ever get for her; she wrote, I must presume, her usual convulsive notes at the time; she must often have looked back on them as her life grew ever more entangled and unhappy; she thought of how desperately she wanted fame, and honour as a writer; something, perhaps that glittering prize on offer – three hundred pounds! – suggested that she could fly again, as she'd flown years before, in her mother's country; and she did something mysterious, which we can't unpick without the closest study of her original manuscript and what her

editors turned it into – she went to the joyful notes of years before, and added to what was already there - the happiest notes she was ever to record – the later consciousness, the acceptance of her fate. The wildness – nothing to do with Oscar – the ecstasy of her life was achieved by coupling that happiness with her awareness of what the decisions made in 1927-28 had brought her to already and where they were likely to take her. We can find her doom presaged in *The Pea Pickers* but also, I think, an acceptance of the dreadful awarenesses that came with that happiness. Setting off to fly, she knew, *The Pea Pickers* shows us, that her return to earth would be a shocking, shameful experience, yet she flew. Eve has, in this spectacular verbal flight, given her country one of the bravest books it's got.

- (1) *The Extra*, Hal Porter, Nelson, Melbourne, 1975, pp 139-151
- (2) See *The Importance of Being Eve Langley*, Joy Thwaites, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1989
- (3) *White Topoe*, Eve Langley, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1954
- (4) See *Wilde Eve: Eve Langley's Story*, ed. Lucy Frost, Random House Australia, Sydney, 1999