

## 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*<sup>(1)</sup>. 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<sup>(2)</sup> 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*<sup>(3)</sup>. 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<sup>(4)</sup> 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

## Strangely humble: *The Tree of Man* by Patrick White

In *Patrick White: A Life*<sup>(1)</sup> David Marr has given us a comprehensive account of the Nobel Prize winner's life: at the end of the book he describes his subject reading what had been written about him. 'He confessed he found the book so painful that he often found himself reading through tears. He did not ask me to cut or change a line.' White, who had spared nobody, least of all himself, in pursuit of what he needed to do, was big enough to grant his biographer the same freedom. This breadth, this acceptance, is something we have learned to expect of the novelist from Marr's pages; yet we have also been shown White in his tantrums and his way of being unable to restrain himself from thinking that his dramas were central to his time when for those who were not part of his circle, they were nothing of the sort. The public became inclined to think of White, towards the end of his life, as a genius (because people who seemed to know said he was), a generous if somewhat bitter-tongued addressor of public issues, and an egotist of torrential scale. Humility is not a word the public is inclined to fix on White, yet, as we have seen in an earlier essay<sup>(2)</sup>, White's pride needed the balance of humility, and frequently had it.

That lifelong, ever-present duality of pride and humility, is not, however, the point from which I wish to start my consideration of *The Tree of Man*. This book, the first of his works to bring him anything much by way of fame in Australia, comes from the time, beginning in 1948, when White and his partner Manoly Lascaris were working a tiny farmlet at Castle Hill (known to White's

readers as Durilgai and Sarsaparilla), north-west of Sydney. *The Tree of Man*, with its pioneering overtones in the early chapters, takes place within a cooee or two of Parramatta and other places which are almost synonymous with Sydney. This is an aspect of the book which I will take up later.

I want to begin, however, with an humility that isn't the pair or partner of high pride, but is of another sort. I refer to the fact that *The Tree of Man* is, although a long book, centred on the lives and circumstances of a man and a woman who are deliberately shown as Every-people, while their children, a boy and a girl, are almost anybody's kids, that is, the family is chosen for representation, not because they are singular in some way, but because they are not. It is the ordinariness of Stan and Amy Parker that causes White to choose them. His subject matter is the daily experience of humble people, sure enough of themselves to insist on the rightness of their ways, but modest, and poor, so that it would never occur to them that they were in any way representative, or models of a certain historical type. They are simply themselves, living quietly in a place that's only bush when they take it up, and thinly developed outer suburbia by the end of their lives. White needs his five hundred pages, so he can string out the markers and events of the Parkers' lives in a way that makes us feel that there's never anything much happening while allowing us to see, by the time the book ends, that a generation or two have done their work, the country's been

opened up, and any number of thoughts and events have sunk into the compost of their country's life.

Perhaps I should have said 'their country's *spiritual* life' because no consideration of White's methods in this book can ignore his aim, which is to rewrite something that other writers in his country have done before him. Let me make a comparison, though it may seem an unlikely one. I cannot imagine that Ben Huebsch, of New York, or the readers at Eyre & Spottiswoode in London, would ever have compared Patrick White's account of the Parkers with the people in Steele Rudd's *On Our Selection*, but writers like Rudd, Henry Lawson ('Water Them Geraniums') and possibly even Barbara Baynton, both are and are not the forebears of the Parkers. They are and they are not their literary ancestors, and I shall try to develop the themes of my approach by looking for the differences and the similarities, and what these tell us about White's intentions. Let us go to the opening of *The Tree of Man*.

A cart drove between the two big stringybarks and stopped.  
These were the dominant trees in that part of the bush, rising above the involved scrub with the simplicity of true grandeur.  
So the cart stopped, grazing the hairy side of a tree, and the horse, shaggy and solid as the tree, sighed and took root.

Took root? What on earth is White giving us? Horses don't take root, even though it's common to speak, as his book's title does, of mankind's life as being in some way tree-like. Horses aren't human, though dogs and humans share characteristics, as White shows us with the red dog and the man who is named 'Stan Parker' for us at the top of page three. White appears to be unaware that he's surprised us. He moves on without explanation:

The man who sat in the cart got down. He rubbed his hands together, because already it was cold, a curdle of cold cloud in a pale sky, and copper in the west. On the air you could smell the frost. As the man rubbed his hands, the friction of cold skin intensified the coldness of the air and the solitude of that place. Birds looked from twigs, and the eyes of animals were drawn to what was happening.

What, exactly, was happening? White gives us three statements, complete with full stops and capitals as if they were sentences, when they are not. They are happenings:

The man lifting a bundle from a cart. A dog lifting his leg on an anthill. The lip drooping on a sweaty horse.

The first of these is a step in the man taking possession of this bit of bush; the second is incidental to it, the dog being part of the man, as it were; the third is merely an impression. Merely? White uses such impressions all the time to pull us away from conventional ways of seeing things, or expectations on our part, as readers, that he will give us expected, usual, things to sustain our interest. He has no intention of so restricting himself.

Then the man took an axe and struck at the side of a hairy tree, more to hear the sound than for any other reason. And the sound was cold and loud. The man struck at the tree, and struck, till several white chips had fallen. He looked at the scar in the side of the tree. The silence was immense. It was the first time anything like this had happened in that part of the bush.

'It was the first time anything like this had happened in that part of the bush.' This again is an impression; White doesn't tell us

how far we are from any earlier settlers, or even where we are. He gives us, instead, an almost biblical moment of beginning. It would be ruinous to the atmosphere he's creating to tell us about the activities and energies of the city of Sydney, which is not far away. Nor does he 'locate' Stan Parker socially; instead he reverts to a time before Stan was born, and his mother had thought to call him by another name, but her husband laughed, so Stanley the child became, because it 'was, after all, a respectable sort of name. She remembered also the explorer, of whom she had read.' Within a few lines we move on to his mother's reading, her timidity, and her making two requirements of her young son: he's to promise that he'll love God, and that he won't 'touch a drop'.

"Yes," said the boy, for he had experience of neither, and the sun was in his eyes.

So God appears on the third page of the book, and the fourth, and thereafter is never far away, no matter how worldly, or secular, the matters of the narrative. The book is famous for a passage close to the end, when a young evangelist breaks into the thoughts of the elderly Stan Parker to talk about the glories of salvation. Stan thinks to himself, though he doesn't say:

If you can understand, at your age, what I have been struggling with all my life, then it is a miracle, thought the old man.

Stan spits on the ground, and a moment later he points with his stick at the gob of spittle.

"That is God," he said.  
As it lay glittering intensely and personally on the ground.

That would appear to conclude the argument, if it has been an argument, of the book, but there is a short final chapter, which begins: 'In the end, there are the trees.' It goes on: 'These still stand in the gully behind the house, on a piece of poor land that nobody wants.' We recall at once the trees at the beginning of the book. Trees there are at the end, and soon after a 'rather leggy, pale boy' comes into the bush. He is Stan Parker's grandson, disturbed by having been in the house containing his grandfather's body, so he has come down to the bush. He has it in mind to write a poem of death, but his mind changes and he decides what he wants to do:

So he would write a poem of life, of all life, of what he did not know, but knew. Of all people, even the closed ones, who do open on asphalt and in trains. He would make the trains run on silver lines, the people still dreaming on their shelves, who will wake up soon enough and feel for their money and their teeth. Little bits of coloured thought, that he had suddenly, and would look at for a long time, would go into his poem, and urgent telegrams, and the pieces of torn letters that fall out of metal baskets.

This book, forming in the child's mind, is, one feels, not at all far from the book we've been reading. The boy's thoughts develop:

He would put the windows that he had looked inside. Sleep, of course, that blue eiderdown that divides life from life. His poem was growing. It would have the smell of bread, and the rather grey wisdom of youth, and his grandmother's kumquats, and girls with yellow plaits exchanging love-talk behind their hands, and the blood thumping like a drum, and red apples, and a little wisp of white cloud that will swell into a horse and trample the whole sky once it gets the wind inside it.

By now we are within a few lines of the book's end. The boy can't, as yet, write these thoughts that are mounting in him, so he scribbles on 'the already scribbled trees', and goes back to the house where his grandfather has died, taking with him his thoughts – 'his greatness', White says – leaving us in the same bushland, considerably altered no doubt, where the book began.

So that in the end there were the trees. The boy walking through them with his head drooping as he increased in stature. Putting out shoots of green thought. So that, in the end, there was no end.

So we have an ending that is no ending, but rather an affirmation, not only of continuity, but also of the ephemerality of human life. White wishes us to know, I think, that, ephemeral, inconsiderable and frequently trifling as life may be, some grandeur can also be seen if we can only get back far enough to see it whole, as *The Tree of Man* has attempted to do. The book's claim may be huge but it has been modestly made, and this is consistent with its central characters, whose lives we have followed over many years. At this point the reader may reasonably ask why I linked this book to writings by Steele Rudd, Lawson, et al. I did this because I think there are places where White's deliberately modest approach to the lives of rather scatty early settlers is not so far from the writers named in my perhaps unlikely comparison. Take Chapter 10, where Amy Parker visits the O'Dowds in response to a note from Mrs O'Dowd, who isn't married to O'Dowd, but uses the name for convenience, because she isn't going to leave him, despite the querulous and sometimes dangerous nature of her situation with a

man who drinks himself crazy. O'Dowd, by the time Amy arrives, is reduced to drinking eau de cologne and clinging to a shotgun. This is only for show, Mrs O'Dowd says, but a minute later White gives us a farcical scene with Amy running around the house and its surrounds – *garden* is no word for the mess surrounding the O'Dowds' place – some distance ahead of her neighbour who is perhaps under more immediate threat, with the rear brought up by O'Dowd who has exchanged the shotgun for a cleaver. This continues until it occurs to the drunken man that if he turns in the opposite direction, those who are fleeing will be brought face to face with him.

And so it happens, and O'Dowd comes to something like his senses, and peace of a sort is restored. Amy tells Mrs O'Dowd that she wouldn't stand for such nonsense from any man, even her husband, but Mrs O'Dowd, who is apparently used to scenes of the sort, says that she likes her husband (who isn't her husband) and that they are suited to each other. It's a funny scene, White clearly revels in it, and in some sense it lies more easily within his range than another of the novel's major scenes, one which would apparently suit him better.

I refer to the bushfire that follows the floods in the area in the traditional Australian way, something White, not so long before an expatriate of many years' standing, accommodates easily. White keeps his distance from both these dramas, but not so great a distance that he can't show us, sometimes quite satirically, the ways of Durilgai-folk, especially the men, when handling, welcoming, these challenges. One bunch of men is fighting the fire with words

and vehement attitudes as much as with bags and sticks (!) but an old man called Peabody tells them there will be a change. The men see no sign of it:

“Change!” said somebody. “We shall be changed all right, with the fire lickin at our arses. We shall be changed into jumpin monkeys. Up the hill and over. With the smoke comin out.”

But Peabody is right, the wind changes, and the fire, turned back on itself, dies among some rocks. It would appear that normality will resume, but this fire has only been a prelude to another to follow, threatening Glastonbury, the large home of the ex-butcher Armstrong, who, with his wife, have important, meaning wealthy, connections in Sydney. The Armstrongs have a son who will die in World War 1, when the book gets that far into the century, but the son, Tom, is currently the fiancé of the beautiful but inexplicable Madeleine, whom we have encountered once or twice, riding through the district, something about her, high on a horse’s back, indicating her view of herself in relation to lesser beings, including Amy Parker who is in some way besotted with her, or perhaps with something Madeleine represents which Amy knows is beyond her.

By the time Stan Parker gets to Glastonbury, spectators have gathered to watch the efforts to save the grand home. One feels, as the flames approach, that the battle to save this place which only the Armstrongs care about is something of a set piece, and so it turns out, but in an unexpected way. The beautiful, the haughty – or is she? – Madeleine is still in the house as it starts to burn. Why she’s in the house, why she’s been allowed to remain there, is not

explained. There would be no such gap in Steele Rudd or Henry Lawson. White is quite extraordinary in his way of glossing over things he doesn’t want to bother about. Madeleine is in the burning house because Stan Parker, brave and cool-headed, is going to find her, to try to lead her out, to be blocked by flames in the back stairs, and then further flames on the grand front stairs, Madeleine is going to reveal something that lesser writers would call a death-wish, and she is going to be saved when Stan takes her in his arms and carries her out of the flames to a welcoming set of onlookers. This is when Tom Armstrong, who is to die in France a few years later, will rush up to claim his fiancé, only to find that something in her experience – something never really explained – has turned her life in another direction. She doesn’t want Tom Armstrong. She staggers into the darkness; White tells us that her hair has been burned off. This, like almost every ‘factual’ point in a Patrick White book, is an invention suddenly imposed by the writer. Many writers, one feels, perhaps one knows, are at the mercy of the subject matter they’ve gathered from here and there in their experience or imagination. In White’s case, his writing being as subjective as it is, the world he creates is something that’s been willed. One feels that the burning of the Glastonbury homestead is in some way a brief morality play enacted by White for insertion into the long stretches of narrative that lie between the trees that open the book and the trees that close it.

The mansion at Glastonbury has a further function in the book, something that White handles with extraordinary skill. Before the fire, it is the centre of social activity, not for people of the district,

but for upwardly mobile people from Sydney's social scene; after the fire, life's energies depart. Madeleine disappears from view, rebuilding ceases when Tom Armstrong is killed in war, Armstrong senior, his face disfigured by a stroke, visits only occasionally with his wife to collect a few roses and go away. Stan pays a brief visit to have a look, and finds a half built staircase leading to an open sky, vines growing inside the walls, sexual yearning scribbled near the ashes of a swaggy's fire, and excrement smeared on a wall. The Armstrongs have left a ruin, perhaps even the ruin of a folly, to be swallowed and regurgitated in Durilgai's folklore. We are a long way from such optimism as existed at the opening of the book, but White has ended a period and left room for the beginning of another, all this done with simplicity and ease, because he leaves it to the reader to see the implications inherent in his description. It is a pleasure to see him working with such breadth, and skill, just as it's infuriating to see him unable to prevent himself mentioning hairs on a man's belly or the backs of his hands as a sign that the character so described has incurred the novelist's distaste. He's also interestingly ambivalent when he shows Mrs Gage, the postmistress, showing her late husband's paintings to some friends. I find myself struggling to know how to read this scene, or the sequel to it, which is another visit by Amy Parker to the O'Dowds (of shotgun and cleaver fame).

Reading should be easy by this stage, because the book is beyond its halfway mark and its general movement appears fairly clear, then the oil painting scene draws out something almost malevolently satirical in White's presentation of his people,

something which all-female groupings seem to prompt him to write. Some of Mrs Gage's friends have no sympathy with or understanding of oil paintings (the word 'oil' appears to signal that the paintings lie between being pretentious and mysteriously significant), whereas Amy 'was opening to an experience of great tenderness and beauty'. Mrs Gage, having revealed the mind of the husband who hanged himself, appears to have reached some finality on the matter of the paintings, but they stir Amy on to another visit to the O'Dowds, who are drinking home-made rotgut, and somewhat later, to a brief sexual affair with a travelling salesman who visits the Parkers' home. My difficulty with these scenes is that they appear, to me, as rather arbitrarily chosen, partly to display satirical moods that weren't present at the beginning of the book and aren't present at its end, and partly because they cause me to think that what I'm reading is not so much a narrative as an agenda for later writing to explore. It is as if a different part of White's mind has taken over for a time, before he returns to his theme of life unfolding such shape and purposes as it possesses in his normally quite delicately observed writing.

This leads me to ask myself for some judgement on his treatment of his themes. I've already referred to White's way of controlling what goes into his narratives and his exclusion of aspects which other writers would think needed to go in. It's interesting to me as a parent that he appears not to take up any position on whether or not Stan and Amy are in any sense responsible for the lives of their children, Ray and Thelma. I'm not suggesting that there are any simple answers to such questions, but it's a fact of parenting

that fathers and mothers are inclined to think themselves to some degree responsible or in some way causative of what their children are able to make of themselves. Everyone knows that some children 'copy' their parents, and others 'react', and doubtless there are any number of other set sequences that might be set out as applicable in this case or that. White's skill in showing the contrasting developments of Ray and Thelma, each of them contrasting with and occasionally continuing the characteristics of the parents, Stan and Amy, is considerable; what appears to me to be lacking is any great curiosity about how Stan and Amy deal with these matters of continuity and responsibility in relation to their children.

Let me take this matter a little further. At the beginning of chapter 19, Thelma and her husband – the Forsdykes – go to visit Stan and Amy. At the bottom of the same page we discover, as if it's a matter of little consequence, that Stan and Amy were not present at their daughter's wedding. Why not? White offers no more than this:

If they had not been to the wedding, it was because, obviously, it might have been embarrassing. But on an afternoon visit, alone, they were appreciative and hushed.

A chapter or so later, Ray marries Elsie Tarbutt, a devout Methodist. Stan and Amy, who have seen little of Ray over the years, attend this ceremony. Elsie has a child, also called Ray, who is, I think, a necessary creation because he will be needed for the very end of the book. At this point I begin to develop doubts about the nature of *The Tree of Man*, a phrase, quoted in the book, from A.E.Housman. Is it a book about the cyclical nature of human life, going on and

on, endlessly repeating, endlessly different, or is it something else? I have already said that I think some incidents are included in the book because they are agenda items for later writing by novelist or dramatist White. We have already met the O'Dowds; they are vulgar enough, in White's judgement, to allow him to deal with them in a prose where satire, savagery, contempt and an extra layer of human feeling can all come into play. Amy Parker makes a last visit to the O'Dowd's, and holds her once-friend's hand as she lies dying. White rises to the drama that he will enjoy creating:

Great gusts of wind rocked her in the little trap. Her cheeks were soon plumped out. Down the funnel of her throat poured the wind, till she was big with her mission.

Amy finds her friend, 'or what remained of her, on the high pillow of a bed.'

For Mrs O'Dowd had sunk in, and was all for dying, now that her body was a strait space. She had suffered that day – was it the worst? – she did not yet know. Although weak, her gums could still bite on pain and draw the blood out of it. Her cheeks were quite gone. But her eyes, to which the spirit had withdrawn, were big cloudy things. They were not her own, or rather they were that part of man which is not recognizable in life.

Clearly, we are in for a deathbed scene, but White redoubles the effect by introducing 'a fellow called Cusack', also called 'the man from Deniliquin', who makes just the one appearance in White's long novel, for no other reason – and no less a reason – than to tell the story of him accompanying his dead father home from a whore-



house on the back of a water cart. White seems to need vulgarity as a balance to his own refinement. Theatrical narrative, theatrical presentation, gives him a release that his normally allusive prose can't achieve. The man from Deniliquin's narrative is a phase of this novel where it forgets, or perhaps deliberately changes, its mode of presentation. The man from Deniliquin takes over, for two and a half pages, the management, the character of the book, and when he falls silent, and we return to Mrs O'Dowd, her hand held by Amy Parker, death is in the room. Is it a rule of White's writing that only when coarseness has been given its head that we can be sure that basic facts have been established? In the later chapters of *The Tree of Man* there are a number of passages, events, where I feel the satirical, scornful, some would say elitist, Patrick White is chewing on events, characters, details, which a part of him despises, but knows must be included if his book is to have the completeness that he'd planned to give it. Late in the lives of Stan and Amy, they go to Sydney at the suggestion of Thelma, their daughter, and they attend a performance of *Hamlet*, which Stan read as a boy. Seated high in the theatre, they watch the events of the famous play rather like the King and Queen watching the play within a play performed by the visiting troupe. In this way, and with enviable skill, *Hamlet* is turned by White into the play that is within his own ... play? *The Tree of Man* is a novel, but the novelist's methods, in the later parts of the book, are more dramatic than novelistic. Stan Parker, whose perception of God in the blob of spittle has already been discussed, died that same day. Mrs O'Dowd's death has already been described so Stan's death is brought to our attention, and

his daughter's attention, as the aftermath of a visit she makes to a concert. One notices White's surgical gloves being pulled on for his description of the concert:

There were several pieces of programme music that Mrs Forsdyke [Thelma] had learned never to listen to, and would treat even with disgust.

The main item is a violin concerto – whose, we aren't told – and it is played by a Jew. It's made clear that he gives a brilliant interpretation but there's an element of distaste in the prose each time he's mentioned that suggests some link between the vulgarities of the death-bed scene we've earlier witnessed and the musical farewell which Stan Parker, unaware because he's dead by now – is being given. Thelma goes home, she's met by the glow of her husband's cigar, and she hears that her father has died. The funeral will be the following afternoon, and Thelma, who was to attend a dinner at Government House with her husband, decides that Government House must take second place to her father. Elsie, Ray's partner – Ray is dead by now, having abandoned his moment of respectability with Elsie and their child – is already at Durilgai, with young Ray, her son, and the tree of Stan's life has been brought down, but the little boy discovers that there are still trees enough, and he realises that he will 'write a poem of life, of all life, of what he did not know, but knew.'

*The Tree of Man* is a most ambitious book, and has many marvellous passages, but such unity of vision as the book proposes – I use the word deliberately – seems to me to be more notional than actual. The beginning and the ending are as appropriate to

each other as two book-ends – I think Patrick might have liked that comparison – but it seems to me, as I’ve already said, that the many matters and incidents that separate these book-ends are not entirely or altogether of a piece. Sometimes, when White’s treatment of them seems appropriate, as when he turns savagely farcical for the O’Dowd scenes, I’m cheerfully accepting of the book finding a second, a separate, a new voice appropriate for its material. At other times, notably when the man from Deniliquin takes control of the narrative, or when the Parkers go to the performance of *Hamlet*, it seems to me that White is culling through some op-shop collection of materials he’s gathered in his mind to give variety to his vision, even though the way he begins and ends the book implies a unity of vision that he’s not yet able to display. This forces me once again to consider the opening: what is happening, and where? Something about the writing suggests that we are at the outer edge of civilisation, yet we are not terribly far from Sydney. White probably didn’t think, at the time he wrote the book, that Sydney was the centre of anything very much, because he was, I’m sure, acutely aware of what he’d separated himself from by returning to Australia. In putting Stan and Amy where he does, White is not really recreating the scenes of Steele Rudd, as I suggested at the beginning of this essay, he’s expressing an opinion, fiery of breath and scornful of brow, on the place where he is working ...

... with unusual humility to re-start his life and his writing career. In the years when he was writing *The Tree of Man*, he and Manoly were working long and hard on the tiny farm and Patrick was getting up in the night to do his writing. Lording it over

anybody who thought they were anything in Australian arts and society didn’t start until rather later. The early Castle Hill days were a time of austerity, work, and devotion, both to tasks and to each other. The best way to see *The Tree of Man*, I think, is to see it as the groundwork of the career that would make White famous. It resembles none of his later books, though it contains a good deal that would be developed later. The difference, the reason why I say the book doesn’t resemble those that came later, is that White, for the most part, disciplines himself to stay at the level of his central characters, to see the world in their way, and to restrict himself and his writing to the visions, enjoyments and pains of common people. In that sense, at least, the writer and his book are true to the breadth implied by his title.

- (1) *Patrick White: A Life*, David Marr, Random House Australia, Sydney, 1991
- (2) See ‘The Eye of the Storm: but what is the storm?’ in *The Well in the Shadow*, literary essays, Chester Eagle, worldwide web publication 2008 via [trojanpress.com.au](http://trojanpress.com.au) (see OZLIT menu item)

## *Capricornia*

A tale – a *moral* tale - of two brothers, a half-caste son, of blackfellas and whitefellas, frontier men and women, endless roguery, probing cops, a railway of a sort, crashes, booms and more roguery, booze, unionists, people wanting to get rich ... and the sort of book it takes to make us know these things.

In my edition of *Capricornia*<sup>(1)</sup>, the word ‘civilisation’ first appears on page 3, but the first two pages are also focussed on the arrival of this phenomenon in Australia’s Northern Territory. Civilisation? The blacks resisted it more sternly than in the south, Herbert tells us, and his immensely zestful account of life in Port Zodiac (Darwin) and places within a couple of hundred miles thereof makes you wonder whether ‘civilisation’ was the word for what arrived beyond the tropic-line which he uses as his name for the region. Civilisation? The book is also about the Shillingsworth brothers, Oscar and Mark; Oscar dies three-quarters of the way through, while Mark is still there at the end but the family line has been continued by Mark’s yeller-feller (half-caste) Norman, a clever young man with considerable engineering skills who gradually moves to the centre of the book insofar as Herbert’s storytelling allows it to have one.

A paradox about this novel (if that’s its category; I’ll discuss this in a moment) about Australia’s north is that its first draft was written in London. Frances de Groen’s biography of Herbert (2) suggests that it was written there between March 1931 and his

return to Australia late in 1932. It’s tempting to think of Herbert choosing this locale for writing in a mood of colonialist rebellion against the mother country, but we should bear in mind that British readers of the imperial heyday had an appetite for tales from the frontier; magazines as well as book publishers catered for this desire for adventures not available in their island home. Frances de Groen suggests also that what Herbert wrote was a reworking of an earlier story called ‘Black Velvet’, which suggests that the sexual imbalance between male and female whites which is everywhere in *Capricornia* was in his conception, if you’ll excuse the word, right from the beginning. In the book as published, it only takes Herbert twenty-four pages for a black woman called Marowallua to bring to birth the yeller-feller child called Norman (Naw-nim, or No-name) whose father is Mark Shillingsworth. Herbert is quick to set out the main lines of his narrative: a (reasonably) respectable brother who comes into possession of a large station called Red Ochre, south of Port Zodiac, and a footloose brother whose life and associations take us through those parts of Territory life which are beyond the pale of respectability – meaning most of them.

Herbert is a yarn-spinner, and *Capricornia* is a vast agglomeration of yarns told to entertain us, as they do. Is it also a novel? My answer is yes and no. A novel is a social fixture of sorts, containing or implying a certain way of looking at society as a whole, and a novel is written by someone whose understanding of society and his/her characters is both far-ranging and deeply penetrating. If,

with these thoughts in mind, we search the book for passages on the inner life of the main characters we will look in vain, and yet, rough and sometimes raucous as the book may be, and cheerfully as Herbert gives us the various surprises, wriggles and contrivances of his plot, we do know we are in a novel as I understand it for most of the book's considerable length because we are aware of the book's moral dimension almost all the time. Herbert is too good a teller of tales not to provide something so important to his readers' understanding, and there is more to it than that: Herbert is aware, as most of Australia was not at the time he wrote the book, that the black people, and perhaps even more the half-castes, the yellere-fellers, are people too, with thoughts and feelings as deep, as important to themselves, as those of anybody ever considered in a literature. Norman is the book's focus and its subject is everything that ever happened and/or is happening in the vast area north of that line that gives the book its name. By way of comparison, think of a book being called 'Germany', 'France', or 'The Upper East Coast of the USA'. If the book is raucous, crass, lacking in inner analysis, sprawling and/or unrefined, so is Herbert's subject. What you are getting is true whether or not you like it, and somehow, give or take a few rough spots and things ignored because the narrative (or those listening to it, in Herbert's mind) needs to move on, it all works. Things happen, or don't, by the skin of somebody's teeth. Before he took ship to England, Herbert had spent time in the north and he knew what he was about. Personal identity, personal coherence, consistency of the parts of a personality were not as necessary in the Territory as they were in the cities of the south, and the young

Herbert – he wasn't calling himself 'Xavier' at that stage – found himself, in the north, in the sort of place where he could be what he was and if anyone objected to what he revealed of himself, he could fight them or forget them according to his inclinations. Any uncertainties about himself – see de Groen's biography for more on this – aligned him all the more closely with those he saw about him, most of all, perhaps, with the mixed race people who were everywhere, scorned by the whites who nonetheless used them to the hilt, and regarded as lesser people by the fully initiated blacks of whom there were still plenty in the Territory, even by Herbert's time. Here's Herbert developing his theme through the words of Andy, a white man of sixty talking to young Norman:

... 'D'you know, Sonny, I like to think that the Great Bunyip, the Spirit of this Southern Land of ours, the Lord of your Aboriginal forefathers from the beginnin' of time, and now the Lord of us who are growin' up in your forefathers' place and goin' the same old manly, carefree way, wants to keep a bit of the place in its aboriginal glorious wild state, and has chosen this here Capricornia for it. If that's so, good luck to Him, says I.

Andy has a lubra living with him, wearing an expensive green satin dress when Norman meets her, and she is 'adorned with good jewellery'. Andy calls her Velvet, thinks she's wonderful, knows that just as she's getting nice and fat and cheeky one of the blacks will sneak her back, but this troubles him not at all because 'I'll soon get another'. He laughs at old Alfie Alcock of Bonnidinka who gets trackers to help him chase runaway lubras; the trackers lead him a dance and he never sees his black woman

again. He's a fool, says Andy: 'comicaest thing you ever seen'. The names in this passage catch one's eye; 'Alcock' is as obvious as Herbert could make it, and 'Bonnidinka' takes us back to a time when it was common for a cyclist to give another person a 'dink', meaning two people on one bike. I think I am correct in seeing Herbert as using this word in a sexual sense; he's certainly laughing, as we can see by looking at the names of some of his other characters, especially those he wishes to satirise, such as policemen (O'Crimnell, O'Theef, Robbrey, Tocatchwon), clergymen (Reverend Simon Bleeter, Reverend Theodore Hollower), or men of law (Judge Pondrosass or Alexander Nawratt, lawyer of Port Zodiac). You may think these names crude but they show clearly enough that Herbert's sympathies are with those who live their lives trying to avoid the grip of what's virtuous, and I want to repeat, here, that although that includes all the rough and ready white men of the Territory, his strongest sympathies are reserved for the blacks and the yellor-fellers. Much the same can be said of the central character Prindy in *Poor Fellow My Country*, but that's far too big and complex a book to be considered here. *Capricornia* will give us quite enough to think about.

So what do I think about it? I think it's a wonderful creation, and perhaps it's an anti-novel as much as it's a novel, and why? Because what it describes is as much an anti-civilisation as it's the civilisation its controllers – policemen, southern legislators, official spokespeople like the clergy, and so on – try to make it. So many of those who are in the north are renegades from the south, the Empire, and the ways enshrined in law, that the regulations, enforced as

they may be by those in control, sit on top of all the other impulses of a society that doesn't respect things set up to govern it. Society is an agreement, after all, and the agreement north of the Tropic of Capricorn is far from the social settlement of the south. One feels this in Herbert's names for Batman (Melbourne) and Flinders (Adelaide); something about his throwaway use of these names suggesting that the places are to some extent risible to *Capricornia's* author. His choice of an incident to mark the end of combat in 1918 shares the same mood of scorn: he follows up one tragedy on the railway line with another.

Mick went to look, saw, gasped, goggled. When the truck was lifted and the crumpled mass freed from the wheels and springs and rails and laid on a blanket on the cess-path, he bent over it, kissed its shattered head, wept over it like a mother over a dead baby, crying again and again, "Oh Joe, man dear! – Oh wirrah man wirrah! Oh whoy did ye do it! Oh whoy did ye doye so harrd?"

Four days later, while riding up to Town on the trike to report certain visions of delirium tremens to the Roadmaster, Mick was struck by the mail-train, was run over and cut to pieces.

So the Great War ended; and the weary nations knelt before the Throne of God and bespoke God as though they never expected to have trouble with Him again.

I've already referred to a scene involving Andy, the landowner, and young Norman, who will himself become a landowner later on, courtesy of his uncle Oscar. In the same scene Andy prevails

upon a man called Joe Mooch (there's never much respect in Herbert's whitefella names) to play on his concertina and sing. We get 'Waltzing Matilda' from first line to last, and also a reminder of another favorite:

Oh don't you remember Black Alice, Ben Bolt,  
Black Alice so dusky and dark,  
That Warrego gin with a stick through her nose,  
And teeth like a Moreton Bay shark –

Australian folklore is mostly disrespectful, and insofar as Herbert is addressing fellow-Territorians, as he is most of the time, I think, in his imagination, he lets his sympathies flow where his audience would expect. There are moments where he simply lacks the skill to do what he wants to do, and plenty of other moments when he has no trouble presenting his readers with what he feels like showing us. Two examples follow; one where he sets out to describe a Territory station, and one of a wedding. The station is Oscar's 'Red Ochre', and Herbert devotes something more than a page to presenting it.

At times he loved it best in Wet Season – when the creeks were running and the swamps were full – when the multi-coloured schisty rocks split golden waterfalls – when the scarlet plains were under water, green with wild rice, swarming with Siberian snipe – when the billabongs were brimming and the water-lilies blooming and the nuttaguls shouting loudest – when bull-grass towered ten feet high, clothing hills and choking gullies – when every tree was droning with humming birds and native bees – when cattle wandered a land of plenty, fat and sleek, till the buffalo-flies

and marsh-flies came and drove them mad, so that they ran and ran to leanness, often to their death -

The passage goes on, dashes succeeding dashes because a lyrically descriptive prose is beyond Herbert, who is so concerned to list the riches of a place he loves to the point of fascination, until he's dealt with the wet season (I delete his caps) and does it all over again for the Dry (dry). His subject matter – the wonder of a place that's close to his heart – is beyond his capacity to make prose work for him. Everything in his style is geared to narrative of a certain sort and he can't adjust or put it to one side, which is another way of saying, I suppose, that his narrative has a certain speed which he hasn't many means of varying.

Here's another passage where he's at ease with what he's doing:

The first watery whistle of the engine brought the crowd from the house, headed by bride and groom, he in whites and topee, she in satin and veil. All were agreed that they were the Bonzerest couple ever seen. Arm in arm they walked in front of Trooper O'Theef and Pat O'Hay, who played the Wedding March on fiddle and concertina. They climbed into the brakevan in a blizzard of confetti and rice, and amid a hurricane of cheering from the crowd and a cyclone of whistling from the engine, were drawn away into the mystery of the future. Then Mrs McLash and Blossom buried their faces in each other's fleshy necks and mingled the attar-drops of their hearts.

The total cost of the success to Tim, after deducting the amount he secured for the sale of two crates of butter dishes and one of biscuit-barrels to a Chinaman in Town, was 308

pounds, 13 shillings, and 7 pence. He did not smoke for six or seven months.

Herbert's at his best when he can work simply. He shows Norman getting angry when someone at Red Ochre calls him a half-caste, and, knowing somewhere in his being that it's true, and that he must reconcile himself to his situation, he leaves the station. Unfortunately, it's the Wet season, and before long he's lost in jungle, surrounded by water, and can't think of anything to do but bash on through the scrub. At some stage he shoots a turkey and is trying to cook it when he sees 'a savage', as Herbert calls the man, naked but for a belt of human hair, striped by paints, and carrying an armful of spears. To the surprise of Norman, and the reader, the 'savage' recognises Norman, and is in turn recognised by the lost young man:

"Me Bootpolish," replied the savage. "You no savvy?"

"Bootpolish," breathed Norman. "W-what – old Bootpolish work longa Red Ochre?"

"Yu-i," said the savage, and skipped to the fire and retrieved the burning bird.

Norman caught him by a shoulder, and looking wide-eyed at his death's-head face, cried, "Bootpolish – Bootpolish – what you doing here?"

Bootpolish grinned and answered, "Belong me country. Me go walkabout. Me fella bin hearim rifle, come look see."

Norman is quick to make it clear that he needs to get back to the station, and then to the South, as he calls it, or he'll lose his job. At this stage, in a careless piece of writing, Bootpolish introduces other

black men, including one called Muttonhead, who makes it clear to Norman that, the Wet being what it is and the country being what it is, he's stuck where he is for four or five moons. Much better, Muttonhead makes clear, for Norman to stay with the people who know the place:

"More better stop. You harcarse. Plenty harcarse stop longa bush longa blackfella."

"I – I mean I gotter ."

"Proper good country dis one. Plenty kangaroo, plenty buffalo, plenty bandicoot, plenty yam, plenty goose, plenty duck, plenty lubra, plenty corroboree, plenty fun, plenty ebytings. Number-one good country. More better you sit down all-same blackfella – eh Norman? Dat lo-ng lo-ng time you gotter wait – You gottim plenty baccy?"

This is hardly very elegant writing, but I think even the white reader can feel that Muttonhead is putting the obvious case for the blackfella's life. Norman stays in the jungle four months, presumably enjoying its gifts, as listed for him by Muttonhead, before he returns to Red Ochre. He's quickly back, literally, in the saddle, taking a mob of cattle to Port Zodiac for shipment to the Philipines, but the boat which was to transport them gets wrecked, and Norman has to return. On the way back to Red Ochre he stays at 'Gunamiah' and enjoys the hospitality of Andy and his lubra Velvet, as already mentioned. Andy has a good deal to say about the situation of the white man in the Northern Territory and I feel that he provides Herbert with the means to deliver himself of some broadsides to unsettle those of his readers who haven't come to

terms with Capricornia as he has had to. What looked like the crudity of the passage beginning 'Proper good country dis one' looks like simple truth when it's recalled twenty pages later. This is Herbert's way of telling his readers that Capricornia, the region, will change them if they go there and submit to it; the whole book is an account of submission to the north, the tropics, and that submission, that encounter with Capricornia, won't even have begun until the wisdom of the blackfellas has been acknowledged and the situation of the half-castes considered. Those policeman, clergymen and southern legislators referred to earlier who insist on trying to make the ways of the south apply in the north are forever swimming against the tide of locally-based experience. Norman, who has been raised as a son by Oscar at Red Ochre, and has been educated in Batman, has, in a sense, been deprived of the wisdom which is properly his, and he has to learn it all the hard way. The book ends with him learning the hardest, nastiest lesson of all. Let us now look for a time at the last chapters and what Herbert is telling us in them about the North and the South.

It's hard to find a suitable point of entry for considering the finale of the book, because Herbert is developing and inter-threading its strands for so many pages, but the late chapters are centred, much of the time, in courtroom dramas, especially the murder charge brought against Norman for allegedly shooting Frank McLash. Having already followed the events leading up to the death of McLash, we know Norman is innocent, but innocence is not always easily proved, especially when there are various associated guilts which the accused person would prefer to keep hidden. Norman, in this case, is the father of a child born to Tocky, another half-caste,

who has escaped from 'lawful' custody in Port Zodiac and is living with the black people at Red Ochre, now Norman's property, and sometimes in the house with him. Alarmed by the presence of some police troopers and the questions they put to him, Norman tells Tocky to hide herself and her child in the empty tank of a windmill not far from the homestead. She will be out of sight, and safe, he thinks. Soon after, he himself is taken from Red Ochre to be charged with the murder of McLash who was actually shot by Tocky – a story too complicated to be recounted here. The case against Norman looks ominous, and he's persuaded to employ 'the Shouter' to defend him: the Shouter is a brilliant barrister from Batman, and a past-master in analysing cases and influencing juries. In this case, though, the case will be decided by two judges on the bench, not by a jury (the Shouter having pulled that trick in an earlier matter!). The Shouter's reconstruction of the death by shooting is quite brilliant, and Norman is found not guilty by the judges. Norman, however, has hardly time to feel relieved before he is presented with the Shouter's bill and associated expenses. The Shouter knows Norman hasn't got the money to pay but offers to relieve him of Red Ochre station by way of compensation, and it appears, for a moment, that this is likely to happen. Enter Nibblesome, another legal practitioner of Port Zodiac, who has become aware that the Shouter (real name Bightit!) has already purchased two other stations in the area and has begun to examine the situation of the meatworks, currently closed for want of export markets. Nibblesome warns Norman not to enter any agreement with the Shouter and goes off to make inquiries. When he returns, he tells Norman that the Shouter is acquiring Northern Territory



stations at bargain prices because he has formed a company down south to buy the meatworks, because the Australian government has secured a five year contract to supply canned and frozen meat to the French army and navy, there's been a recovery in the meat market in the Philipines, and Argostinia (Argentina), a rival of Australia as a meat producer, has had a series of earthquakes. There's money to be made and the Shouter means to make it.

Norman has to pay for this advice, but with any luck he may be on the way to wealth and a change of fortune at last. Not so. When he gets back to Red Ochre he discovers the skeletons of Tocky and her baby in the tank where he'd told them to hide. He's alerted to this by the cawing of crows hanging around the tank. How, exactly, did this happen? We're not told. Herbert's wiped out any idea of a happy, or promising, ending with this catastrophe. Norman's line of descent has been broken. What will he do now? The book has no more to say. 'Kah, Kaaaaah!' say the crows, given the book's last sentence. We've followed Herbert's yarnning through any number of incidents and adventures but they lead inescapably to despair. The meatworks will reopen, the Shouter will make money, but fortune is always manipulable, and those who need its blessings most – the blacks and the half castes – will always miss out. Bightit, the Shouter, is a brilliant man, and he's on top of the management of his life, something that rarely if ever happens for the blacks and yella-fellas, who are always struggling, as are all the station and railway workers we've been reading about, except that they are usually a rung or three above the coloureds. I said at the outset that Norman is the centre of the book insofar as Herbert's storytelling allows the book to have a centre. I meant by this that Herbert's characters

aren't developed to the extent, common in Shakespeare, where what happens to them is a function, perhaps a dictate, of what they do. In Herbert's presentation, characters are two-dimensional, and subject, first of all, to movements of the plot, and it is the plot, the arrangement of the narrative with all its constituent stories, which embodies Herbert's world-view. You want to know what Herbert thinks? Examine what happens. Herbert the yarn-spinner is fond of introducing characters who give the reader a lecture; Andy, already discussed in this essay, is only one of Herbert's characters who directly address the reader with the views Herbert wants to get across. Such passages can be treated sympathetically or not, as you please. What is inescapable, and makes Herbert a much better writer than the surface of his prose would suggest, is the effect of all the interlinking stories stitched together, very skilfully for the most part, in his narrative. There's nowhere to get out, halfway through. The reader's bound by some agreement of narrator and listener to see it through to the end, and the end, which is by Herbert's choice, arrives at a dismal moment when those who ought to benefit, ought to be in fortune's favour for once, have run out of luck, and energy, completely, and those who, like Bightit, ought to be discredited, and are, perhaps, in the readers' eyes, are prospering as never before.

Kah! Kaaaaah!

- (1) *Capricornia*, Xavier Herbert, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, A&R Classics edition 1996 reprinted 2000
- (2) *Xavier Herbert: a Biography*, Frances de Groen, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1998

## Questions of scale: a term in Geneva, starting in 1926

Frank Moorhouse gives us a look over the shoulder of a young woman working for the League of Nations.

*Grand Days* begins on a train. Edith Campbell Berry is travelling to Geneva to take up a modest position in the headquarters of the League of Nations, the hope of the world after 1918. She shares lunch on the train, the rest of the trip, and many later days and nights with Ambrose Westwood, a doctor, a British Major, and a somewhat more senior employee of the League. Two thumpingly thick books later, they share the misery of rejection as the League is replaced by the United Nations, on American soil this time, the League's achievements virtually ignored by the new creation. Edith Campbell Berry has put two decades of her life, her highly developed working methods and diplomatic skills, into an organization that the world has chosen to forget, but Frank Moorhouse has brought it to life again in *Grand Days*<sup>(1)</sup> and *Dark Palace*<sup>(2)</sup>, two books that summate his long-term fascination with conferences. It might be said that Moorhouse specialises in bringing together the public and the personal, and it seems to me that his greatest strengths and his greatest limitations as a writer join at this very point where public and private encounter each other.

Take the first chapter (they're not numbered) of *Grand Days*. Believing, as we do after reading the jacket blurb, that the book's subject is the League of Nations, we have to ask why the opening is concentrated, not on the state of the world, but on two people

encountering each other and recognising an attraction? The chapter ends with a kiss and the firmness of an erection; what is this the start of, in the fortunes of the world? In the endless rearrangements of life which will one day be sifted through and written down as history?

I have no simple answers to these questions, and this must therefore be the starting point, and probably the ending point too, for my consideration of the League of Nations books. I recall that I was a little surprised, on my first reading, that *Grand Days* began as it did, and, rereading several years later, having been to the end of the journey with *Dark Palace*, I was even more surprised that the opening of the double-book should be given over to two people who could at best be regarded as 'representative' of the League. As you see, I still believed that the League was the subject, the focus, of Moorhouse's writing.

As, of course, it is, and yet Moorhouse's methods are so noticeable that one feels that his way of going about things is as much his subject as the matters that are the focus of these methods. I refer mainly, I think, to what people call his 'discontinuous narrative method', something which he has used in earlier projects (*Grand Days* appeared when he was fifty-five). I've not read an explanation of this method and am loath to take on the task, beyond saying that it appears, to this writer, to be a means for the author to dislodge the weight of God-like knowledge and responsibility which was once expected of narrators, and novelists in particular, in

favour of offering a series of cameo-observations which the reader must put together for him/herself. It is as if the writer leaves to the reader the work of building an interpretative structure from the evidentiary materials supplied. Moorhouse uses this method with great skill in *Forty-Seventeen*<sup>(3)</sup>, where the reader is put in the position of interpreting the narrator's life from the late years of schooling to somewhere in mid-life and mid-career. I don't think the discontinuous narrative method is as severely tested by *Forty-Seventeen* as it is by the two League of Nations novels for which the method, I think, has had to be somewhat adjusted. In the earlier book, breaks are inserted wherever needed, whereas the League novels are broken into chapters, many of which have to accommodate a variety of content, so that the shaping hand of the God-novelist can be sensed from time to time. One wonders sometimes, particularly in the second of the novels, whether the author may, perhaps, have allocated blocks of material – incidents, characters, scenes – to certain chapters in a process of preliminary allocation, followed by the business of shuffling, juggling, fitting in. I don't make that suggestion as a criticism, since big books require a good deal of organization, management, if they are to work, but I noticed, as my recent re-reading passed the halfway mark of the second book, that the chapters had a remarkably even distribution of weight, as if they were structural elements of something like a bridge, designed by an engineer who intended each part to carry a share of the total load, and with no part allowed to carry more than its share.

Another noticeable feature of Moorhouse's writing is that it is post-Freudian. I don't think any of us are yet in the position to evaluate what European civilisation lost and gained by adopting a Freudian viewpoint on human behaviour, but Moorhouse's writings suggest, to me, that Freudian emphasis on motivation and the unconscious surfacing in unexpected times and places is either taken for granted as one of the many thought-offerings available – and one which is as likely to be rejected as accepted – or it has been allowed to recede into the recent past, not necessarily rejected, but no longer vitally important. In this respect the subject matter of *Grand Days* is a guide, in matters both public and private. Again and again, in the League novels, Moorhouse's characters, especially but by no means exclusively Edith Campbell Berry, are forced to consider procedures. The League is a new institution, it is dealing with new challenges in new ways, and its methods of working – with the diplomats and politicians of its member states – have to be considered in all their aspects and implications. This is a matter that requires the formulation of new rules and procedures, not a practice without formalities:

She believed in the formal occasion, where all the rules were known to all. The casual was too demanding, the rules too ambiguous for relaxed pleasure. The casual required blatant behaviour to ensure that understanding had occurred. The formal allowed subtlety to play within its firm boundaries.

The first word in that quote reminds us of another development since *Forty-Seventeen*; the central figure of the League novels is a woman. This suits Frank Moorhouse uncommonly well, despite

the Hemingwayesque features of the central male in *Forty-Seventeen*; placing a young woman at the heart of the books gives marvellous scope for two complementary sides of his writing: the endless exploration, the satisfying of curiosity, which gives his work much of its impetus, and the definition, labelling, categorisation of modes of operation and diplomatic necessities. Edith, like Bartou and Sir Eric Drummond, her immediate superiors, is forever examining Latin tags or other summarisations of ways of seeing things. They are forever in search of useful ways of thinking, and this is one of the ways by which Moorhouse puts us in a position, suitable for us and suitable for him, whereby we can see, or at least try to see, the work of the League, in all its immense complexity, through the eyes of a handful of those who work for it. I referred earlier to my surprise that the opening chapter, in presenting us with Edith and Ambrose, appeared to think that it was also introducing us to the League. To this moment I am not entirely comfortable with this but I have to find that Frank Moorhouse is consistent in his use of Edith (especially) and Ambrose as both participants and commentators, analysts also, of the League. The League, however it may have been described at the time by people of many nations, was a creation of the best minds that worked for it, and this meant that essentially it was always a work in progress, something that was being brought into being at every moment of its existence and eventual decay. Edith, Bartou, Sir Eric, Herr Stresemann, the pre-Nazi German envoy, and all the rest of the characters, both fictional and drawn-from-life, are not only actors on the League's various stages, but creators of the League because creators of the

tools of thought it uses. This is something Moorhouse develops in our understanding of the League through his examination of it via a long chain of chapters; what he is giving us is not a history of the League, with dramas, failures and achievements, so much as a meditation on the nature of the League via the minds of those who thought most and most deeply about it. This excludes the various dictators and despots around the world for whom the League was simply a nuisance, and concentrates on those most committed to seeing the League succeed.

But, of course, it failed, unable to override the rampant nationalisms of the period. To us, today, World War 2 seems an inevitable follow-up to the unfinished business of World War 1. The forces let loose in 1914 hadn't been contained, the League couldn't restrain them, they broke out again, worse the second time, if possible, and when World War 2 ended with the dropping of the most awful weapon ever devised, Europe's dominance of the world had ended. Hence the transfer of the UN across the Atlantic. It is perhaps asking too much of Edith Campbell Berry, Ambrose and the rest of the League-loyalists to see this far into the rhythms and delimiting forces of their time; their job was the very difficult but slightly simpler task of keeping the League alive in some of its functions at least until the second great conflict had ended.

We do feel, I think, when *Dark Palace* reaches its end that a chapter in the world's history has been brought to a sad but inevitable conclusion and I think this is a triumph on Moorhouse's part. I find my way of looking at the world has been changed by the experience of reading these two novels. I want the world to be able to manage, to control, itself; I want turbulent countries to be

kept in restraint by their neighbours; I want national policies, all too often the policies of madmen, made subject to the advancement of humankind in general. Globalisation has advanced considerably since the years between 1926 and 1946, the period of these books. In ordering these years, in reminding us of all the work done in the decades he's covered, in making us feel for the many people working for the League – and reminding us of others resisting it – Frank Moorhouse has done us a noble service. We are wiser for having worked through his thousand or so pages; we're better informed, we've got a base for thinking about the efforts of peacekeepers today and in years to come. There is a saying that all that is required for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing; we might reasonably reply that if good people are to triumph then they should be well-informed about the things Moorhouse treats in these novels. Something of this feeling that humanity has taken some steps forward over the decades covered by the novels derives from the altered power balance achieved by the book – by Edith! – in its latter half. As indicated above, Edith is junior to Ambrose in the early chapters of *Grand Days*, but by the later chapters of *Dark Palace* they make jokes about her employing him, and the jokes are true. Edith has a job and Ambrose is dependent on her, so much so that it's actually quite hard to recall, as the second book wears on, that in her early days at the League she did some silly things. She was impulsive, hadn't learned the limits of her powers and capacities, and hadn't yet learned that anyone wanting to shape events has to wait for, and recognise, those moments when opportunity presents itself. The later Edith, the *Dark Palace* Edith, has learned these things well. One can't put the second book down without realising

that Edith has developed mightily since the opening chapter of the first, and, one realises on reflection, that this development has come about because she's realised that the closest possible attention to the forms, the working methods, the procedures in all their minutest detail, is what creates a successful organization, and that the lives of individuals – their happiness, their sense of themselves, their fulfilment – depend on the lives of the organizations of which they are a part much more than they do on the inner workings of their own psyches. If you have a problem, we might extrapolate from the character of Edith, don't introspect or analyse too far: change your way of working to make yourself more productive. To put it another way, to change yourself you must change the organization of which you are a part.

I imagine that in thinking along these lines I am getting a little closer to the reasons why Frank Moorhouse has decided to open *Grand Days* with Edith and Ambrose meeting one another, disconcerting as I find this way of starting. I am forced to the conclusion that I put society and individual in a different balance in my thinking than Frank Moorhouse does, and since I am writing about his work, I must respect his way of seeing. It comes naturally to me to look at society first, and locate individuals within it, whereas the writer of these novels conceives Edith and Ambrose as both fields of force and also vantage points for looking at, for thinking about, the League.

This brings me to the question of Edith's marriage. As *Grand Days* wears on, the name Robert Dole crops up more and more; he is a journalist and he's interested in Edith. Later, of course, he marries

her, and later again they separate, but before any of this can happen Ambrose has to be moved out of the way.

The trigger for this is Edith's realisation that her lover is sending messages to the British Foreign Office about happenings at the League. Edith's loyalty to the League's ideals make this intolerable, even from her lover. Moorhouse's account of this shock to her system, and what she then goes on to do about it, move the personal lives of Edith and Ambrose onto the plane where the League itself takes its actions. Edith puts her problem to Under Secretary General Bartou, who moves it, with admirable skills of analysis and diplomacy, back to Edith. She searches Ambrose's flat and finds what she finds. She tells Bartou. Ambrose is demoted to lesser activities of the League – building maintenance, furniture and cleaning. Bartou recruits Edith as his personal assistant. She is on the way up. Bartou comes out very strongly as an intelligence and a character in this section of the book. He has been a Swiss diplomat and he tells Edith that he has a very great curiosity about the English and their empire. She, on the other hand, comes from a part of that empire, which means that her family's origins lead back to the same formative influences that have produced Ambrose. It cannot be easy for her, Bartou says, to turn against him.

Your soul came from the same place but it has been altered.  
Altered by the sun and by the pioneering and by the distance  
in under 150 years. I am interested in what happens to the  
national soul when it's transplanted.

It's worth saying that the two books are full of such moments, when whatever's happening in the foreground of the narrative squeezes, forces, some such observation from one of the League's people.

I've already referred to the League as a work in progress; it's in such reflections, observations made on the run, that we can see the League's inner life, see it working itself out according to whatever's happening. I think we can say that Moorhouse creates the League as it creates itself: this is a marvellous achievement. The League is not only an organization, it's an organism, alive and struggling to remain so, whatever the world throws in its direction. Edith's loyalty to the League is great; it's the ideal of her life, and she works so hard to embody its aims and the perfections it aspires to that she, largely unaware of what's happening, shifts away from her own Australianness. In the year that *Grand Days* was published, it was entered for the Miles Franklin Prize, but rejected by the judges as not being sufficiently to do with Australian life. Scornful as I may be of the prize-culture in our literature, I was at the time and remain today quite amazed at the judges' reading of *Grand Days*; I can think of no other book so aware of national characteristics and their place in the struggle for human improvement. Edith's life in the twenty years she spends with the League is one long test of the usefulness and the limits of national characteristics. After Bartou makes the remark, quoted above, about Australians as transfigured British, the two of them have a long conversation, he offers her a job with him, and she, in her turn, asks him if he would have made the offer if she hadn't 'exposed' Ambrose Westwood.

He thought about it. 'This matter has brought you into my focus. I like the way you handled it. There was no "clean" way of handling it. You rolled up your sleeves and did the job. I imagine that's an Australian characteristic. And a Swiss characteristic also.'

Edith points out to Monsieur Bartou that he is 'seemingly still on the soil of your own country but legally in a diplomatic nether region.' This is something he understands very well. 'I can never be Swiss again in the same way.' Working for the international, or supra-national, organization is something new in human experience. The waters are uncharted; this is why the Latin tags and various legalisms from here and there are brought out from time to time and examined. There must be some relics from the past that give guidance? This is why the character Edith, or certainly the later Edith, can be used as a window on the life and the thinking of the League. Edith's development perhaps justifies that exposure at the very start of the first of the two books as being representative of more than herself.

Which brings us to Ambrose, the Molly Club he frequents, his disgrace, his replacement in Edith's heart by the journalist Robert Dole, and by the failure of that marriage and the return of Ambrose to the inner sanctum of Edith's affections. This is a process that spans many pages and dominates the later part of *Grand Days* and the first half of *Dark Palace*. As I made clear at the start of this essay I have difficulty in finding a way to link the personal lives of Edith, Ambrose, Robert, with the broader narrative of the League. In an attempt to quantify the size of my problem, I turn to the pages (lists) headed 'Who is Who in this Book'. At once we discover a remarkable thing. Most of the characters, personalities, are real people, identified with names, nationalities, responsibilities and the like, and therefore historically verifiable, but – *but* – the weight of the narrative is borne by the people Moorhouse has made up. The

book is, as he himself says in a note at the front of *Grand Days*, 'a work of the imagination'.

Does this, then, or does it not, give Moorhouse the choice of characters – the sorts of people they are, and the way they are shown – for his novels? Having given himself the responsibility of showing, and frequently quoting, his historical figures, may he not choose his own foreground people, against whom the historical figures are set? Put this way, the question has to be answered in the affirmative. He does.

Do I, then, find anything wrong in his choice? Of Edith? Of Ambrose? Of Robert Dole? Of other League people, such as Josephine, whom Edith uses shamelessly when it suits her, and Caroline (a novelist whose writings about the League, read by her in a self-indulgent setting, caused me to smile; I sensed that Moorhouse was in playful mood when writing these parts)? This question is not answered so easily. I am least comfortable with Robert Dole, so will begin with him.

Dole is not a foundation of the books, as Ambrose is. Dole wasn't there at the beginning. He turns up much later as a minor character, but we notice his name occurring with a certain regularity and it is evident that his importance is on the rise. He is a journalist, and well-informed. Presumably he has sources here and there around the world; the knowledge of these people, their perceptions and suspicions, could be of interest to the reader and of value to Edith in her work, but Robert Dole isn't used in this way. Let me clarify the line of thought that I am taking here. At a certain stage of the first of the two League novels, Edith's affections and attention

shift from the disgraced Ambrose, whose loyalty to the League was wanting, to a knowledgeable and competent journalist whose viewpoints and contacts might easily be used to enrich the book. Robert could have been used by his creator to provide news and views of the League and its activities from virtually anywhere in the world. He might bring to Edith's and the reader's attention any number of things not visible to someone with a Geneva base. Robert Dole offers the possibility of a wider understanding of the League than we have had so far. Used well, his character and occupation could have provided a base for the books' deeper examination of the League, but Moorhouse doesn't take this opportunity which he himself has created. Edith's love for him dwindles, he's away from their Geneva home for long periods, he's dislikeable when he returns, but he refuses to see himself as not possessing his marital rights (!) and, to be frank, this reader wonders why Edith, practical and determined as she is, doesn't have the lock changed on her apartment so he can't break in on her with Ambrose, as he does one night. This unpleasant scene is so obviously and easily avoidable that we are forced to consider that the author wanted it to happen and therefore made sure that no steps were taken to prevent it. Then, as it seems to the reader that Robert is about to disappear from the scene, he suggests to Edith that they have a child. She decides against this course, this life-changing decision, but not without considering it, and it occurs to this reader that the whole business of Robert's presence in the book might be a device to present the possibility of motherhood to Edith, so that she can reject it – decide against it – more decisively than by simply going

ahead with her by now revitalised relationship with Ambrose. In this sense I think that Robert Dole is not so much a character in his own right, a force in the book with capacities and mobilities of its own, so much as a representation of an aspect of Edith that needs to be dramatised in order to be rejected. Robert, in my view, is not a path with a validity of its own, but rather he is the path not taken by Edith. He's there in the book to show us what Edith chose not to do, even though – for she did marry him, didn't she – she was attracted to it. That other path, that collection of meanings represented by Robert, needed, apparently, to be shown, to be seen by the reader and by Edith, so that her return to Ambrose and their mutual paths, is both understood by and credible to the reader.

One has only to open the book anywhere and compare a scene where Edith and Ambrose are together with an Edith/Robert scene to realise how much better suited Edith is to Ambrose. Their minds meet ever so much more easily, they dress and undress each other with a tenderness that is a pleasure to consider, and it is a tenderness that the reader remembers when Robert, returning from wherever it is he's been in the ever-troubled world, wants to speak scornfully of the man in Edith's apartment – Ambrose. The reader swings automatically behind Ambrose and also behind Edith's choice of him over Robert. This is done so convincingly that the writing pushes aside the opportunity mentioned earlier on about the novelistic possibilities of using Robert's worldwide contacts as a way of adding to the author's League of Nations theme. With Robert dismissed, and motherhood abandoned, Edith has fewer choices; she's committed to the League until the end, and when the



end comes, on page 657 of *Dark Palace*, she and Ambrose wonder what they will do tomorrow.

Tomorrow? Ambrose talks about Haydn's *Farewell Symphony*, one of those cornerstones of European thought, where the players leave the stage, one by one, until, not only is there no music, there are no musicians either. He hums a few bars. What will they do tomorrow? Tomorrow, Ambrose says, they will find a place in this new world. Edith, as ever, is stronger than he.

She took a deep breath. 'No. We will *make* ourselves a place.'

And so the second book ends. Ambrose and Edith, whose coming together initiated the first book, have seen it through, and, shattered as they may be, they are still, while holding each other, talking about tomorrow. Tomorrow, of course, must look after itself, but the reader doesn't feel the desperate hope of Edith that *something* can be discovered, resurrected, or whatever for them to do. Characters live in the imaginations of their readers. When books end, readers put them back on the shelves, while the characters, those drawn with sufficient verve and vitality by their creators, live on for a time in the minds of those who've read about them. Edith Campbell Berry is a character who'll live in our minds for a long time, but only for what she's done in the pages Frank Moorhouse has written for us. I don't find myself thinking of future steps and stages in her life to come. For me, she dies when the League dies. Her period ends when the League ends. She added a few bricks to the wall which we call world government, and this was an honorable thing to do, but, her moment of being somewhere near the spotlight having passed, she slips into the darkness which history's lights can't, or

don't bother to illumine. This may seem to bring this discussion of *Grand Days* and *Dark Palace* to an end, but there are still a number of things I want to look at, and will do so after we take a look at the work of that other, and equally political, Frank who gave us *Power Without Glory* and *Legends From Benson's Valley*.

- (1) *Grand Days*, Frank Moorhouse, Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 1993
- (2) *Dark Palace*, Frank Moorhouse, Random House, Sydney, 2000
- (3) *Forty-Seventeen*, Frank Moorhouse, Penguin Books, Melbourne, 1988

## Another journey with another Frank

The position of the working class, as understood by the Communist Party, and as depicted by Frank Hardy in *Power Without Glory* and *Legends From Benson's Valley*.

You may think this trivial, but in writing the above sub-heading ('The position of the working class ...') I was unsure which title to put first, although this would seem simple; *Power Without Glory*<sup>(1)</sup> was published in 1950, while *Legends From Benson's Valley*<sup>(2)</sup> was published in 1963. Problem solved: the first book should come first. But if we look at the stories in the Benson's Valley collection, we see that they include 'The Load of Wood', and if we search a little further and discover the (undated!) *The Man from Clinkapella and other prize-winning stories*, we're told that 'The Load of Wood' was included in the 1946 *Coast to Coast* collection (Angus & Robertson), and most of the Benson's Valley collection feel as if they come from the same cast of mind, if not the same period. The Benson's Valley stories pre-date the outlook of *Power Without Glory*. In fact, the last story of all, 'The Stranger from Melbourne', appears to have been placed at the end of the book for the purpose of making a transition between the worlds of Benson's Valley (Bacchus Marsh, Victoria) and Collingwood (renamed Carringbush), also in Victoria.

Benson's Valley, at the time of Hardy's stories, is in the grip of the Great Depression. It's a small town, it's been reasonably prosperous, but it has an agricultural working class whose people are vulnerable. They've little enough to fall back on, and, although

they're not so very far from Melbourne, their world is cut off. They live in a valley and places like Melbourne and Ballarat are over the horizon. They are peculiarly helpless because, though they may blame wealthier locals like Squatter Fleming and Shire Engineer Tye ('There's only two bastards in this town ... Tye the Shire Secretary and Tye the Shire Engineer'), for their situation, those men are no more directly responsible for their suffering than they are themselves. Indeed, is there a sense in which the Benson's Valley locals are responsible for themselves?

Surely not? Hardy began his writing in a world where there was clearly something wrong, and it might be said that he spent his life telling stories that showed the world's wrongs or promulgating answers to the question of what brought those wrongs into being. Later in his life these simple questions became more complex ... but we will leave discussion of works such as *But The Dead Are Many* to the second of these essays devoted to his work.

Back to Benson's Valley. The economy's depressed, the town's depressed, nobody sees any way out except to leave, but that means either joining all the other jobless tramps on the road or losing oneself in the metropolis to the east where, by all accounts, the problems are worse. Hardy's stories all have at their centre the viewpoint of working men beset by problems they cannot solve. It's beyond them to make their situation any better. This is what makes 'The Load of Wood' so heroic. Darky and Ernie Lyle (roughly representing the author, and even to some extent the

reader) use a borrowed truck to steal firewood one night from a paddock belonging to Squatter Fleming. 'Squatter': this is Hardy making it clear where our sympathies should lie. Noisy as the two men are, with their chopping and splitting, and tossing bits of wood on the truck, nobody interrupts and they get away with the wood. Darky insists that he'll take half and sell it, thus making some money, because he's out for himself, he says, but his actions belie his words. The narrative is simple, obvious, and moving. He tosses bits of wood into the yards of people who need it, keeping only the last two or three for himself. Darky, a thief in the eyes of the law, is shown as a very good Samaritan indeed, and this is probably as close as Hardy the writer ever got to welding his Catholic Christian background to the communism he embraced.

The last story in the collection, 'The Stranger From Melbourne' links the two worlds, or perhaps it provides a bridge from the earlier to the later, larger world where Hardy was to enact his life and find new sources for his writing. It's a simple connecting piece rather than a story in its own right. A bunch of workers – Darky, Ernie Lyle, and the rest – are visited during their lunch break by a stranger selling *The Workers' Voice* at a penny halfpenny a copy. Darky welcomes him with the last of his tea – 'Cold tea and sugar; the working man's champagne.' The visitor is working locally but will soon be going back to Melbourne. He seems to have a broader view of the workers' position than the Benson's Valley men. 'Don't forget to read that paper,' he says to them as he leaves. The narrator scans the paper during the afternoon tea break: 'It seemed to speak of many things remote from Benson's Valley, of new horizons, new

ideas. It seemed to speak, above all, of the stranger. It aggravated a feeling of discontent that had been with me lately.' The narrator sees his valley township differently as he rides home that afternoon. He has to leave, or life will pass him by. The story ends with a passage that might have been written by Alan Marshall:

Suddenly, I knew that I must go away, out into the big world where life was exciting, where people were interested in finer things, where the sun rose over great cities, where people faced the conflicts of life without flinching, where you might even get a decent job.

Conscious of *The Workers' Voice* in his hip pocket, he rides down the hill into town, passing

the familiar signboard: GOOD-BYE TO BENSON'S VALLEY – A GOOD REXONA TOWN. And I found myself laughing, head high, hair in the wind, exultant and defiant.

It's his farewell to the place where he grew up and learned at least the basis of his later values, though it's still a long way to the ruthless investigation of John West in *Power Without Glory*, but I don't want to leave *Legends From Benson's Valley* without a look at the first story in the collection, 'The Cockie in Bungaree'. It's a narrative response to a folk-song which begins the story:

'Come all you weary travellers that's out of work, just mind,' Arty MacIntosh sang through his nose. 'You take a trip to Bungaree and plenty there you'll find.'

Arty and the narrator are working for Old Hungry Phillips. They're served beer at the Bungaree pub by a barmaid called Mabel, the pivot of the story. She's nervous, we don't know it yet but she

has a three year-old son in Melbourne, and she's attracted to Arty MacIntosh, and vice versa, yet, ridiculous as it may seem to the two young workers, she's also being courted by Hungry Phillips, and he brings her to his farm, where he treats her miserably, in his wretched, penny-pinching way. Arty looks on with a mixture of confusion and contempt, certain that he has more to give her than the old man. Hardy shows us 'two men and a woman, the triangle as old as civilisation, Mabel waited on Arty MacIntosh with flaunted attentiveness, smiling at his jokes. Old Hungry's eyes never left her.' Two men and a woman; the overlapping triangles are those of class warfare, workers versus their boss, and the wishes of a young woman, conflicted because she's desperate for a place to bring up her child, while she's also intensely desirous of the younger man who wants her. She leaves Hungry in the night to satisfy her passion for Arty, yet not before a scene, a passage, which is unusual in Hardy's writing, where the narrator, going up to the house to fill a waterbag (and to stop Arty precipitating trouble by going to the house himself) sees Mabel naked before a mirror, considering her body. The writing manages to suggest that she is balancing her future carefully, trying, presumably, to find a way whereby she can proceed in these conflicting directions.

She does. She leaves the house in the middle of the night and joins Arty in the workers' shed for an hour or two of passion. Yet she overcomes Hungry Phillips and somehow manages to force him to concede that she will run the household as she thinks fit and then, to the reader's amazement, Hungry gives her ten pounds to travel to Melbourne and bring back her son. He will have a home,

there will be a little money, and Hungry will endeavour, we feel, at least for as long as he feels threatened by the possibility that Mabel may leave him again, to make her happy if he can. The narrative follows Arty and his mate back to Benson's Valley, with Arty still singing lines from that song about Bungaree, a song which Arty announces is banned in future.

I watched him change, grow more introspective, less ironic in humour, less keen on cruel practical jokes, kinder to women.

Neither Arty MacIntosh nor I ever returned to Bungaree.

The story, the first in the collection, is a negation of much, perhaps most, that Hardy wrote later. It's told from the point of view of the two working men, agricultural workers, as in the other tales in the collection, and their opponent in the story is Hungry Phillips, for whom the reader has little sympathy, yet Mabel, by her very presence, implies that neither the Church nor any political movement for the betterment of mankind is of much significance beside a woman's needs; Mabel wants passion, but has an even stronger need for a situation which will allow her to mother her child properly. Hungry Phillips may think that he has triumphed over Arty MacIntosh – in the long run, if not for a couple of hours, one lustful night – but he too is made subservient to Mabel's needs as woman and mother. This is something Hardy is able to imply against the grain of his natural method of storytelling: quite an achievement. The very first of his Benson's Valley stories gives a woman more power and importance than Nellie West ever achieved in *Power Without Glory*, although it could be said that

John West's position at the end of Hardy's book about him is all the more pitiable because of the way he's been able to overrule his wife and children, reducing them to unwilling witnesses to his ghastly, regrettable power.

I am conscious that in making these remarks I am to some extent reading back into Hardy's writings of the mid-twentieth century a feminist, or feminised, way of thinking that wasn't widely available when Hardy's work first appeared. As we will see when we examine *Power Without Glory*, Hardy came to consciousness in Australian-Irish Catholic family circumstances which were later influenced by left wing thought, notably the Communist Party (when there was only one, and it took its orders from Moscow). We have only to go back to the shearers' strikes in 1890s Queensland to be reminded how the Australian working class was willing and able to organise itself to resist the imposition of overworked poverty as its lot; the Australian working class was largely though far from entirely Irish Catholic in origin, and influenced, therefore, by the Church; it also received heady doses of its thought from the international labour movement, notably the Communist Party, an organization which in many of its doctrinaire and hierarchical ways resembled the Church it despised – and vice-versa. These two sources of the radicalism of the Australian working class were always likely to split, to conflict, and Frank Hardy's working life spanned the years when this conflict erupted. It was the bursting bubble, the gaseous fermentation inside the working class which brought Hardy and his work to the surface of Australian readers' attention, he knew this and made the most of it, as we can see if we read not only *Power Without Glory* but

also his reflection on the writing of that book, with its subsequent court case, in *The Hard Way: the story behind Power Without Glory*<sup>(3)</sup>, T. Werner Laurie, London, 1961.

One last look at a Benson's Valley story from a feminist viewpoint, before we move on. 'Good as Ever' is again about Darcy, and it's the second last story in the book, immediately before 'The Stranger from Melbourne'. Darcy's daughter Kathleen has been made pregnant by a man called, significantly, Younger. He won't acknowledge responsibility. Darcy determines that for the honour of his daughter he must fight Younger. He does. The fight is brutal. Ghastly. Nonetheless, Darcy is standing at the end, and Younger on the ground, unconscious. Darcy's proved that he's as good as ever he was. He says so, even if he isn't. And what does that matter, we ask? Hardy's last paragraph gives this answer:

With that he turned and led Kathleen into the darkness. His left hand still circled her shoulders as if he thought it could shield her from all the tragedy and sorrow that life held in store.

Darcy's defeat of Younger hasn't helped anybody, least of all Darcy. We assume he'll never fight again. Kathleen's got her life ahead of her and we hope she'll find a man to share her parenting. Perhaps she will. Again, it won't be the Church or the Communist Party that fixes things, though a little faith may help. There's a limit to what can be achieved by systems of thought, however rigorous or carefully created. Hardy's awareness of this, as shown at two crucial points in his collection, make us aware that there's more to this writer than ideology.

This is, I believe, an important warning to consider before undertaking an interpretation of *Power Without Glory*, written, as far as we know, at the behest of the Communist Party. I say 'as far as we know' because the Party left few written records about its decisions, and most of those that existed have long been destroyed or put out of sight. It appears that the Party funded research and Hardy himself for several years. (See chapter 3, 'The Genesis of *Power Without Glory*', in *Frank Hardy and the making of Power Without Glory*, by Pauline Armstrong, Melbourne University Press, 2000.) This matter of the Party's commissioning of the work must join the circumstances of Hardy's criminal libel trial as problematical factors in determining how we, today, read and understand the book. Very soon after the book was first distributed, sheets of names began to circulate, telling readers the *real* names of characters in the novel, the most obvious being John West = John Wren, Archbishop Malone = Archbishop Daniel Mannix, Snoopy Tanner = Squizzy Taylor, and so on. Clearly, those who created these lists saw the book as a *roman a clef*, and we note that Hardy put at the front of the book a quotation from Horace: 'Let fiction meant to please be very near to truth.' This was a daring, perhaps provocative, thing to do. To suggest the book offers (uncomfortable) truths was to put it within range of libel charges, and as everyone knows, the Wren family or its connections were able to persuade the Victorian police and government of the day to resurrect the ancient charge of criminal libel and bring it against Hardy. Hardy was brilliantly defended in an absorbing trial, the evidence against him appeared overwhelming, but to the

amazement of many, inside and outside the court, the jury only took an hour to find him not guilty.

As my head appeared above the courtroom floor, I was struck like a blow on the face with an air of tension. The court had assembled awaiting the Judge and jury. Rosslyn sat pale and tense by the radiator in the corner near the door. Surely the jury hadn't reached a decision so quickly! If it has, I'm a goner! <sup>(3)</sup>

But Hardy was to be amazed. A drink or three later, he became jubilant, exultant. In *The Hard Way*, he says:

We retired to the Cecil Hotel on the opposite corner to the Court, but soon decided to adjourn to the Lygon, our favourite haunt. No matter how long I live, those will be the good old days, the best years of comradeship, of useful work and good cheer of mates together!

Hardy had been cleared, the book could be sold again, and in a way, the nature of the book had been changed ... not forever, but for the generation alive at its birth and subsequent controversy. I think it is still difficult, today, to read the book as if the controversy surrounding its origins and reception had not occurred. It is as if a reader is being asked to take sides with or against Wren himself, the Archbishop, the rogues and the honest men in the Victoria Police, the rogues and idealists in the Australian Labor Party, and to make some decision about the workers in those many years when John Wren's influence could be felt not only on racetracks and in boxing rings but in the legislation that was and wasn't passed in the parliaments of two or three Australian states. Wren had had a hand in so many things. He was, as *Power Without Glory* makes

clear, a man from a poor Catholic background who'd battled his way to wealth and influence via a long and struggle-ridden road, with bribery and corruption at every turn. He used everyone he needed to, and sometimes – Archbishop Malone/Mannix is a good example – he was used, cunningly enough, in his turn. There is a lovely passage in the book about a Saint Patrick's Day parade organised jointly by West (Wren) and Archbishop Malone (Mannix); the Melbourne City Council refuses permission for the march but Wren gets around them by inviting a dozen VC winners to lead the parade, followed at a discreet distance by the Archbishop in his car. The Council, in ceding permission for the march, insist on something they think will gall the Archbishop, but they don't reckon on his guile:

When the head of the procession reached the top of Bourke Street, Archbishop Malone alighted from his car and took the salute on the steps of Parliament House. He stood erect, his heart athrob with emotion. This was a grand day, the answer of Australian Catholics to their enemies – a display of strength which had drawn his flock around him and struck a blow for Mother Ireland. After the returned soldiers' column had at last passed by, he stepped into the car again and was driven to the Exhibition grounds a few hundred yards away. The Exhibition was packed out long before the end of the procession had left the rallying point and tens of thousands could not obtain admission to the speech-making, the singing and the display of athletics and dancing.

Daniel Malone added a sarcastic final touch to his day of triumph: 'We were instructed by the Melbourne City Council to carry a Union Jack at the head of the procession. I could

not get an Irishman to carry it, so I paid an Englishman two shillings to do the job.'

It's worth pointing out that practically all the characters in *Power Without Glory* are depictions of real people; this makes it political in a different sense from Frank Moorhouse's *League of Nations* books, where the foreground is enacted by fictional figures. Reading it as someone half a generation younger than Hardy, but with a reasonable idea of my country's history, I have no trouble identifying characters. Summers has to be Prime Minister Scullin, Ashton is Frank Anstey, Red Ted Thurgood is Theodore, and so on. The actual names of other characters are not known to me, so I read along quite contented to accept these people as fictions, even if they aren't. In other cases I half-know who's being represented, but either because I'm unsure or because I've never known much about these people, I find myself looking at a broad tableau of Australian history and trying to settle on a way of treating what I read in front of me. Fiction or reality? Commonsense would suggest that as the years pass the book will become more fictional to readers who were never part of the realities being described. This means that Hardy has both more and less control over his characters' effect on readers than has Frank Moorhouse, who is rather better placed to manage the effects of his writing. This opens up the question of how certain Frank Hardy was about what he was doing; if you read *The Hard Way*, or had you listened to any of the speeches he made at the time he was trying to sell both the book and an interpretation, a reading, of it to the public, you would feel invited to take part in the class warfare which he says he is describing. As a communist he would

probably have said that he was enlarging readers' understanding of things political, or ridding their minds of the false consciousness imprinted there by the capitalist press, by conservative members of parliament (Labor and National), and so on. But is this what the book does to its readers today, when memories of those years of struggle are fading? I am inclined to read the book, today, in the light of the quotation at the head of Part One: 1890 – 1907 – ROAD TO POWER:

A working man who deserts his own class, tries to get on and rise above it, enters into a lie. (Charles Kingsley)

John West (Wren) was/is a working class man. He became rich and, within limits, very powerful. He bought a splendid home on a hill in Kew, overlooking Collingwood (Carringbush) and had it further extended. He was a neighbour of the Archbishop and although West refuses to practice Catholicism until late in the book, he and the Archbishop have a lot in common, beside their considerable talents for exercising influence. On the numerous occasions when Hardy shows them together we recognise the strange kinship they have with each other, two men manipulating the working class for their own purposes. John West, the book's dominant figure, never leaves behind his origins, desperately as he tries to do so. If he'd given his children more freedom and had the courage to absorb himself in the worlds they opened for him, he might have done so, but he's surrounded at the end of the book as he was at the beginning, by yes-men doing his bidding. In West's mind, there are few favours that can't be bought. At the beginning of the book he lures a policeman into accepting a bribe by spinning

a sovereign into the air in front of him; later, as we see many times, he pulls out a roll of notes or writes a cheque. The sums grow larger as West grows richer, but the approach to getting what he wants hasn't changed. At the beginning of the book, Wren is both desperate and determined; at the end, he is lonely, still trying to dominate, but out of his depth because he doesn't know how he looks to others. They still fear him, he yearns for so much more, yet all those instincts developed for escaping poverty trap him. The grand house near the Archbishop's residence is an unhappy one. No love flows to him from his family. He sleeps at night with a gun under his pillow. In his old age, and his wealth, he's as wary, cautious, watchful, as he was when he was fighting off cops trying to close his tote. All he's ever known is the worst side of human beings. Many, many people along his path have been generously treated by John West, but always because he senses advantage to himself. There's little enough altruism in the man. Protected for most of his life by men we might call hard cases, he is himself a sad case, to be pitied rather than envied. What has he done for the working class he's tried to leave behind? He's given them trotting, boxing, foot running, horse racing, and wrestling, he's corrupted their policemen and their politicians, he's done next to nothing to enrich or broaden their lives at all.

Why not? Hardy shows a man who quite lacks that vision without which, it is said, the people perish. John West is a racketeer who climbs out of the muddy river-flat suburb of Collingwood (Carringbush) to the high land of Kew, from a wretched shanty to one of the city's grandest homes, but it's never been anything



but a selfish, personal struggle for betterment. West changes nothing except for his own advantage. He encapsulates the evils of parasitism, partly because he understands only too well the temptations that lie before those of the poor, who, like him, try to rise out of the situation of their class. Police will take bribes. Politicians need money and they need votes. Both can be delivered. Everything, in the mind of John West, can be bought at a price, and he has that roll of notes in his pocket or his drawer ready to peel off the necessary amounts. Hardy seems obsessed with this. His manner of recounting West's doings is not so much a matter of moral outrage as of fascination. The book contains scores of characters, most of them identifiable from one of those name-sheets, if we can get hold of one – if we feel we need it. Scores of characters, yet it's West who dominates the book.

Why? He challenges both the Church and the Communist Party. They struggle to be clean enough, ideologically and morally pure enough to do their work in the world, and West refuses to be troubled by their castigations, though their political manoeuvres may make things difficult for him. He buys them off, he cedes them things, he seeks their opinions in order to subvert them or get around them, via whatever opening his cunning can discern. In the end, or as a final judgement, I think *Power Without Glory* is a moral tale, showing how hard it is to make life better for any group of believing or non-believing humanity. It's easier, because simpler, to corrupt. Corruption, in the eyes of West, as revealed by Frank Hardy, is more natural than social improvement. There's a lesson to be learned about West, and the society that made him rich, if we look

at his brother Arthur and Arthur's friend Dick Bradley – the only man on earth that Arthur trusts, or likes, or is humanly connected to, a connection brought about by the fact that both these men were lashed when they were in jail. The awful thing that was done to them linked them as long as they lived. I think Frank Hardy the communist might take more pride out of his portrayal of these two criminals than from almost anything else in his famous book. These two men did dreadful things, dreadful things were done in turn to them, and neither could escape what had been made of them, any more than John West could escape what he'd made of himself by buying a mansion on the high ground overlooking his past.

The last pages of the book are very moving, so long as we've stayed with Hardy's portrayal of West loyally enough to see that our sympathy is being called for. West's wife Nellie is in another room, where she's slept, separately, for years. West has had a heart attack and is lying in his bed. He gets his beads and says his rosary, then he remembers the revolver he's forgotten for the first time in fifty years. He hears a piano downstairs and thinks he hears his daughter Mary's voice, though she is dead. He sees his mother before him, pleading with him not to go the way he's gone. He sleeps, eventually, after a fashion, and he cries out in his sleep, beyond redemption. He has, in his own strange way, been brilliantly successful, but it's as clear as Hardy can make it that his life's failed utterly, and there's no hope for him now.

So why did Hardy write about him? Because the Communist Party wanted an expose? Yes, that seems to be what he was asked to do. Because he wanted to show what the Church and the

Labor Party had and hadn't done for the people they purported to speak for? Yes, that seems likely to be the case. Because he wanted to expose corruption and so to advantage the progress of the Communist Party, which, much as it wanted to regulate the thoughts of its supporters, did so on the grounds that they would be led to a betterment, a freedom, that nobody else was likely to give them? Yes, yes, yes, all those things too. But what does the emotional movement of the book, particularly in its third and last phase, Part Three: 1935 – 1950 : DECLINE OF POWER tell us was the heartfelt reason for, the force behind, Hardy's writing of *Power Without Glory*?

I think what Hardy had most need to express, by the time he was near enough to the end of the book to get his final thoughts prepared, was his horror that so much energy and determination to rise above the sadness of John West's poverty-stricken origins could lead to such a morally stricken end. What he has shown us is virtually the opposite of the hopeful thoughts in the young man's mind in the last lines of *Legends of Benson's Valley*: you remember? A young man laughing, head high, hair in the wind, exultant and defiant! *Power Without Glory*, much as Hardy extolled its revelatory qualities to anyone who'd listen – or might buy the book – offers a warning to the world rather than a path to be followed. There's little to be learned from it other than not to do things West's way. We're meant to be shocked and disgusted rather than to find any sign of moral uplift in its pages. It's a condemnation rather than a lesson in positive thought. Reading it again more than fifty years after it was published, it is still extraordinarily strong. When I

first read it, I was a university student of English Literature and I thought it was uncommonly badly written. Rereading it today, I can't imagine how I ever thought so. There are occasional signs of haste and awkwardness, but for the most part Hardy's simple viewpoint and direct expression provide a clear pane between his message and our minds. The book is also a fascinating piece of historical writing, subverting much of the standard way of looking at our country's past. This aspect of the book is so strong that one is inclined to add it to the fact that the novel is a *roman a clef* and say that it's hardly a work of imagination at all, except that Hardy's grip on the limited, obsessive mind of John West (Wren) is so strong that those final pages make us realise how tightly we've been gripped by the man, and how much that grip – an obsession, in turn, of ours – has been created in the mind and feelings of Frank Hardy who, I think we can say, taught himself to write a novel by writing one.

- (1) *Power Without Glory*, Frank Hardy, Realist Printing and Publishing Co., Melbourne, 1950
- (2) *Legends From Benson's Valley*, Frank Hardy, T.Werner Laurie, London, 1963
- (3) *The Hard Way*, Frank Hardy, first published by T.Werner Laurie, London, 1961; quotations from Fontana (Collins) Sydney edition, 1976

## How the world failed the League of Nations, then began again

Some thoughts about *Dark Palace* by Frank Moorhouse

*Dark Palace* begins in Geneva. The story of the League is already well advanced, though the darkness of the title lies ahead. It's 1931; Moorhouse tells us this in the second line. It's not a date he would have featured at the beginning of his two-book undertaking but he's entered the period for which he can expect his readers, the older of them at least, to recognise the significance of dates. I say this even though the Great Depression, which was at its worst in 1931, is hardly mentioned. This reminds me that by the time we get to 1946, when World War 2 is over and the League is all but washed-up, he's made no mention of atom bombs dropped on Japanese cities, indeed virtually no mention of the war in the Pacific at all. His concentration on the vestigial League's skeleton staff in Geneva has been very disciplined, and he's able to do this because for most of *Grand Days* he's taken it for granted, I think, that some sense of the war's events and those leading to it is lurking in the minds of his readers. For instance, before the book has reached its midpoint he starts a chapter with 'Australia, 1936', and I find myself supplying, as many readers will, even must, my own sense of the country and the period he's introducing. Several chapters and a fifth of the book later, he returns us to Europe simply by announcing '1938' and we know from the date alone that we are entering the darkness referred to above. The events chronicled in the book are minor, almost trifling, in comparison with the storms

raging around them, but the details in front of us and the events of the wider world are endlessly connected by Moorhouse; it's part of his skill that he makes the connections by making us make them for ourselves.

Let me give one example of his use of a handful of people to indicate the state of the world. Lester, an Irishman, has taken over the role of Secretary-General, replacing Avenol, who's returned to France, not without losing the trust of those who worked with him. Lester approaches Edith, because of her connection with Ambrose who is very much part of the Molly Club – it surprises her that Lester knows this – and because Bernard Follett, who runs the Molly Club, is a man of considerably increased importance. The false identities, the cross-dressing and so on which once made the club a thing of the night, now resemble everyday life in wartime. Contacts are everything. Bernard's busy. Lester, the League's third and last Secretary General, knowing of Edith's links with the club, is looking for a way to help James Joyce, the Irish writer who is living in Switzerland. Joyce's daughter is in an asylum in France, mentally ill, and he wants her near him. Can this be arranged?

Bernard says he will see what he can do. He makes it clear that nobody will be told what's happening. 'If possible, the girl will simply arrive at his doorstep.' Edith explains that the daughter is violent, and that if she is travelling she will need attendants to handle her. 'Mother of God,' Bernard says, and runs a hand through his hair. 'Is there no end to it all?'

There is. Moorhouse ends the chapter thus:

James Joyce died in Zurich. His daughter stayed in the clinic in La Baule. Switzerland was not invaded. And there in the Palace of Nations they watched the Germans gradually face defeat.

The next chapter is another of those beginning with a date: 1945, this time, and everyone is waiting for Prime Minister Churchill to make an announcement. But the speech, when it comes, is made by Lester to what's left of his staff in the library of the Palace of Nations. Moorhouse does some foreshortening of time and events at this point. No mention is made of Russia's army moving towards Berlin, and what that country's conquest of eastern Germany will mean. Japan and the Pacific aren't mentioned. (Those bombs haven't been dropped yet.) Nonetheless, Lester mentions that he will soon be going to San Francisco to attend a conference on arrangements for what he calls the 'New League'. His optimism reads a little oddly, today. Had he no idea what sort of world, and world organization, was likely to form? I find myself admiring the skills of Frank Moorhouse but not quite knowing how to take what's happening before me. Moorhouse gives the book two endings. The first is bitter-sweet, with a feeling of a period running out while trying to tell itself it isn't, while the other puts us down hard. As stated earlier, the UN has no wish to inherit the League's memories. The UN, beneath its rhetoric, has in all probability decided that the League was a failure and doesn't want to be associated with it, so much so that it's determined to create a new identity without connection with the old. So much for the last

chapter. In the second-last, before the League people are made to feel the shame of their situation, they see themselves as those who carried the flag – held up the world's banner, as Lester puts it – while the rest of the world was fighting. Proud of themselves for having kept something of the world's hopes alive – or that's how they see it – they hold hands and sing.

[Edith] still held Jeanne's hand as she looked around the crowd, but Jeanne's hand seemed cold.

She knew which of the crowd would stay on and which would now go home never to return – go away to start their ordinary lives which had been postponed during the war.

Go to their banal and happy lives.

Her eyes came back to Jeanne. She'd lost Jeanne.

That couldn't be helped.

They let go of each other's hands.

'Going back to Paris, Jeanne?'

'As soon as I can.'

'Good.'

'Go well, Edith.'

'Go well, Jeanne.'

Edith is still expecting the League's resurrection, though I think it's made clear to the reader, three hundred pages earlier, that the world has lost faith in the League. I refer to a speech Edith makes at Sydney University on her return home in 1936. Italy has invaded Ethiopia. Edith explains the steps taken by the League. 'Firstly, it

had to determine whether a state of war existed.' Edith has made a reputation at the League for being meticulous with procedures but it's obvious to everybody in her audience that a state of war must have existed: Ethiopia's been taken over, hasn't it! Edith moves on to explain the various stages of sanctions against an aggressor nation, and reverse sanctions to assist nations that have been attacked. Her presentation is knowledgeable, even sophisticated, but her audience can't see it working. Indeed they know it's failed. The League, in the minds of her audience, is a dead duck. A man suggests this to her, directly; the chairman rules him out of order because it's his third question. The meeting is about to close, and Edith, knowing this is by way of relieving her, restarts her speech. 'The League of Nations is a college as much as it is a political instrument. We are all learning,' she says. People clap, but they've seen the world situation more accurately, and more nastily, than she's presented it. Has she then come home in order to be forced to face the truth?

The answer's yes. The people at Sydney University see what she doesn't want to see. I have no doubt they feel she's trying to sell them the party line and they're not swallowing it. I would go further and say that this part of the two books – the long section back in Australia, with a copy of D.H.Lawrence's *Kangaroo* in her bag, to be read as she travels around - is the most problematical of all. Travelling by train to meet her father, on the south coast of New South Wales, she finds she doesn't like the look of the place. 'It was grim in its barren repetition.' 'The bush *was* grim and the bush was dull to the eye. And dangerous.' She feels that she's being

disgustingly disloyal and that the disloyalty is 'an embarrassing and gaping hole in her heart'. Then she gets off the train and meets her father, who says, as they embrace, both of them weeping freely, 'I've missed you something dreadful, Edith ... something dreadful.' Edith's missed her father too, and tells him so. Twelve or thirteen pages later he asks whether she and Robert – her husband; he's still on the scene, publicly at least – are ready to retire to Jasper's Brush; he wants to be looked after. Edith sees the problem clearly enough. If she takes a position in Canberra he could join her there. This seems feasible to her father, but he says he's too old to travel to Geneva. Jasper's Brush, he says, is a good place to raise kids. He's sketching in a life she isn't going to lead. Ambrose has already indicated his willingness to move to Canberra, but he knows as well as Edith how unsuited he would be for the bush capital.

Edith does, however, visit the capital, as she's told Ambrose she would. It happens in a chapter called 'To The Unfinished City'.

From Geneva, one of the civilised world's oldest cities, she'd travelled to the world's newest, most unfinished and unhewn of cities.

Capital of one of the still uncompleted nations. Although she was beginning to think that all nations were incomplete. Had changes yet to be made. Had to continuously evolve.

But she had come to the world's most *baffling* city, baffling by its not being there.

She has an appointment, and orders a taxi. It doesn't come. She makes another call, but still it doesn't come. She retreats to her

room, calms herself, then walks. A man cycling past, a civil servant such as she may become, if she's offered a job, and accepts, offers her a ride. A 'dink', as it was called in my childhood. She gets on, and, remarkably, they're both going to External Affairs, and she enjoys the ride. Again I think Moorhouse is amusing himself, and he's certainly amusing me! Yet somehow the incompleteness of Canberra is seen less sympathetically than is the League, another work in progress. Canberra is the capital of a nation still forming itself, as the League is forming itself, but Edith succumbs to the feeling of security which Europe – despite the dramas and chaos of its history – manages to suggest to her is available in Switzerland. This, even though Europe is about to tear itself in pieces all over again, having done so quite thoroughly in the war that led to the League being set up.

In raising this point I am adding it to the abandonment by Frank Moorhouse of the theme he raised a hundred pages earlier – the question as to what Edith will do about her father's needs as he declines. That chapter ended on page 280 and that was when her father, though we didn't know it at the time, and received no signal to that effect, dropped out of the book and as far as the reader is ever told, from Edith's life. This problem has arisen before, in the earlier book, when Edith's mother is made aware that she hasn't long to live. She writes to Edith, as does Edith's father, telling her that there's nothing she can do if she comes home, and her work in Geneva is too valuable to be interrupted, so Edith stays where she is. This is sensible, justifiable, and it's what her parents told her to do, but I can't read that section of *Grand Days* without feeling that something more, just a little more, is needed. These doubts, I

find, remain buried until Edith does return home, has an emotional reunion with her father, senses his need for her, then abandons him. Or is the abandonment by the novelist rather than the character? In the earlier of these two essays about Frank Moorhouse I avoided giving a definition for the term 'discontinuous narrative'; I did this because I can't know how Moorhouse would explain his own methods. I can only sense that he operates according to some principle – which isn't mine – of how readers will react to, and use, what he gives them. During my first reading of *Dark Palace*, becoming aware of this problem, I re-read the Australian chapters, thinking that perhaps the author had been stuck for space, and forced to leave out things that might otherwise have gone in. After this re-reading it was clear to me that this was not the reason for dropping Edith's father. Scrapper, the returned serviceman with the ruined face, who persuades an unwilling Edith to give him the 'pleasure' of masturbation with her gloved hand, has more pages devoted to him than does Edith's father. Why? Scrapper's appearance in the novel might be termed gratuitous. Nothing depends on him, and once he's gone nothing of him remains beyond the displeasing feeling that the book has turned an ugly corner, and contains a section, now, and fortunately, behind us that we won't be asked to revisit. What is Scrapper doing in the book, and why isn't Edith's father, an important part of Edith herself, kept before us as his destiny works itself out?

I can't answer these questions, I can't see any answers in the book(s), and I am left wondering why the author approached these things as he did. The League novels are huge in their scope, of course, and not everything can be put in; I notice that when *Dark*

*Palace* returns to Europe (1938!) things are as if the return to Sydney, the south coast of NSW and even Canberra, the capital that isn't there, had never happened. The world doesn't take much notice of Australia because it isn't forced to. Edith herself, who sometimes senses, in Geneva, that she's reacting in an Australian way, is all the more an internationalist for having returned for a while to her place of origin. She is a world citizen and it's one of her jobs, or perhaps it's the ultimate direction of everything she does, to take the world with her to the new high ground she and the people at the Palace of Nations occupy. If she had ever put it this way to herself she might have seen how unlikely it was that the League would succeed. What they were about was simply too early in human history to be achievable. Too many dark forces had to be worked through before the League's aims were even thinkable.

This becomes clear in one of the finest sections of the two books, wherein a young German called Dieter arrives in Geneva, wanting refuge from his Nazi bosses, and bringing news of his government's plans to wipe out Jews, homosexuals, and gypsies. '*Arbeit macht frei*' is already becoming more than a slogan. Testing's taken place. Extermination can be made to happen. The world doesn't know yet, but the very nature of the war, the moral balance we might say, has changed, and the side hostile to the Germans is picking up the first signals of change. The arrival of Dieter in the book, a not very pleasing young man, alters the characterisation of Germany, which, in the earlier book, was at least to some extent embodied in Herr Stresemann. Not any longer. People drink with Dieter, Ambrose goes to bed with him (!), and his story's out. Edith uses the secret phone number that Anthony Eden gave her, and gets the discovery

through to the British Foreign Office. Moorhouse handles this most convincingly, especially when the officer assigned to probe Edith's account turns out to be an old mate of Ambrose. This comes at the end of the phone calls and it sets a seal of success on what Edith's done, in a very British way that reinforces the affection we have come to feel for Ambrose. Edith and Ambrose are both well-bonded and re-bonded by now, and the pair of books is as much theirs as I imagine Moorhouse intended when he began the story of the League's journey with their meeting.

I've already praised the skill with which young Dieter is used to remind us of the Nazis' worst excesses and bring at least the overtones of their actions into the creation, in our imagination, of things set before us by Moorhouse in his prose. He doesn't have to tell us, show us, everything. We can do most of that for ourselves. Or can we? Will we? Most readers, I think, will use Dieter's presence in the novel to remind themselves of what they already know about Germany's actions in World War 2, meaning that they probably won't revisit or re-examine the reaction of Germans to their defeat in World War 1. What was World War 1 about? Was it a struggle for dominance in Europe? A struggle for dominance between a vast (British) empire and a much lesser German one? However we answer this question, we have to recognise that the League failed because it simply couldn't stop the rivalries of the earlier war breaking out again in a second and finally decisive later war. Events, once war breaks out, run out of control. This means that the League, in trying to manage events and minimise the damages done, is in a reactive position, unable – *pace* Edith's speech on sanctions – to control the forces wielded by great powers while

having few powers of its own. Moorhouse, although presenting us again and again with the thinking of League people, can only leave it up to us to see what the League can and can't do, because he's writing a novel, not a thesis of historical analysis.

This dichotomy, of novel and political/historical analysis, is fundamental to the way we read *Grand Days* and *Dark Palace*. I find it's a conflict in myself because, even though I'm a writer and sometimes a novelist myself, I can't stop myself trying to read the two books in terms of a statement about a certain reasonably recent period of the world's history. I find myself wanting to interrogate the book, asking its author 'Are you saying this? That?' when I know that if I myself were being interrogated I'd be replying, 'I'm telling you a story, or interconnected set of stories, and all my political and historical comment is *incidental* to my story. Follow the story,' I'd say, 'and pick up everything else along the way, as it comes in at the edge of your perceptions ...'

Historical novels are supposed – supposed! – to recreate the past. *Grand Days* and *Dark Palace* may only very loosely be termed historical novels. For all I know, Frank Moorhouse mightn't want that term applied to them at all. He might reasonably say that they are contemporary novels wearing the dress, the costumes, of an earlier period, but only as a device to fix them more firmly in the contemporary mind. I think this is the best way to read the two books. Why do I say this? At once I'm scratching my head. As I search for my answer, I find my mind circling around the character of Edith. She was 39 in the year 1939; this means – if you think about it; Moorhouse doesn't mention it – that she was born with her century. She is, in that sense, an artefact of her times, and as her

century progresses – that awful century whose story we know only too well! – she moves with it, embodying it, or aspects of it, as much as any single person can (unless they are a Stalin, Hitler, Roosevelt or Churchill, names that are synonymous with the various forces that they both wielded and represented). We are getting somewhere near the limits of the human mind, here, because we, as a race, find it hard to understand ourselves, despite the various human sciences we've devised for this very purpose. (Fictions are as good as most, hence people's liking for novels; they're by no means an easy way out of thinking!)

I was speaking of Edith. Should we think of her as an historical person (brought into existence by a novelist), or perhaps as a contemporary figure, imagined by a contemporary novelist, and sent time-travelling back into a period when he, the novelist, hadn't been born or was too young to know what was happening? Is she, perhaps, a modern woman, used to explore a time before her own? A sort of Doctor Who, running between the time she belongs in and the past she's been sent to explore?

I think the books, especially the second one, read more easily if we think along these lines. It need no longer trouble us if sometimes Edith feels a little more like us than she's like *them*. Like many other readers I find Edith a delightful central character, a most successful creation by Moorhouse, convincing, even admirable in her knowledge, foresight and frequent pedantry over procedures. If small things are done correctly, and well, so too will larger things, or that's how Edith makes us feel. She is the heart of the two novels. When Ambrose is with her she springs even more



keenly to life; something about his ambiguity, or adventurousness as a male enlarges her, makes her adventurous too, bigger in mind, in a way that simply doesn't happen when she's with Robert Dole, the journalist she marries. As I said earlier, Robert's work as a journalist might have been used to enrich this novel about the League, but I find myself forced by my own thinking to realise that it takes Edith to bring the League alive for readers and it takes Ambrose, with all his sexual ambivalence to bring Edith to life for us too. As readers, we can't do much for Edith but look at what she's doing, and admire; it takes her love-life with Ambrose, their partnership, to bring her to life for herself; we stand, I think, on the brink of discovering that the two of them, by giving each other the freedom to be selfish, make themselves unselfish each to the other. So that it seems that I was wrong when I questioned at the start of my essay on *Grand Days* Moorhouse's way of starting his journey with these two League workers finding each other on a train. The journey of the two books is *their* journey, and it's the energy of Edith with Ambrose and vice-versa that brings the League to life for us. In this sense the two novels, pleasingly huge, tell the story of an unusual love, one that generates not children but a well-energised viewpoint, not onto the present, leading into the future, but onto a piece of the past which I think Moorhouse feels is inexplicably, perhaps disgracefully ignored. It takes Edith and Ambrose to make us transport our minds over the years of the League, and when, at the end of *Dark Palace* Edith says goodbye to Jeanne – going back to Paris as quickly as she can – it occurs to me that Jeanne's story – at the League; or perhaps after she leaves Geneva, as she is about

to do, on page 633 – Jeanne's story might well have made another book, even another pair of books, if Moorhouse had known as much about the young Parisienne as he was able to make himself know about a young woman from the south coast of New South Wales, Australia, someone born in 1900 with the whole world, and a whole century, in front of her. Earlier in this essay I introduced the slightly unsuitable term 'historical novel'; I say unsuitable because to call a book an historical novel is to suggest that it tells you about some period, whereas, as I hope I have managed to show in these two essays, what Frank Moorhouse has done in *Grand Days* and *Dark Palace* is to repossess a piece of everybody's history, to refurbish and rearrange it precisely, procedurally and aesthetically – the way Edith might have made it presentable – so that we, his readers, can possess it imaginatively, and make it our own.

## The living are few, Frank tells us, *But The Dead Are Many*

An inquiring look at some things produced by Frank Hardy in his later years.

Few? Many? I am more inclined to think that the most important decision about numbers for anybody considering the work of Frank Hardy is the choice between one and two. Was he one writer, or two? One personality, or more? His book *The Hard Way: the story behind Power Without Glory*<sup>1</sup> has a 'Prologue: For the Uninitiated', which has this to say:

*The Hard Way* tells the story of two men, Ross Franklyn and Frank Hardy. It tells how Ross Franklyn, a battler from the bush, became a writer the hard way and published *Power Without Glory*. And it tells how Frank Hardy was arrested and fought back against the Criminal Libel charge. At the end, the two men meet and face together the 'Problems of Victory'.

In case this device should puzzle the reader, I should explain that all my writing before *Power Without Glory* was published under the pen-name of Ross Franklyn and that *Power Without Glory* carried two names, Frank Hardy (Ross Franklyn). And so, when writing *The Hard Way*, I felt that the man, Frank Hardy, who faced the Judge and Jury, was a different man to the happy-go-lucky bloke, Ross Franklyn, who'd pulled himself up by the shoestrings to write *Power Without Glory*.

So the story is told that way.

This prologue is signed Frank Hardy, Manly, N.S.W. And if we check the title page of *Power Without Glory*, we see that it is called 'a novel in three parts by Frank J. Hardy', while the next line gives, without explanation, "Ross Franklyn". This duality, if that's what it is, is continued in the last part of *The Hard Way*, called 'Epilogue: The Problems of Victory'. In this part of his book, Hardy tells of exhaustion and bewilderment following his acquittal of the charge of criminal libel. 'I could neither sleep nor relax. Serenity of mind deserted me. A nerve rash attacked my hands and feet. I was prey to fears that my personality was splitting, that I was losing my identity as an individual.' He goes on:

The bitter campaign just ended had made it impossible to become again the happy-go-lucky writer Ross Franklyn. I was torn with struggles between the Ross Franklyn of old and the new Frank Hardy which, swirling now out of the mist of the years, take the form of arguments between the two men.

The rest of this epilogue, to a book published a decade after the *Power Without Glory* case, is a dialogue between Ross and Frank, two halves, two aspects, of the one person, and it may be worth adding at this point that 'Ross Franklyn' is itself a name involving two people: Hardy himself (Frank) and his wife of many years (Rosslyn). I'll return to the epilogue a little later, but I want to interrupt myself to say that the main question in my mind after re-reading *But The Dead Are Many*<sup>2</sup>, is whether its two main personalities, John and Jack, the

two voices of the fugue which is Hardy's form for the book, are two people, two separate people, or more simply, more *integratedly*, two sides, two aspects, of the one person. Is it a book about two men, or about one?

Let me now quote Hardy again<sup>3</sup>, this time responding to comments made by a John Frow in *Southern Review*:

Frow indicates some rather modern, even post-modern techniques I used in my works ... "In all the books subsequent to 'Power Without Glory' there is an internal doubling of the act of writing: Paul Whittaker writes about the process of writing about his alter ego Jim Roberts in 'The Four-Legged Lottery', 'The Hard Way' splits the author into two characters, Frank Hardy and Ross Franklyn, in an alternating narrative structure; the author F.J.Borky is seen at work in 'The Outcasts of Foolgarah' on a novel which is obviously 'The Outcasts of Foolgarah'; Jack self-consciously reconstructs the life of his double, John Morel, in 'But The Dead Are Many'; and in 'Who Shot George Kirkland?' Ross Franklyn writes about the writing of a novel, called 'Power Corrupts', and after his death is doubled by a biographer who gradually comes to identify with him."

Having, as it were, snatched Frow's weapons, or arguments, from his hand in order to wield them for himself, Hardy goes on:

Professor Frow implies that my literary method was a consequence of the ambiguities in the 'Power Without Glory' trials (1950-1951) rather than my ability to vary style and form to match the content of the work to be conquered. Trouble is, I used precisely the same method in a book

written before 'Power Without Glory' but published after, 'Legends From Benson's Valley'.

It's commonly said that if you want to tell a fib and be believed you should tell a big one. Hardy has done so here. There's no sign in *Legends From Benson's Valley* of the duality, the dualism, that's built into the later books. None at all. Hardy is not only a born spinner of yarns, he's also an innate controversialist. He loves to argue, not that he does it very subtly. He's funny when he's brash, and he enjoys making a point with all the grandiloquence he can muster. Here's a passage from *Who Shot George Kirkland?*<sup>4</sup>

Thinking like Franklyn's prose in its most satirical moments – not the turgid prose of the thick novels or the positive hero stories, but the magpies' nest of bawdy words and phrases he had studied when writing his lame-brained thesis on Franklyn, casually larded with all manner of verbal crudities so as to sharpen the sense of outrage and alienation with the gift for the crazy list applied with savage skill to those who manipulate the Australian working man: gentlemen, scholars, blue bloods, ladies, parasites, culture vultures, hangers-on, bureaucrats, distinguished citizens, bozforrical bludgers, statesmen, legal eagles, capitalistic exploiters, triplicate fillers-in, lurk detectors, multinational milchers, money-lenders, bankers, in a word – THEM.

Other such passages can be found in the same book, which Hardy, to my amusement, sub-titles 'A Novel about the Nature of Truth'. For 'truth' I would substitute 'obfuscation'. Any indication from Hardy that he is about to delve into the nature of truth is, for this reader, a signal that some sort of smoke-screen is going to be

unleashed. Visibility of the desired object, or idea, is about to be reduced. If we go back to the passages from *The Hard Way* quoted above, we find Hardy talking about himself as 'a battler from the bush', a 'happy-go-lucky bloke/writer' who's 'pulled himself up by the shoestrings'. This is Hardy enlisting readers' approval by the simple trick of trotting out a few clichés which we're asked to take at face value. That young man, riding home after a day's work, with *The Workers' Voice* in his pocket – you remember him from the previous essay? – simply must have contained the seeds, the germ, of what he was to become – and did. I do think, however, that the processes of being commissioned to write what became *Power Without Glory*, of researching, writing, and then the quite extraordinary things that had to happen to get the book printed and into the world, coupled with the later trial for criminal libel, with all its associated publicity, making Hardy central to the life of his state for a few days at least, and perhaps, depending on how you look at things, much longer than that, all these things combined to change Hardy, or perhaps to bring out in him things that he'd hardly known about or understood until circumstances brought him to see himself in a different way. The later Hardy is not the same man as that idealistic young fellow on his bike on the last page of *Legends From Benson's Valley*, 'head high, hair in the wind, exultant and defiant'. The later Hardy, I'm sure, knew, when he raised his head – or his voice – defiantly, that everything had a cost, that the world was by no means as simple as he liked to tell us it was, and that older people, once they've matured – if they ever do – carry inside themselves at least the potential for the decay, the decline, of things

that their younger, earlier, faith has raised like a flag in defiance of the world.

If what I've said wasn't so then *But The Dead Are Many* would never have been written. Something more exultant, more defiant, might have been there in its stead.

Or something even more sombre, more terrible, like *Darkness at Noon* (Arthur Koestler) might have been offered. Communism's dying in *But The Dead Are Many*, there's no question about that, but the focus of the book is not so much the end of the political movement as the killing of people's worldwide faith in it, and the nihilistic situation of those left without the faith they once enjoyed.

Faith secures the insecure, and that's most of us. Faith sustains us and makes life bearable. Vast crowds gather in front of Saint Peter's in Rome, or they go inside to gaze in wonder. They listen in awe when the Pope, God's master of the faithful, delivers messages to those who need them. Catholicism, you may say; why are you dragging this into an essay on Frank Hardy, probably the most outspoken communist Australia ever had? I do so because catholicism and communism were competing faiths for many years, they resembled each other in being organised to have worldwide reach, while maintaining central authority – Moscow, Rome. Ordinary mortals espousing faith had to accept the dictates – yes, *dictates* – of those at the top of the hierarchies, even though, in the case of communism at least, being anywhere near Joseph Stalin – the top of the tree – was very dangerous indeed. Communism presented itself as a movement bringing huge benefits to the masses, but the means whereby the masses were controlled and if

necessary eliminated were kept as far as possible out of sight. One method of control was to bring communist leaders in front of the masses to undergo show trials, as we see in *But The Dead Are Many* in the case of Nicolai Buratakov, who is perhaps the central figure of the novel, if a book that purports to be a fugue can have a central figure.

I would now say to the reader who has been patient enough to come with me thus far that I have laid down the guidelines for what I want to talk about in this essay. I am interested in the *form* of Hardy's novel, I am interested in its way of offering us the voices, writings, interpretations of *two* writers who are as close as can be to being *one*, and I am intrigued by the fact that it is one of the two, perhaps three, books Hardy produced in a lifetime of writing and talking which deserves to hold our attention. Hardy was a garrulous man, his books show him and/or his characters forever talking in pubs with glasses of beer before them, yet the rooms in which he did his writing appear in his own and other people's reminiscences as having been unutterably bleak, wretched, lacking in taste, decoration or comfort. It can be said that there are ways in which he never escaped the cliché of a working man who gave a certain fraction of his pay packet to his wife for housekeeping, then went to the pub to waste what was left on beer and betting.

Betting! Beer! But let us leave these dreary topics and turn to the third of his books that deserve our attention. Hardy tells us it's a fugue, with the Latin *fuga* meaning flight, but we soon discover that the word 'flight' means, for him, running away, not moving through the air on wings. Hardy's section-headings are at pains

to explain the musical terms he's using, so I shall borrow from his methods and tell the reader that his first and second subjects are John and Jack, and his underlying themes, his essential subject matter, never far from the reader's mind, are despair and death. John Morel dies by his own hand, and Jack? The last pages are as ambivalent as Hardy can make them. Jack is, at the end, lying on the bed where John died, he too has taken sleeping tablets (though not so many?), and Jack calls on the dead man to wait for him. Is he taking the same path to the same end? I am inclined to think not.

... suppose I do not die, by some miracle I remain alive, what for?

I am floating on a wave to the shore. Then I am running to the dreadful junction where all the roads meet and John is hanging there and he is speaking to me. I cried for help and you did not listen, you did not know how, too late to listen now.

And when I looked up, his legs were still, his arms lolling, his eyes bulging from their sockets, his mouth slammed shut like a trap-door.

Rat-it-a-tat: the train wheels are rattling on the rails and I am falling from the train, falling, falling, falling. It is only the falling dream; the hedge will break my fall and the lush green leaves will caress my face.

I think 'only' is the key word here; that, and the fact that the hedge has been mentioned several times before, as a place where a child waited for his parents to come home, come back, to him, but, he never remembers them coming, though they did. Reference to

this somewhat ambivalent hedge prevents the book – the fugue, let’s not forget – reaching a moment of full, indeed double, closure.

This, in my view, is important, because it brings to my mind the way in which I respond to the performance of fugal music. I am actually rather surprised that Hardy chose the fugue for the form of his novel. There is absolutely nothing in my recall of *Power Without Glory* or *Legends From Benson’s Valley* to suggest any interest on Hardy’s part in any of the music known as ‘classical’. Any number of composers have written fugues but the master is generally thought to be J.S.Bach, and his fugues, like most of his music, are deeply infused by his faith. Bach may have been a Lutheran, and a product of the Reformation, but his music rests on a rock-solid faith that the world, with all its faults and problems, was created by and remains in the hands of God. His powerful chords make one aware that although it is possible to see the world in dramatic terms, Bach’s drama is not the same drama expressed by later composers – Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven – who knew very well that they were down here (on earth) and God, though he could be found in the hearts of men, was, for most of the time, *up there*. One does not listen to a fugue by Bach as one listens to a movement by any of the composers I’ve just named. A fugue by Bach is something like a statue both conceived and carved in time. A fugue by Bach is shown to the listener, bar by bar, note by note, until it comes to an end and only when the reverberations of the last note are dying away can the listener reach an understanding of what’s been heard. The fugue is only complete when it’s been brought to its end. Fugal music is therefore not expressive in the more dramatic way

of something written in sonata form – or a subsequent allegretto, andante or allegro vivace either. Fugal music is only expressive when the fugue has been fully comprehended, and that’s only possible when it’s reached its conclusion.

You are, perhaps, wondering about Hardy? Ross Franklyn? Why are we talking about Bach? It’s because I found myself searching for the right way to read *But The Dead Are Many* on each of my first, second and third readings. I read the book when it came out in 1975, again a few years later, and again recently (2009), and each time I found my reading habits unsettled. How was I meant to be affected by this book? It was clearly a different kettle of fish from the Wren/West book: a long, long way from the simple morality – and simple *immorality*, for that matter – of Carringbush and Kew. The word ‘epoch’ occurs a number of times, a word I wouldn’t expect in a Frank Hardy book, and it gives me a certain indication of what Hardy is up to. Here we are on page 26:

So in the spirit of Party mindedness, to which their personalities were being attuned, they demanded higher vigilance of themselves and so perpetuated the vicious circle that was to strangle a whole movement, a whole epoch: the habit of vigilance seeking enemies where they did not exist and finding them to confirm the habit of vigilance.

And here we are on page 288, with the book almost over:

For too long, I had played the role of the hard-headed sceptic prepared to leave the unanswerable questions unanswered; now I must explore the limbo between fact and fiction where death found John Morel and wove the years of his life

into the tapestry of his epoch. In art and history man has a memory of events at which he was not present. So, in a sense, memory can go beyond the living, can be transmitted from and extend to the dead past. Is it possible, then, for John's memory to assist me? This question arose in my mind and I am tempted to elevate it to the level of a theory in the way that man elaborates theories to serve his needs, as the theory of the existence of heaven responds to his yearning for a better life.

The epoch which began in 1917 with the Russian Revolution (and the birth of Frank Hardy in the very same year), or perhaps in 1905 with the earlier, premonitory uprising, was ended by the time this novel appeared in 1975. How can I say this so confidently? Because the faith that early communism engendered was dead. Faith had died. Nobody believed, any more, that Russia, first, and then the world, were being made better, perhaps even perfected, by an idea. It had been a good idea, and it had brought a lot of hope, but Stalin was turning an optimistic, meliorist movement into a tyranny worse by far than the tyranny it had replaced. The transformation of something outdated into something modernly beneficial had gone appallingly wrong. The disposition of power in the new Russia was worse than the disposition of power anywhere else in the world. Hope had given way to terror. The people of Russia and the people of the world, looking on at the show trials, knew very well how they were supposed to react. The answer was abject terror. Thought crimes – and what were they, you might ask? – were almost worse than murder, and led straight to imprisonment in the cellars of the secret police, questioning, confession, followed

by a bullet in the back of the head. At the outer edges of the communist faith – Australia, for instance – it was impossible to believe any more. Those who had depended on faith had to find a new one, or learn to do without, or simply despair, and if despair was intolerable, they had to find a way out of a world that was no longer tolerable.

Hardy made this the subject of an important book. His second or his third? Third, I think, because *Legends From Benson's Valley* needs to be included as the beginning of the journey which ends with the death of John Morel and the loss of faith of Jack, the man who's doubling him.

So, back to my opening question: one writer or two? Is Jack the same man as John? Or not? Two writers or one? How many? Does it matter and if it does, why does it matter? What's the nature of the question, where do we look for an answer, how do we know if we're right?

Frank Hardy has gone to join the John and Jack he created so he's not available for questioning and I think the quotes offered at the start of this essay show how unreliable, uninformative, his answers might have been. He wasn't a very introspective, self-analytical writer, because he wasn't that sort of person. So we are left with our questions and must decide for ourselves. Two writers or one? Something happened to Hardy, mid-career. He couldn't rediscover the certainty he'd once possessed – or was it affected? Having two personae was his way of dealing with this situation. He didn't so much deepen, as double. This became his way of working. He didn't need it for his Billy Borker or other similar yarns, but he

needed it for anything serious. Is Jack the same man as John? Not quite, though they're intimately related, like a question and answer belonging together, the second having been brought into the world by the first. Does it matter? Yes, because the doubling of the writing voice may confuse or mislead us. It may throw us off the track, something which I suspect would have pleased Hardy so much that he would have told us what fools we were for not seeing what was obvious to anyone with half a brain. Obvious to anybody who wasn't one of THEM! And the nature of the question? That's one to think about. The key question, with Hardy as with most writers, is to ask whether or no we're reading according to ... not what the writer intended, but as the prose demands. Is our way of reading the best way of finding what's there for our minds to feed on? It's time, I think, to ask ourselves what faith does, because *But The Dead Are Many* is a book about faith and the loss thereof. Nicolai Buratakov, as I said earlier, is the central figure of the book, and he's doubled – followed, haunted – by Stalin, that monster with a nickname (Koda!). Stalin, though not present as a character, is fugally present because he's in chase of Buratakov, and has him trapped where he cannot escape. Buratakov, therefore, cannot act fugally, except insofar as his thoughts, his predicament, are a theme for others to pursue and to be possessed by. Buratakov can be known by his writings, his behaviour at his trial, and something of him still lives in his wife – her memories – and his daughters. Two daughters, one for each of the men who visit Russia from Australia, in search of faith (the first) and evidence of what actually happened (the second). Each of these men coming from Australia is in flight

from his own version of domesticity, and from the Australian Party's interpretation of what's happening in Moscow. Coming to Moscow, however, only makes the problem more intractable. Each of the two men loves a Buratakov daughter, and much good that does the daughters! The foreigners can do little enough for them. The foreigners go back to where they came from. Their local Party branch falls apart as Kruschev's denunciation of Stalinism takes effect. The centre has fallen apart. Faith in communism is no longer tenable. It has to be put aside, and then what?

Faith is revealed in Hardy's book as a very dangerous asylum to shelter in. It's an island full of dangers for the people in a sinking boat who take refuge there, because it creates dependency. Faith, sought by people whose world won't hold together otherwise, can't be replaced when it's been found to fail. John Morel isn't capable of discovering alternatives once his faith is broken. He isn't presented to us that way and Hardy didn't conceive of him that way. Hardy knew about the faith of communism just as he had absorbed the catholic faith in his early life. A different personality, a different man, might have searched for new foundations on which to raise up a less shonky building, but it was beyond Hardy. When communism failed him, when the left wasn't a place to be any more, he went to the aboriginal people of his country's Northern Territory, and west, and resurrected his sympathies and his grievances, attaching them to the native people's struggles. He may well have done a lot of good but the respite he found for his own soul was temporary at best. He needed to face his situation.



He did. He wrote *But The Dead Are Many*. It's about journeying from faith to despair. Despair, in the case of John Morel, leads him to find relief in death. In the case of Jack, John's alter ego, despair is accepted, if my reading of the last paragraphs is correct. As we close the book we have to think of Jack coping with the despair, the state of total disbelief, that he's now in. Do we think of Jack's after-life as we close the book? No, we don't. We're still considering that fugue, conceived and carved in time, that Hardy's written for us.

I referred earlier to the unshakeable faith of Johann Sebastian Bach. Surprised as I may be that Frank Hardy has written a fugal novel, I think it was a remarkably good choice of form to give his book. It was a way of easing the pressure gripping his mind by turning it into tension in the prose, pulling and directing the reader. The book's in motion, we're watching, fascinated, we know what has to happen, just as we know what did happen ... but we're still watching in a quasi-hypnotic state as the motions are gone through. Hardy can't spare us because he can't spare himself. He shows us the fugue in motion, and the worldwide Communist Party set it in motion in the year Hardy was born, and there is simply no escaping. The thing will crumble before our eyes, and those who were part of it will either find relief in ending their own lives or will remain alive but painfully conscious of the spiritual death which came with the ending of their faith.

Faith, as I said before, is a dangerous place to take one's refuge.

1. *The Hard Way: the story behind Power Without Glory*, Frank Hardy, T.Werner Laurie, London, 1961
2. *But The Dead Are Many*, Frank Hardy, The Bodley Head, Sydney, 1975
3. 'Frank Hardy's last blast in defence of truth', *The Age*, Melbourne, 3 February 1994
4. *Who Shot George Kirkland: A Novel about the Nature of Truth*, Frank Hardy, Edward Arnold (Australia), Port Melbourne, 1980 (but dated 1981 on the history page of the first edition)

## A master of prose because he knows he shares it

A second look at *The Middle Parts of Fortune* (*Her Privates We*), concentrating on what Frederic Manning brought to the art of writing.

Let's see how Frederic Manning starts his book. His battalion – Bourne's battalion – has been in an attack. He gives us a few words from Shakespeare, which we'll come back to, then he begins:

The darkness was increasing rapidly, as the whole sky had clouded, and threatened thunder. There was still some desultory shelling. When the relief had taken over from them, they set off to return to their original line as best they could. Bourne, who was beaten to the wide, gradually dropped behind ...

He blunders into a dug-out, lights a candle, and discovers a water bottle. He's thirsty, so he gulps a drink, but it's whisky. He spits, and then he gulps some more. Three Scotsmen come in, he hides the whisky, then Mr Clinton enters the dug-out. The officer advises the Scots on how to find their battalion, and they leave. Bourne is for going too, but Clinton says 'It's indecent to follow a kilted Highlander too closely out of a dug-out. Besides I left something here.'

He means the whisky. He drinks and Bourne has some more. We're three pages in at this stage, and the tone, the *voice* of the book has been set. It's measured, reflective, and doesn't hurry

around detail. The opening section takes five pages. We've already glanced at Manning's prose, his style; it's a book that's full of voices. He tells us in an 'Author's Prefatory Note' that 'in recording the conversations of the men I seemed to hear the voices of ghosts'. He tells us also that the characters are fictitious, but nobody who's read the book would think this strictly true. So what did he mean? I think he meant that he turned real people into characters for his fiction and – he would be too modest to say this, so I'll say it for him – he lifted his men, and their words, onto a plane that resembles reality but isn't the same: it's mysteriously altered because it's been brought into the realm where things have to be heard, examined, in the imagination before they are brought back into literary or historical understanding. Things must be transformed in order to be understood.

This is not new knowledge. Here's the Shakespearian quote at the top of Chapter 1:

*'By my troth, I care not; a man can die but once; we owe God a death ... and let it go which way it will, he that dies this year is quit for the next.'*

One hundred and fifty pages later, with the men knowing they will soon be sent forward again, and trying to make sense of the hell they find themselves in, a soldier called Pacey says this:

'If they don't send us over the top here, they'll send us over somewhere else. It 'as got to be, an' if it 'as got to be, the

sooner it's over an' done wi' the better. If we die, we die, an' it won't trouble nobody, leastways not for long it won't; an' if we don't die now, we'd 'ave to die some other time.'

It will not escape the reader's notice that Pacey is saying what the greatest of English writers said centuries before. Manning's respect for his soldiers' thoughts is profound. He includes what they say in a way that compels us to respect them. The remnants of Bourne's battalion are brought back to their tents to be dismissed, and a man observing them smacking their rifles and their officer returning their salute 'took his pipe out of his mouth and spat on the ground.'

'They can say what they bloody well like,' he said appreciatively, 'but we're a fuckin' fine mob.'

Two pages earlier, over those gulps of whisky, Mr Clinton told Bourne that the two of them are lucky because they've come through without a scratch, and if their luck holds they'll 'move out of one bloody misery into another, until we break, see, until we break.' Manning is both outlining the men's situation, and stating his themes. Themes, as surely we know, can only be developed if a writer can make his prose rise to their demands; let us now move to Chapter 16, two hundred pages later. The previous chapter has ended with the men being ordered to fall in on the road; they do so, and a few moments later they are marching towards the attack that will end the book and Bourne's life. Manning writes this falling-in and marching quite marvellously, but he has plenty in reserve for the start of the following chapter. He quotes Shakespeare again – and again I'll come back to it – and then he gives us:

The drumming of the guns continued, with bursts of great intensity. It was as though a gale streamed overhead, piling up great waves of sound, and hurrying them onward to crash in surf on the enemy entrenchments. The windless air about them, by its very stillness, made that unearthly music more terrible to hear. They cowered under it, as men seeking shelter from a storm. Something rushed down on them with a scream of exultation, increasing to a roar before it blasted the air asunder and sent splinters of steel shrieking over their heads, an eruption of mud spattering down on the trench, and splashing in brimming shell-holes. The pressure among the men increased. Someone shouldering a way through caused them to surge together, cursing, as they were thrown off their balance to stumble against their neighbours.

'For Christ's sake walk on your own fuckin' feet an' not on mine!' came from some angry man, and a ripple of idiot mirth spread outwards from the centre of the disturbance. Bourne got a drink of tea, and though it was no more than warm, it did him good; at least, it washed away the gummy dryness of his mouth. He was shivering, and told himself it was the cold.

Manning moves on to discuss fear; they're all afraid because it's impossible to be otherwise. Some rum is brought around, and they drink it. 'It'll soon be over now,' Martlow says, one of the two young men the educated Bourne has befriended. Manning also talks about comradeship, which extends to anybody in the same wretched position. Friendships, which form often enough, are forever being broken as men are killed or so harshly wounded that they're sent out of the battle. Fate can't be controlled, and

Headquarters' plans are usually beyond the men, so they are left with each other:

Only there was a sound of movement, a sudden alertness thrilled through them all with an anguish inextricably mingled with relief. They shook hands, the three among themselves and then with others near them.

Good luck, chum. Good luck. Good luck.

He felt his heart thumping at first. And then, almost surprised at the lack of effort which it needed, he moved towards the ladder.

The attack that follows is confused. The artillery barrage supporting the men, and clearing their way through enemy resistance, moves faster than the men, who are slipping and sliding in mud. Fog obliterates everything they need to show them where they are. They hardly know what they're doing, except of course, they do, and men are shot, bayonets are thrust so deeply into the other side's soldiers that the rifle has to be fired to get the bayonet out again. Martlow, who was shaking hands and drinking rum only two minutes before, is hit by a bullet that blows the back of his head away. Bourne is enraged, and Sergeant Tozer tells him to steady himself, then comments on the fact that he's got (Martlow's) blood all over him. Manning manages this part of his narrative skilfully, showing us confusion with clarity, letting us see whatever the fog allows the men to see. It's a scene of greatest simplicity; life and death are wrestling, engaging many hundreds of men, most of whom don't know each other and few of whom can see each other. Death is everywhere, and those still alive are doing their best to

remain so, while handing out death at every chance. There is a weird moment when some of their own front-line men, terrified by the reception they've met, run away from the battle, and those still coming forward jeer at the cowardice – this is what it would be called, though it's natural – of their own men. 'For a moment they might have broken and run themselves, and for a moment they might have fought men of their own blood, but they struggled on ...' Manning tells us. This is where the evenness of his prose gives him freedom to move wherever in the confusion there's something to report.

Manning is as easy with philosophical reflection as he is with action, and as good with the atmospheric, if I may use the word in this context, of battle as he is with soldiers' conversations and things shouted in the heat of fighting. I think he can do this because his writing is not simply the voice of Private Bourne. Manning is speaking on behalf of the civilisation of which he is a part, and he's not restricting himself to the thinking of those who rule Great Britain's empire. He recognises that a civilisation is composed of the abject as well as the articulate, those with few options as much as those with many. He knows he has Shakespeare behind him, of course. Here's what he puts at the start of Chapter 16:

*We see yonder the beginning of day, but I think we shall never see the end of it ... I am afeard there are few die well that die in a battle.*

Bourne lasts a few hours longer, but doesn't see the end of the battle. He's shot, and Weeper Smart carries his dying comrade back to the trenches where he would have been ... safe, after a fashion. This

causes us to reflect on Manning's use of Weeper, the most strongly drawn character in the book. Bourne always calls him 'Smart', but the other soldiers protect themselves by using his nickname derisively, trying to block out what he's too honest not to say. He's the ultimate pessimist, and because the soldiers' situation is as bad as it is, he's always right. Manning quotes him again and again.

Then the officer came to the concluding paragraph of the instructional letter.

'It is not expected that the enemy will offer any very serious resistance at this point ...'

There came a whisper scarcely louder than a sigh.

'What fuckin' 'opes we've got!'

The still small voice was that of Weeper Smart ...

A couple of pages later, the men are discussing the war: Pacey, whom I mentioned a little earlier, says, '... but what I want to know is what all us'ns are fighting for ...'

'We're fightin' for all we've bloody got,' said Madeley, bluntly.

'An that's sweet fuck all,' said Weeper Smart. 'A tell thee, that all a want to do is save me own bloody skin. An' the first thing a do, when we go into t'line, is to find out where t'bloody dressing stations are; an' if a can get a nice blighty, chaps, when once me face is turned towards home, I'm laughing. You won't see me bloody arse for dust. A'm not proud. A tell thee straight. Them as thinks different can 'ave all the bloody war they want, and me own share of it, too.'

What do I want to show, by enlisting Weeper, Bourne, Madeley, Mr Clinton and the rest of them? I think I want the reader to notice that these are not so much the voices of individuals, as voices from the mass, and that the whole, the mass, is European civilisation, it's fighting itself, it often does, it will do so again, and each and every conflict will force those engaged in it to see themselves as living creatures brought face to face with the immediate probability of their own extinction. They will be killed by people very like themselves: *like* because the viewpoint being adopted by the writer, that of the whole civilisation considering itself, reduces human differences to minuscule proportions. Weeper, Madeley, all the men, may be speaking with great power, for those who are accustomed to listen to such as them, but these rank and file soldiers are of the minutest significance to those whose counsels control the war. Manning hears the soldiers because each of them is thinking for himself, he listens, he records, occasionally he joins in, but his real achievement was to write down what he remembered them saying. He was Shakespearean in that, and Shakespeare gained a new lease on life by being quoted in *The Middle Parts Of Fortune*. It's a book that draws its life from saying what mustn't be forgotten.

This is something the book can do because it speaks in many ways. Officers, men, the French people whose places of living are being ravaged, the French women whose presence is a corrective to the masculinity of the soldiers every time that they, the women, appear ... all speak, and think, according to their habits, training, background, and the effects of whatever's in their vicinity. I've said, often enough, that Manning is speaking for the whole civilisation;

it's something he'd been preparing himself to do for many years. He had his few months at the front line and then he knew all he needed to know. He waited another decade until it had been digested, had all settled, in his thought, then he wrote it down. The sentences pour out with the inevitability of unshakeable thought:

The drumming of the guns continued, with bursts of great intensity. It was as though a gale streamed overhead, piling up great waves of sound, and hurrying them onward to crash in surf on the enemy entrenchments. The windless air about them, by its very stillness, made that unearthly music more terrible to hear ...

At the beginning of this essay I quoted the opening of the book. There was some shelling then, too, but it was behind the action, because the battle lay behind Bourne and the remnants of his battalion. At the end of the book, the battle lies ahead, and then it's all about them – the men, the reader too. Manning, who doesn't want for technique, pulls a trick on the reader at the start. He gets Bourne and the other remnants out of the battle, sums up by using the man who took his pipe out of his mouth to spit – 'a fuckin' fine mob' – and then he gives us four pages, almost all of it in one huge paragraph, of Bourne's memories of the action that's already over. 'It is infinitely more horrible and revolting to see a man shattered and eviscerated, than to see him shot. And one sees such things; and one suffers vicariously, with the inalienable sympathy of man for man. One forgets quickly. The mind is averted as well as the eyes.' But when Frederic Manning sat down to write, ten years after the war had finished, his mind concentrated on those things which

had caused him – them – to turn away. What he saw, the second time, became his book.

A book is not an easy thing to create. It is a mass, even, perhaps, a mountain, of thought. The thought exists in one mind, and must be made ready, laid out, for other minds to take it in. This making ready, laying out, and taking in, are the matters of writing and reading. The broadest, the subtlest of minds, minds in all their variety must be catered for. It's almost impossible to write a book without excluding some who aren't ready for it. A well written book is like the procedures of law; it must be comprehensible, and fair, to all. Or so I feel when I've had my head in Manning's pages for a time. I want to mention now an oddity, a minor sub-theme: the matter of Private Bourne's suitability to be sent away for officer training. It crops up frequently in the book, and could be read as a claim that Bourne doesn't belong in the ranks, where he's chosen to be. I don't think this would be the right way to take it. I think we should read it in the opposite direction – that the officers should be listening to their men, as Bourne is; that the voices of the men – Weeper, Madeley, Pacey and the rest – are the more thoughtful voices of the army, and that European civilisation works in a certain way. Its policies demand a price, and the voices of the men are the voices of that part of civilisation which pays most of the price. The benefits are unevenly distributed, and so are the costs, the suffering. Manning wants to make this clear, so Bourne 'should be' an officer; notice, though, that he's killed before he achieves the promotion. From the very last page:

Bourne was sitting: his head back, his face plastered with mud, and blood drying thickly about his mouth and chin,

while the glazed eyes stared up at the moon. Tozer moved away, with a quiet acceptance of the fact. It was finished. He was sorry about Bourne, he thought, more sorry than he could say. He was a queer chap, he said to himself, as he felt for the dug-out steps. There was a bit of a mystery about him; but then, when you come to think about it, there's a bit of a mystery about all of us. He pushed aside the blanket screening the entrance, and in the murky light he saw all the men lift their faces, and look at him with patient, almost animal eyes.

The book has only a couple of lines until it ends:

Then they all bowed over their own thoughts again, listening to the shells bumping heavily outside, as Fritz began to send a lot of stuff over in retaliation for the raid. They sat there silently; each man keeping his own secret.

So, powerless and put upon as the men are, they preside over their own thoughts. They possess their own souls until a bullet, a shell, separates the two, leaving them as Bourne has been left, staring eyelessly at the sky. Manning's in no doubt as to who's carrying the pains and punishments of civilisation. Ordinary people cop it, as a result of decisions made in offices, at cabinet tables, in places of command. Ordinary people cop it, but their humanity is increased as they take on the suffering. It's a message that comes out again and again in this book. I'm writing about Manning's themes and his techniques in presenting these themes. Let me offer a few more, very simple examples of his way of working. Sometimes he can be so simple as to seem inconsequential:

He was instantly aware of the presence of another in his neighbourhood, and always very keenly and definitely. After a few minutes, he met a couple of men in the twilit street.

'Good night, chum,' they called out to him, softly.

'Good night.'

And they were gone again, the unknown shadows, gone almost as quickly and inconspicuously as bats into the dusk; and they would all go like that ultimately, as they were gathering to go now, migrants with no abiding place, whirled up on the wind of some irresistible impulse. What would be left of them soon would be no more than a little flitting memory in some twilit mind.

Here's a moment during a kit inspection, which reveals that Bourne's helmet – his *tin hat* - needs to be replaced.

'See that this man has a new steel-helmet by tonight,' said Mr Marsden imperiously.

'There are none here, sir,' protested the sergeant-major. 'There may be a few at the quarter-master's stores in Noeux-les-Mines; but even there, they've probably got all their stuff packed ready for the move.'

'Then see that he gets one at the first possible opportunity,' said Mr Marsden; and with this indefinite extension of his original time-limit he passed, somewhat hastily, to a detailed criticism of the next man's deficiencies.

Nothing is going to be done, plainly. Let us move now to an incident not long before the final attack – final for the book, that is,

for it describes events of 1916, and the war had two and a half years to run. Bourne has tried to buy some delicacies in the Expeditionary Forces Canteen, which was set up for all ranks to enjoy, but the officers have sequestered it for themselves, and Bourne has been told to go around the back, where he might get some cocoa and biscuits. Martlow and Shem go round the back, but not Bourne! He gives money and a list to a soldier called Evans who has access to the canteen.

‘For Gawd’s sake don’t mention cocoa and biscuits to ‘im,’ said Evans. ‘You’d better go and take him back to billets, before ‘e starts fightin’ a policeman. Everybody seems to be in a bloody bad temper today. All got wind-up, I suppose.’

‘All got wind-up’; fear and acceptance colour the book; the men are dignified when they’ve got control of themselves, and most of them, most of the time, have this control, officers and men. Each of them is carrying a load that’s too terrible to bear so none of them want others’ fears unloaded on them. Here’s a passage about the death of Mr Clinton, ordered to take a working party to the line at night, and ordered to do so in a way that suggests, quite unjustly, that perhaps he’s been dodging the danger.

‘They got Mr Clinton all right. One of them sausages came over and blew most of ‘is guts out. No, ‘e’s not dead, they gave ‘im morphia, and took ‘im away on a stretcher. Well, if ‘e’s not dead yet, ‘e pretty soon will be.’

‘Who’s that?’ said Corporal Reynolds, sitting up.

‘Mr Clinton, Corporal; ‘is number’s up all right. It fair made

me sick to see ‘im. ‘e was conscious too. ‘e said ‘e knew ‘e was going to get it up ‘ere. ‘e knew it.’

Bourne did not move, he lay absolutely still in his blankets, with an emotion so tense that he thought something would snap in him.

Horrible as such moments are, the men can find excitement, too, in their position:

Immediately after dinner, a thrill of excitement passed rapidly from company to company: all parades were cancelled, billets were to be cleaned up, and the battalion was to be ready to march at half-past five. It was some time since they had marched by night. For once, too, they had some definite details: they were to march to St Pol, and entrain there for the front. It was very curious to see how the news affected them; friends grouped themselves together, and talked of it from their individual points of view, but the extraordinary thing was the common impulse moving them, which gathered in strength until any individual reluctances and anxieties were swept away by it. A kind of enthusiasm, quiet and restrained because aware of all it hazarded, swept over them like fire or flood. Even those who feared made the pretence of bravery, the mere act of mimicry opened the way for the contagion, and another will was substituted for their own, so that ultimately they too gave themselves to it. They might fail or break, they might shrink back at the last in an agony of fear, but this overpowering impulse for the time being swept them on towards its own indeterminate ends, as one common impulse might move in a swarm of angry bees.



I think that with that passage I can quit my sampling of Manning's writing. He's giving voice to those who fought in the war that he fought in himself. He's rendering the experience of many hundreds of thousands, and his writing is personal only insofar as each of the men appearing in his pages has to make sense of experience for himself. That's why they talk so much, so philosophically, about their situation. The things that they've experienced, and the things that are waiting for them when the next attack starts, are not the same as the official messages read out on parade or blathered at them when they go on leave and see and hear what's happening where they've come from, back home. The war means that home will never be home again for those who've fought. A generation's being changed, when they're not being killed, and generations that follow will be different too. Manning knows this, and he charts it as best he can, with surprising humility. He knows that where he is – or was, as we must say, for he wrote the book some years after the war had ended – was the worst of places, the most dangerous, but was, for someone bent on understanding the world's experience, probably the best place one could be to learn, observe, and record, so that some truth could be set down for those of later generations who become curious about what actually happened ... way back then.

## *Twyborn?* Tri-born? Or some lives as they might have happened?

Finding a way to read Patrick White's *The Twyborn Affair*.

*The Twyborn Affair*<sup>1</sup> comes late in Patrick White's oeuvre. The only sizeable works that came after were *Flaws In The Glass* (1981), his autobiography, and *Memoirs of Many in One* (1986), which, the title page tells us, is by Alex Xenophon Demirjian Gray and edited by Patrick White. The editor's name is given in bold caps, to make clear who's in charge. There's also a fragment of a family chart to tell us who Alex Demirjian is, and we need it, because names fly thick and fast in the 'Editor's Introduction', a piece of deliberately unaccommodating writing, with Patrick letting the reader know how s/he will be treated for the duration of the book.

I mention this aspect of *Memoirs of Many in One* because it's a book that goes even further than *The Twyborn Affair* in rejecting much of what readers might expect a novelist to offer. In *The Twyborn Affair* White wrenched the novel onto the terms that it satisfied him to give us, and in *Memoirs* he went even further. My focus will be on *The Twyborn Affair*, but some of its tendencies, some of its behaviour, may become clearer if we keep the later book in mind.

What to say about *The Twyborn Affair*? It's been a different book each time I've read it; it's only as I get used to it and see what it isn't that I think I may be closer to understanding what it is. Each

of its three parts is centred on a person known as Eudoxia Vatatzes (Part 1), Eddie Twyborn (Part 2), and Eadith Trist (Part 3). When it starts, World War 1 is looming, and it ends, a generation later, with Nazi bombs falling on London. Eadith/Eddie is killed by one of them, bringing the book to an arbitrary but satisfactory enough conclusion. It can be said, I think, that it doesn't much matter how the book ends. Showing Eudoxia/Eddie/Eadith has been its main task, and when Eadith is reconciled with her/his mother, there's nothing further for the book to do. The bomb rounds things off quite neatly.

I've mentioned *Flaws in the Glass*, an unsatisfactory offering because it offers us fragments rather than coherence, which White tires of long before the book has been achieved. It doesn't come naturally to him to satisfy the reader before himself. Indeed, I think that *The Twyborn Affair* is as much an autobiography as it is a novel. If we think of it as three lives that might have happened, many of its difficulties dissolve, as I will try to show.

Three lives that might have happened? Yes, and to some extent they did. Take Eudoxia. She is a foreigner – that is a non-European – living with a Greek in the south of France. A Greek? France? These present no problems to White's imagination. Take Eddie. He's Australian-born, back home with a problematic mother and a father who receives some admiration from his son. Eddie has been out of his parents' lives for years, and he's hardly home before he heads off to be a stockman – a jackeroo – on the Monaro: then, at

the end of Part 2, he disappears again. This section, showing Eddie as uncomfortable with people who are close to him and perfectly affable with those for whom he can afford to be indifferent, strikes me as being revelatory of White, the man and the writer. Most revelatory is Part 3, set in London, where Eadith Trist is running a high class brothel while not allowing herself – with one strange exception – to have a sexual life at all. Eadith Trist is White the writer. Her girls are treated tenderly, they show themselves, as do the various upper-class English people we meet, exactly as they are, and they exist within a most comprehensive and compassionate regard, however sharp it may be at times. Eadith is exploiting them, and yet she has a considerable feeling of responsibility, worrying as they don't for themselves when they are foolish, or likely to be. She cares for her girls and their clients as a novelist must care for the people in his books. I referred earlier to the bomb that kills Eadith Trist (the surname recalls the French word meaning 'sad'; I take this to be intentional). Bombs can kill novelists, but not their books, so in that sense the death is quite superficial; *The Twyborn Affair* is still with us today.

But why isn't it called *The Tri-born Affair*? It shows three lives, or variants of one. I don't know the answer to this question, but must assume that White means to remind us that there are two human genders, and doesn't believe, despite the evidence of his own life, that the in-between existence counts as a third. Perhaps I am wrong, or wide of the mark? Looking for an answer, I move to a passage in Part 1. Joan and Curley Golson, friends of Eddie/ Eadith's parents, are visiting France and have come across the

entrancing Eudoxia. Joan, who has at least some attraction to the life of difference, is fascinated, having no idea that the young woman who attracts her is in fact the son of her Sydney friends the Twyborns. The reader, too, at this stage, is far from certain which are the important connections to be kept in mind when reading this book. White sweeps such considerations away with an unusual passage, in which Monsieur Pelletier, a character we've never met before, and will never meet again, opens his beachfront kiosk at Saint Mayeul, then sees, at some distance, standing on rocks by the sea, a figure, turned away.

Man or woman? Monsieur Pelletier isn't sure, and is frustrated by a wave splashing salt water into his eyes.

*Aaahhh!* He stood arrested, groaning and grinning with anguish, frustration, astonishment, and some measure of fear, all trickling water, grey stubble, mauve gums, and a few prongs of decalcified teeth. Only for an instant his disarray: intense interest made it necessary for him to locate the swimmer's head.

Man or woman, Monsieur Pelletier wonders?

... the swimmer was making for the open sea, thrashing from side to side with strong, sure, professional strokes. It must be a man, Monsieur Pelletier decided, and yet there was a certain poetry of movement, a softness of light surrounding the swimmer, that seduced him into concluding it could only be a woman.

This may be strange enough, but Monsieur Pelletier, whom, as I say, we have never met before and will never meet again,

masturbates himself inside his trousers. It's a sticky act of praise but, strange or silly as it may seem, I think White means us to see this action as ennobling, as illuminating (in the way of putting a halo around a saint's head) the swimmer we are observing from afar. White also says of his observer 'There was no real reason why Monsieur Pelletier should exist.' I don't think I've ever read such a line in a book before. No reason for a character to exist? White goes further, comparing the kiosk-owner to Joanie Golson:

Monsieur Pelletier and Mrs Golson had not met at any point; they would not want to meet; they did not credit each other with existence.

It was only in the figure now clambering down over rocks, that the two might have agreed to converge.

M. Pelletier (male) and Joan Golson (female) exist only to provide contrasting viewpoints on Eudoxia, and White's book exists only to present her in the three forms already mentioned. Eudoxia, swimming, is the most untroubled presentation we will get of this three-sided person, because she's shown at too great a distance to let us see any of the troubling thoughts in her mind, if there are any. At a distance, she's as complete as she will ever be. We will be much more moved by her in her Eadith Trist version, but her complexity as a person and as a collection of frequently contradictory attitudes will have grown so great by then that she will need a household of sexually active women and their clients to portray her, at least in reflection. It's worth mentioning at this point how many times in *The Twyborn Affair*, particularly in Part 3, the central figure sees herself in a mirror. *The Twyborn Affair* is an

endlessly continuing look at its central character, the character is at least to some extent the writer himself; hence my suggestion that we might entertain the idea that it is an autobiography of a life – three lives – that might have been led.

Back to Joan Golson. She has an important function in the book. She knows Eddie's parents, the Twyborns. She might realise who Eudoxia is, and tell Eadie, Eddie's mother. His secret might be out. Eudoxia and Angelos Vatatzes flee their house in the south of France because Eudoxia, as she then is, wants to prevent this happening. Joan Golson also knows the Lushingtons, the Sydney people who own the Monaro property where Eddie is jackerooing. She and Curley visit the Lushingtons, and what does Eddie do? He gets on a horse and rides off into unknown territory, determined to be unavailable. Marcia Lushington has told him that Joanie Golson wants to meet him, so he clears out. Joanie represents, I think, the possibility of the bisexual young man being found out.

There is, however, another Eddie in this three-times-imagined life, and he's kept almost entirely out of sight. Eddie saw action in World War 1. This Eddie, soldier Eddie, is kept from the reader. He appears only once in the book, very late, a sort of Monsieur Pelletier in reverse, when he recalls something told to him by 'an Australian captain, long forgotten'. The captain, in his turn, recalls a sexual encounter with a French farmer's wife. She understands that the soldier, who has just come out of a terrifying action, needs her and for some reason the same is true for her. They undress, though her children can be heard nearby and her husband can't be far away. They fuck:

'It was like as if a pair of open wings was spreading round the pair of us. Ever seen those white cockies pullin' down the stooked oats soon as yer bloody back's turned? Then sitting on a bough screechin' their heads off! Well, like the wings of a giant cocky, soft, and at times explosive. You heard feathers explode, didn't yer?'

This moment of recall is no quick flash. It brings to my mind the man from Deniliquin, breaking in with a narrative he needs to tell, almost as late in *The Tree of Man*; the Australian captain – and why it *had* to be an Australian is an interesting question – can't stop himself going on, though White makes it clear that he knows he might be thought mad.

'Don't know why I'm tellun yer this. About giant cockies. You'll think I'm a nut case.'

Eddie Twyborn had to rejoin his detachment down the road.

'An' don't think I'm religious!' The captain had followed him as far as the door. 'Because I believe in nothun!' he shouted after one he regretted taking for a temporary mate. 'NOTHUN!' he screamed.

Why was the man from Deniliquin brought in to what I am inclined to think of as his book? I can say no more than I said in the earlier essay. Why is the captain brought in to *The Twyborn Affair*? Like Monsieur Pelletier he's out of the book almost as quickly as he's in. He represents, I can only suggest, another way of thinking about human sexuality, a way which is probably instinctive for White, but which hasn't fitted into the tripartite scheme of Eudoxia/

Eddie/Eadith. The sexual encounter of the nerve-shattered soldier and the farmwife in need of an orgasm which only a stranger can give her exemplifies something – a surprising, completely unexpected intrusion of pure goodness which ordinary, rational life can't provide, any more than novelist White's acerbic methods can provide it unless he breaks out of the narrative rules he uses to write his books, and surprises us, and himself, by pulling in a revelation from wherever it is that revelations keep themselves from sight.

This awareness on the part of White that what he can pull out of his usual hats may not be enough, so he has to be brave enough to look elsewhere for what's required, is, in my view, the surest sign of greatness in his work.

Let us now return to a point made earlier about what the book is and isn't. It is about a person with a male body who lives as a female, then as a male, then a female again. Very late in the book, when its concerns have focussed almost solely on reconciliation with the mother, Eadith makes it clear to Eadie that she is not her son but her daughter. This pleases Eadie.

'I am so glad. I've always wanted a daughter.'

The strain goes out of the book at that point. Eadith completes the handover of the brothel to Ada, her ever-compliant and effective junior. Ada, dressed in ways that suggest she is a sort of nun (White calls Eadith Ada's 'Superior'), will manage at least as well as the former owner. The brothel has achieved a continuity that the world around it has not. War will rage, but the brothel, we may be sure, will go on. Why is this? I think it is because White sees sexuality as being one of the lesser strands of life, endlessly

intruding on other things that humans do, but only occasionally assisting people to gain those insights, those attributes of spiritual balance, which we are all seeking. Or should be. White can rarely restrain his contempt for those of his characters who are not aware of spiritual quest. This attitude of contempt is never unleashed on the girls who work in Eadith's brothel. Their beauty, the youth of their bodies, lends some quality of generosity, of luxury and helpfulness, to what they do for the men who come in. Nor are the men castigated too harshly for wanting the women; Gravenor, who pursues Eadith for years, is given great dignity by White, who feels for this man whose passion will never be satisfied because he doesn't understand the secret at the heart of Eadith's life. All the finer qualities of his love – his restraint, his unselfishness, his willingness to comply in any way that pleases her, and his eventual renunciation of a comfortable civilian life in favour of the war that's engulfing his country – would be tipped upside down if he realised the difficulties Eadith faces in dealing with him. White's treatment of Gravenor is unusual among the many character-creations in the novels, and it is also a way of preparing us for the reconciliation between Eadith and Eadie Twyborn which allows the book to end.

So much for the ending, but what about the endings of the book's three parts, and the silences between them? We enter now the territory of what the book isn't, and must move our thoughts away from its qualities and toward its strangeness. This will not be easy and I ask for the reader's patience. This may more easily be given if readers search for their own answers to the questions I raise; your answers may not be the same as mine.

When Part 1 ends, Angelos Vatatzes is dead, so Eudoxia is free to do what or go where she will. In fact, she disappears. It appears that she must have resumed her life as Eddie, joined the army, and fought in World War 1. Her parents appear to have known nothing about this. Now this may be a convenient place for White the novelist to have stored her for those years but everything we know about World War 1 tells us that nobody experienced it without being marked. It's fairly silly for a novelist to ask us to accept the absence of what were for most soldiers the inescapable effects of that dreadful conflict. If the battles of France didn't mark a man then he must have been well back from the line? Where, actually, did Eddie serve? White doesn't bother to tell us. Eddie/Eadith/Eudoxia spends most of his life as a woman; this cannot have been unrelated to his life as a serviceman, and it amazes me that White can expect us to take what he gives us without question.

When Part 2 ends, Marcia Lushington has lost another child. This will be the fourth time this has happened to her, and in writing to Eadie Twyborn she is implying, I think, that the child is Eddie's even though Eadie Twyborn doesn't take it that way, and pushes Marcia away out of her even greater sorrow, she feels, as a woman whose son has disappeared again. I think only the reconciliation between mother and daughter/son at the end of the book can do anything to heal this wound, and it's noticeable, when mother and daughter/son reach out to each other that there aren't too many probing questions asked or answered. The acceptance and/or forgiveness that's offered is mutual, and there's little enough 'information' exchanged. Mother and middle-aged child re-bond in a mood of unconditional acceptance. This is one of White's loveliest

moments, so perhaps it's crass to query it, but, conventional as it may be to think in this way, I can't help wondering about the transition back from Eddie to Eadith. Where, when and how did it happen? Who assisted, who got in the way? What had to be sorted out, fixed up, disguised? Such things can't be done all that easily? Considerable problems of credibility would have to have been solved to make these transitions between the three parts happen, so it's not hard to see why White didn't bother with them, but their absence does leave the reader struggling to work out the underlying logic of the novel. I said, very early in these essays, that the novel, like the symphony in music, is social, and White challenges this idea. His novels are acutely personal, his rules and needs prevail over those of his readers all the time, and he appears to take it for granted that readers will put aside their puzzlements and objections in order to stay within reach of what he's choosing to give them. I've made it clear in earlier essays that I think this presumptuous of him.

The novel, like the symphony in music, is social: do Patrick White's books disprove this idea of mine? Perhaps, but I am more inclined to say that White's writing contains an insistence that the reader, the public, will do any of the adjusting that's necessary to make his books social. It's the reader, the surrounding world, that must budge, not Patrick or his pages of prose. I find myself wanting to accuse him of *lèse-majesté*, but Patrick is bold enough to assert that the majesty is on his side. Something about White, his books and their reception in this country suggests that he has found a hole in the assertively democratic fabric of our society, a way to maintain social and artistic dominance over people who

believe themselves to be lesser because he tells them they are. This is a throwback to the patrician origins he both accepted and rejected in becoming a homosexual, a writer and a small-time farmer. He appears to have believed that a certain grandeur was his natural gift, then transferred it to circumstances that were entirely new in the life of his family; transferred it, too, to a public which saw his books arriving from time to time when Ben Huebsch in New York and Jonathon Cape in London put them before the public. Most writers are desperate in their search for a public; Patrick never. This gave him a considerable advantage, and one he knew how to live up to. If you think you are superior, you must never show doubt.

The paradox is that White himself was racked with doubt. Three versions of the one life! A lifelong struggle to reach an accommodation with Eadie Twyborn, a woman that wouldn't terrify too many of his readers. Months of being loved by Gravenor without being able to get their relationship onto some basis of truth! Then the mind wanders through all the other novels, all the other discomforts and avoidances, finding great writing all over the place but peace and spiritual poise only rarely. White needed his hauteur because it was almost the only base he had for locating his talents; in *Memoirs of Many in One* he offers no spiritual poise at all, only the carryings-on of a silly old person. The thing isn't even credible in parts, but who cares ... when Patrick raves, his audience laughs with him, because he's won them onto his side. 'The novel, like the symphony in music, is social'; but what about when the novelist is very close to anti-social in himself? What will his novels be like then?

We have an answer in the novels of Patrick White, a self-hating man who did his best to relieve himself of the troubles buried deeply inside, and frequently did so, by forcing himself to accept whatever it was his great talents told him to write down. He wrote, and, amazingly, the people who read books in his own country, responded, as well they might; I hope that by now, after writing five essays about this remarkable writer, my own admiration is clear.

And yet something in me, the straight man, rejects the claim that White is our most special writer. I have already quoted Hal Porter in these essays, writing about the young Alan Marshall, whom he described as a very special man because, although crippled, he was, like a beautiful woman, too clever to be limited – trapped – by the way those around him saw him (her). Marshall may have escaped this trap but White did so only partially. In full flight he wrote superbly but there were only certain high points that he could rest on, certain peaks that he could make for in a storm. Ownership of White's world had to be restricted to White himself; the reader could be allowed to recognise features of this world but could never be allowed to feel that it was also his or hers. It wasn't. Is there something wrong with this? Yes, there is. I think that the intrusions I have already referred to – the Australian captain describing the French farmer's wife in terms of a giant cockatoo; and the man from Deniliquin's anecdote about the watercart (a Furphy, no doubt!) and the whorehouse – are, in part, a warning signal from White's psyche that something is wrong and something else is needed. That extra something is brought in by a character from outside to get the book back on its feet again.

This ending to the fifth of my essays on Patrick White may surprise the reader but I offer it respectfully because I think the man is such a phenomenon that we have been inclined to snatch at ways of seeing his work, some of us feeling – and some of us not – that an extra respect is due to an unusual genius, this respect being far better than the usual Australian indifference to oddball figures. I think the best way to safeguard ourselves against misjudging Patrick White, with all the difficulties he brings, is to read him alongside those other writers who've created our literature, and not to see him as something apart. Hence my placement, side by side, of this last essay on White with a second essay on Frederic Manning, another Sydney man, insofar as he came from anywhere in particular, another outsider, a weak man troubled by illness, a man who never married, yet enjoyed the company of women, a man whose mother was also central in his life, a man who against all likelihood became a soldier for a time, but – *but* - a man who adopted society's voice as his own when he came to put his experiences on paper. I am in no doubt, none at all, that Manning surpasses White as a writer by several country miles, but if you think otherwise I invite you to set out your case by way of responding to the viewpoints I've expressed here.

Why else are we reading, and writing about, our writers, if it's not to try to make ourselves understand them?

1. *The Twyborn Affair*, Patrick White, Jonathon Cape, London, 1979



## Judith Wright: from *The Moving Image* to *Fourth Quarter*

Judith Wright published eleven volumes of poetry; *The Moving Image* (1946) was the first, appearing when she was thirty one. It's an astonishing collection, mature in its voice and assured in its methods, both personal and social in subject matter and the outlook expressed, or offered as sharing-points by the writer to her readers. If I had to nominate the most notable feature of the book, I would say that it is the writer's certainty that her viewpoints will be available, accessible, to her readers; this requires confidence, certainty in the language being used, and this comes most easily to people sure in their social class. Wright came from a family that had been adventurous in Australian settlement, and even, occasionally, successful. In an earlier essay in this series ('Judith Wright: the basis of our nation? *The Generations of Men* (1959) and its themes reconsidered in *The Cry for the Dead* (1981)', I referred to the way in which Wright described her family's pioneering in New South Wales and Queensland, then, twenty years later, revised what she'd previously said in order to do justice to the aboriginal people's experiences of the same happenings. This was an extraordinary revision of her family's story. In writing about Judith Wright's poetry, I want to take a similar early-and-late approach, from *The Moving Image*, with its confidence, its way of dealing with the things it talks about, to her last three published collections: *Alive* (1973), *Fourth Quarter* (1976), and *Phantom Dwellings* (1985). I'm aware that this beginning-and-end approach will cause exclusions in my way of looking at her work, but I'm hoping that it will allow some

contrasts to be clearly shown by stepping over the stages where they developed their intermediate forms. *The Moving Image*, then, and the work of Wright's later years.

Writing about poetry is more difficult than writing about prose. Most of us are only capable of writing in prose about poetry, using one level of expression to deal with another. The OED, I notice, says of poetry that it is 'the expression of beautiful or elevated thought, imagination, or feeling, in appropriate language, such language containing a rhythmical element and having usually a metrical form' (1581). Notice that word 'elevated'; this is high art talking about itself, something that's out of fashion today, and no longer easy to find. Alas, say I, but I notice that I'm not a crowd! There's something almost insulting to poetry in talking about it in prose. Good poetry expresses itself so clearly and so well that explication is not only unnecessary, it's as fundamentally stupid as asking someone to 'explain' what Shakespeare meant when he wrote certain lines from *Hamlet*, after which we're offered something untranslatable like 'To be or not to be'. Explain! Explanations are impossibly flawed, or perhaps just impossible. I will try to restrict myself to comments which I think can be made usefully, even helpfully, and I'll try to make any quotations from Judith Wright's poetry as long and/or complete as I can. I do recommend, however, that you have her books beside you as you read so you are not compelled by any argument of mine to restrict your knowledge of her work.

Where shall we start? I've already spoken of *The Moving Image*, but I think the two ends are best approached from the point that divides them, right in the middle. With two poems from *Alive*, one short enough to quote in full, one so long that I can only offer bits. Both relate, I think, to the death of Jack McKinney, Wright's partner of many years. She seems to have been one of those people so well-married that she only ever married once, and, having lost her partner, never gave much thought to partnering someone else. The loss of Jack caused her to think about the house they'd shared, and the house turns itself into the life they lived together. 'Habitat' is the first poem in her 1973 collection.

You and I, house  
are in our fifties;  
time now to pause  
and look at each other.

She does so for pages, in tiny, short lines, minimal verse.

Bed  
you are dressed  
meekly in white  
like a bride

All day  
you wait  
silent  
for night to undo you.

There are twelve more verses as tight as this, then she returns to her start.

Bed  
you are dressed  
strangely  
in white like a bride.

'Meekly', 'strangely'; the sparsity of the words makes us aware of the change in wording; Wright is always economical but this is an extreme that's appropriate because her implied subject, or perhaps the reason why she's talking to and about her house is because it's empty now. It still contains Judith Wright, poet, but not the partnership that sustained her. The building is a character with a life of its own, and it's not unique.

All  
houses crumble or  
fall  
to the wrecker's tool:  
wall from wall;  
or burn  
one tall rage of fire like a tree.  
And I remember one,  
stilted high,  
white-ant riddled, unsound.  
Winds knocked it to one knee,  
then with a year-long  
sigh  
it settled to the ground.  
One old man lived there  
obstinately.  
We saw the smoke rise still  
from its wry chimney

till  
he had to leave. Or die.  
How will it be,  
House, with you and me?

Now, by way of concluding this introductory mid-point of Wright's career, I want to quote the whole of a poem which needs no explanation. It's called 'Finale'.

The cruellest thing they did  
was to send home his teeth from the hospital.  
What could she do with those,  
arriving as they did days after the funeral?

Wrapped them in one of his clean handkerchiefs  
she'd laundered and taken down.  
All she could do was cradle them in her hands;  
they looked so strange, alone –

utterly jawless in a constant smile  
not in the least like his. She could cry no more.  
At midnight she took heart and aim and threw  
them out of the kitchen-door.

It rocketed out, that finally parted smile,  
into the gully? the scrub? the neighbour's land?  
And she went back and fell into stupid sleep,  
knowing him dead at last, and by her hand.

'Dead at last, and by her hand.' She doesn't analyse this acceptance of responsibility. It won't stand analysis, probably, but she makes the reader accept that it has to be accepted. Throwing

out the belongings of the dead is hard, as many readers will know. If we are to go on, we must enact some banishment of the departed. If we elect to go on, we are saying, whether we care to admit it or not, that we can go on without the person now missing. This doesn't make grief hypocritical, it simply says that it has limits.

My space too is limited, so, having established a middle for Judith Wright's career, I'll begin to look on either side of it. She had found her partner, as no doubt her family had expected of her, and she'd lost him. She expected it of herself that she would go on alone, and she did. Her later writing is different from her early writing. Let's now go back to the beginning, or rather to an early moment in her career, December 1959, when Wright edited 'Poetry 1959', a Current Affairs Bulletin, a publication of the University of Sydney which a few readers may still remember (or am I showing my age?). It's a tiny little brochure, but it holds poems by twenty poets, and a brief introduction in which Wright says this:

... I shall choose to generalise by saying that most of our poets, both old and young, (with a few obvious exceptions) share at least one characteristic: they are more likely to choose the colloquial than the decorative in language, to use the immediate image than the image mediated by religion or literature or even history; that is, they are likelier to attack their subject directly than by implication or subtlety. This is perhaps the result of our traditionalism, of our tendency to work as individuals rather than in groups; of our youth, in short. And perhaps this very immediacy of approach is the reason for our poetry's being considered either vital or naïve, exciting or provincial, according to the taste of the reviewer. In contrast with the poetry of older countries, our

writers sometimes seem to be looking at, and trying to find language for, their subject as though no one else had treated that subject before. Ours is a poetry without echoes.

In case that sounds restrictive, I'll add a few more lines from the end of the piece.

The fact is that our poetry is in some sense a wholly indigenous product, and the critics who would like it to strike a note of deeper involvement, of greater sophistication, do not seem, judging by the work of our younger poets, to be having much effect so far. But, to think a little deeper into the subject, may it not be that the only real maturity lies in striking out one's own line, remaining faithful to one's own experience? If so, I think it may quite well be that Australian poetry is beginning to become mature.

That was 1959; here are the poets Judith Wright included in her survey for the Current Affairs Bulletin. In order, they were James McAuley, John Blight, Vincent Buckley, A.D.Hope, John Gooday, David Martin, Geoffrey Dutton, Nan McDonald, David Campbell, Max Harris, Douglas Stewart, Randolph Stow, J.R.Rowland, Ian Mudie, Chris Wallace-Crabbe, Laurence Collinson, Thomas W.Shapcott, W.Hart-Smith, Rosemary Dobson and Christopher Koch. Those were her fellows, selected in 1959; who stands beside her now? Many hundreds, no doubt, for our poetry has rather more echoes today (2009) than it did fifty years ago, and why? Because poets, Judith Wright included, have kept at their work and, though they may have been ignored, or pushed aside by the writers of song-lyrics, not to mention those verse- and thought-

substitutes known as advertising slogans, they have written their poetry, guiding the muddy rivers of our thought by the clearest and most eloquent statements they've been able to make. One has only to reflect on a few pages of poetry to realise how hard it is to make good statements, how much work goes into producing a few eloquent lines, and how much they're needed by a population that's forever presiding over the floodwaters of daily usage. Language is spread abroad like silt by all of us, and poets are one of our means of keeping the language clarified in order to keep it potable, useful, meaningful, viable ... or what you will. Here's how Judith Wright starts *The Moving Image*:

Here is the same clock that walked quietly  
through those enormous years I half recall,  
when between one blue summer and another  
time seemed as many miles as round the world,  
and world a day, a moment or a mile,  
or a sweet slope of grass edged with the sea,  
or a new song to sing, or a tree dressed in gold –  
time and the world that faster spin until  
mind cannot grasp them now or heart take hold.

'Only the sound of the clock is still the same', she says, and a few lines further on:

And the clock begins to race.  
We are caught in the endless circle of time and star  
that never chime with the blood; we weary, we grow lame,  
stumbling after their incessant pace  
that slackens for us only when we are  
caught deep in sleep, or music, or a lover's face.

Judith Wright was a woman of the twentieth century and one of the limitations the century imposed on those who lived in it was the perceived limitations of those apparently – but were they? – limitless concepts of time and space. In that sense the death of Jack McKinney may have been, strange as it may seem, a release of a certain sort, because the world had done its worst and her problem was what to do with the time remaining. She put that question to herself, and had an answer. Here's 'To Mary Gilmore', and again it's from 'Alive; Poems 1971-72':

Having arranged for the mail and stopped the papers,  
tied loaves of bread Orlando-like to the tree,  
love-messages for birds; suitcase in hand  
I pause and regard the irony of me.

Supposed to be fifty-six, hair certainly grey,  
stepping out much like sixteen on another journey  
through a very late spring, the conference-papers packed  
as a half-excuse for a double-tongued holiday;

as though I believed – well, then, as though I believed.  
Remember Mary Gilmore, her little son  
turned sixty-four, and bald? And Mary playing  
her poet's game as though she'd never be done.

This is my place. It isn't far to my grave,  
The waiting stone. But still there's life to do  
And a taste of spring in the air. Should I sit and grieve,  
Mary, or keep the ink running, like you?

Years have their truths, and each as true as another.  
Salute, Mary. Not long now till we know

the blackened deathly world you once foresaw;  
but now – let's live. I pick up my case and go.

Feeling humbled, I pick up Judith's case for her, and go – in the opposite direction, to a world at war. *The Moving Image* is full of it. Here's a verse from 'The Company of Lovers':

Death marshals up his armies round us now.  
Their footsteps crowd too near.  
Lock your warm hand above the chilling heart  
and for a time I live without my fear.  
Grove in the night to find me and embrace,  
for the dark preludes of the drums begin,  
and round us, round the company of lovers,  
Death draws his cordons in.

It's intensely personal and yet it's generalised, for war has much the same effects on all whose nations are taking part. War is a framework for feeling, intensifying it, providing, also, a context for the innumerable judgements that people have to make in order to manage their emotional lives in a time when life itself is in disorder. Perspectives don't last. Events far beyond our control make it possible or impossible to do things we fancy. Fancies themselves live endangered lives; warlike ones are put to use, reputations are made, heroes and villains define themselves, and all the other amazing things that happen when war gets loose. The first verse of 'The Trains':

Tunnelling through the night, the trains pass  
in a splendour of power, with a sound like thunder  
shaking the orchards, waking  
the young from a dream, scattering like glass

the old men's sleep; laying  
a black trail over the still bloom of the orchards.  
The trains go north with guns.

Notice that the word 'orchards' occurs twice in that first stanza; it occurs again in the second and third, four times in a poem of twenty lines. I doubt if this was a calculated effect; rather, I think, a natural corrective forcing its way in to re-establish something Wright felt needed to be there. I think we may take the repeated use of the word 'orchards' as the writer's heart wanting to reassert itself in any way possible.

We cannot leave the theme of war without referring to 'To A.H., New Year, 1943', a poem of forty-five lines, which is longish for Judith Wright. A.H., whoever he may have been, is dead as the poet writes, his 'scattered bones rolled on the chill floors of the shallow Baltic'. The poet wants 'to make peace with the remembrance of the insistent dead', and does so in a way that accords with the world of the pastoralist family of which Wright was a part.

Having you in my mind, this new year's eve,  
I would resolve my mind upon this faith,  
finding a meaning in annihilation.  
Since blood has been your gift, let me accept it,  
remembering that for spring's resurrection  
some sacrifice was always necessary.  
Osiris, Christ; your flesh broken like bread  
will be the rite that marks the heart's rebirth.  
These wearied fields, made fertile by your blood,  
will bear some richer harvest. Let the year begin  
and bring with it the autumn, the time of sowing.

It's interesting to observe that this ritual of acceptance, of peace-making with the spirit of A.H., to some extent contradicts Judith Wright's remarks of 1959 about images not being 'mediated by religion or literature or even history'; her confident use of the names of Osiris and Christ struck me as being amazingly forceful when I first read the poem in 1954 and feels as strong today. It is a post-Enlightenment way of seeing that she offers us. We're invited to revert, as it were, for a time to the ways of thinking of Christians or even early Egyptians as a *means* to reach the state of acceptance which one feels is present in the poet's mind for reasons which have little enough to do with either or both of the divinities mentioned. The healing, as I read the poem, comes eventually from the autumn and the sowing it brings, that is from the earth and its seasons, rather than from the numinous powers she names. I say this with some confidence because another poem in this collection, 'For New England' ends with a similar invocation of the land:

Wind, blow through me  
till the nostalgic candles of laburnum  
fuse with the dogwood in a single flame  
to touch alight these sapless memories.  
Then will my hand turn sweetly from the plough  
and all my pastures rise as green as spring.

Judith Wright was a woman of the land, and the land of certain parts of a certain country, and she had the down-to-earthness we associate with people of the land (the word 'pastoral' changed its meaning between England and Australia), and she could also find the whimsies and delicacies of a way of life she knew from every direction. I refer to the incomparable 'South of My Days', which

I won't quote here, having done so elsewhere in my writings: but turn to it, dear reader, turn to it and gasp, that she could, when still so young, write the anthem of a way of life that had fed into, and helped create, her own. You remember how it ends?

South of my days' circle  
I know it dark against the stars, the high lean country  
full of old stories that still go walking in my sleep.

There are not so very many poems in *The Moving Image* but they all have effect; we notice the aboriginal people, missing now, in 'Bora Ring' and 'Half-caste Girl'; the tender recall of 'Soldier's Farm'; and the contrast, another part of her country's history, between the disinherited spendthrift and the squire, his brother, in 'Remittance Man', where the formal roses of an English garden contrast with the heat and dust of the Australian outback. Wright's own inheritance had given her access to much of Australia's history, the pastoral aspects of it at least, and the confidence to bring it to life with that easy ownership which is part of the way of rural people, perhaps anywhere in the world, but certainly in our country.

After *The Moving Image* Wright gave us *Woman to Man* (1959) and the changes were upon her. Several other volumes followed, with a variety of forms of endeavour and experimentation, and then, as I said earlier, her way of living was changed when she lost Jack McKinney, her husband. 'Habitat' again:

When we first came  
the house seemed too big,  
then too small,  
then too big again.

When I'm alone  
it creaks like footsteps.

Houses and bodies  
have memories, but forget.  
Things drop through cracks,  
mice chew old letters.

But worse things happen than that, and the older Judith Wright wanted to save the world from environmental ruination, and from the madness of its nuclear abilities. 'Geology Lecture':

"We need some knowledge of the rocks beneath ..."  
Oh yes indeed, oh yes, indeed we do.  
The furnace of an old volcanic breath  
survives and culminates in me and you.

"The Lower Paleozoic muds and sands  
laid down five hundred million years ago  
contain few fossils." Life's obscure commands  
direct our blood, still salt from far below.

'Sea-lily stems, some radiolaria,  
and vegetation unidentified ..."  
We feel complacent. How evolved we are  
Who stare down knowingly at lens and slide!

"The horizontal layers gently fold;  
the sediments consolidate to shale.  
The last Ice Age ..." A reminiscent cold  
shivers our spines as we absorb the tale.

"During the Cainozoic lava-flows  
these ranges were built up." They wear away.

We perch upon them now in half a dozen  
sitting with gently folded hands today;

containing all prehistory in our bones  
and all geology behind the brain  
which in the Modern age could melt these stones  
so fiercely, time might never start again.

A number of poems in the three last books are fired with the same fierce prophesy. In 'Interface (III)', she starts off talking about whales:

Whales die of a sort of madness:  
They choose their own beaching.  
Watch them come in like liners  
under deranged captains.

Before long she's enlarged her argument:

If you mourn its choice, remember,  
not only whales have made it.  
Whole peoples, countries, nations  
have died in the same way.  
Galaxies may be strewn  
with staring burned-out planets  
which took that path.

But this is to mourn a whale –  
only a whale.

And so her poem ends, asserting one thing, having punched it into us that the opposite is likely to happen if we don't modify

our behaviour as a species. This was a way of thinking that wasn't available when Wright was thirty-one; destruction could be ascribed, when the world was at war with itself, to the enemies of our nation. Hostilities move, however, in a world at peace, inside humanity's minds. We can see ourselves, at last, as being our own worst enemies. When the Wrights began to settle in New South Wales and central-southern Queensland, the circumstances surrounding them – not to speak of the black people – were arduous enough to provide enormous challenges to be overcome. Judith Wright greatly admired her grandmother for operating first one, then two, properties on that tableland she remembered with such affection in 'South of My Days'. If you struggle, as the Wrights struggled, you struggle against something. War is similar in this; you have an enemy. Life is simpler when there is an enemy, more easily understood. Goods and bads are more easily allocated. Identified. Virtues are found in struggle, and goals can be set – to overcome! One of the things we can say about the poems in *The Moving Image* is that they stand separately from each other. Resonate together as they may, there's nothing in them compelling us to read each of them as an extension of the others. This is no longer true in the last three collections, where the vision has unified considerably and one poem sends our minds off to the others before and after it in the same book. I think we can see this clearly in 'For a Pastoral Family', in *Phantom Dwelling*. Part 1 is addressed 'to my brothers':

Over the years, horses have changed to land-rovers.  
Grown old, you travel your thousands of acres  
deploring change and the wickedness of cities  
and the cities' politics; hoping to pass to your sons



a kind of life you inherited in your generation.  
Some actions of those you vote for stick in your throats.  
There are corruptions one cannot quite endorse;  
but if they are in our interests, then of course ...

Well, there are luxuries still,  
including pastoral silence, miles of slope and hill,  
the cautious politeness of bankers. These are owed  
to the forerunners, men and women  
who took over as if by right a century and a half  
in an ancient difficult bush. And after all  
the previous owners put up little fight,  
did not believe in ownership, and so were scarcely human.

Our people who gnawed at the fringe  
of the edible leaf of this country  
left you a margin of action, a rural security,  
and left to me  
what serves as a base for poetry,  
a doubtful song that has a dying fall.

She could hardly state her position more clearly. She goes on,  
in the next section of the same poem, to say:

The really deplorable deeds  
had happened out of our sight, allowing us innocence.  
We were not born, or there was silence kept.

This, of course, was the silence which Judith Wright herself disrupted  
when she replaced *The Generations of Men* with *The Cry for the Dead*  
as her account of the lives of early settlers, her own family included.  
Life taught Judith Wright a great deal, and she found the writing

of poetry got harder as the years went on. Sometimes, though, she  
found something, as often as not drawn from many years earlier,  
that could give her a spontaneous rush of feeling to unify a simple  
statement: these are the late poems of Judith Wright which I think  
are priceless. 'Smalltown Dance'; how could anything be more  
insightful, more lovely than that? And if we go looking for last  
words, they're there, delightfully in 'Counting in Sevens', cheekily  
in 'Fourth Quarter', first poem in the book of the same name. If I  
had to choose, and I do, then I would pick 'Wedding Photograph,  
1913' as most representative of that ability Judith Wright achieved,  
for she didn't really have it when she was thirty-one, to make a  
simple statement of what I will call her state of being. It's about her  
parents, that most important but hardest of all subjects for a writer  
to write about; after all, what are we, in this world, and what do we  
have to write about? We are a continuation of our parents, we are  
a creation they've assisted in, and something which they've had to  
accept because they couldn't by any means entirely shape us, and  
we, in turn, have to find acceptance of them if we're to have any of  
that peace within ourselves which we will need for our writing. In  
accepting Judith Wright's parents as she gives them to us, we are  
accepting her and those eleven vols of poetry which were her gift:  
we can even join in for her final lines, speaking to her as she spoke  
to them.

Ineloquent, side by side, this country couple  
smiling confettied outside the family house –  
he with his awkward faun-look, ears spread wide,  
she with her downward conscious poise of beauty;

surrounded, wished-for, toasted by your clans  
in the last threatening calm before the wars –  
I look at you and wonder if I knew you.

Fathers and mothers enter an old pattern,  
whoever they are; assume it for the children's  
dependent and rebellious eyes. I see you  
not through this amateur happy snapshot's sepias  
but through the smell of a tweed shoulder sobbed-on,  
through picnics, scoldings, moralities imparted  
shyly, the sounds of songs at a piano -

through all I had to learn and unlearn,  
absorb and fight against; through tears, then, better  
remembered than through your love and kindnesses.  
And she, pointing out birds or pansies' eyebrows,  
gentle, fighting increasing pain – I know her  
better from this averted girlish face  
than in those moments death cut so short.

That was the most important thing she showed us –  
that pain increases, death is final,  
that people vanish. She never thought of that,  
her second bridegroom, standing there invisible  
on her right hand. Nor he of grief,  
whose laughing easy look was furrowed later  
by private and public matters. He lived long –

so long, I knew him well. Or so I thought;  
But now I wonder. Here in this photograph  
Stand two whom I can ponder. Let me join  
That happy crowd of cousins, sisters, parents,

Brothers and friends. I lift a glass as well –  
The grey-haired daughter whom you did not know.  
The best of luck, young darlings.  
Go on your honeymoon. Be happy always.

## A *Kangaroo* still hopping around in our minds

Lawrence's weeks in Australia; what he saw, what he brought, and what he produced

*Kangaroo*<sup>1</sup> has a unique place in our literature. D.H. Lawrence and his wife Frieda visited Australia briefly in 1922. They had a fortnight in the west, then came to the east coast. After a couple of days in Sydney they settled in Thirroul, thirty miles to the south, for about six weeks more. Lawrence began his new book at Thirroul; he added the last chapter of what is now *Kangaroo* in New Mexico, U.S.A., after he left, and the work was published in 1923. It's never been regarded as one of Lawrence's major works but some Australian readers and commentators have thought highly of it, especially those taking part in the decades-long discussion of Australia's identity, or its spirit of place, on which matter Lawrence certainly had something to say.

I first read it many years ago, and was fascinated by his comments on the nature of Australia, while regarding most of the book as a shambolic mixture of various thises and thats. I was fascinated by the long chapter about Lawrence's experiences in England during World War 1, but wondered what on earth had led him to stuff it into a book about something else. Kangaroos, it seemed to me, belonged in Australia, not in a Cornwall where people were either crazy about spies or so busy with harvesting

that warfare was beyond their ken. Funny people, the English: Australians, as Lawrence perceptively observed, were different. Or so I thought. Rereading the book recently has been quite an experience, and I shall use this essay to try to make something coherent of how it seemed to me, fifty years on.

The title first. It has a double meaning, referring to the well-known animal and by extension the country at large, but also to a character known mostly by his nickname, who is one of the leaders of a formidable if nebulous organization of ex-soldiers who have political aims of a sort. Believing they saved their society, they have an ill-defined passion for what it must – or more precisely, *mustn't* – become. More of that anon.

Lawrence is everywhere in this book, calling himself Richard Lovat Somers; Frieda has become Harriet. They know only a handful of people and for the most part they prefer to be alone, hence their stay at Thirroul. Lawrence, or Lovat, finds the new country fascinating, English-derived but having turned itself into something different. This is partly because it's in the southern hemisphere and the skies, the ocean, light and warmth are different, and it's partly because this new civilisation has only sprinkled itself, so far, on a land that's alien to the European mind.

The European mind! It occurred to me, soon after I began my recent re-reading, that the locale for the book was Australia – *kangaroo* country – but the issues of the book were European, in that remarkable way by which travellers find that although their

observations are of the places they're visiting, their thinking is concentrated for much of the time on the place they've left behind: their *home!* I've found this on my own travels and recognised it in the pages of brooding which intersperse Lawrence's reactions to the country he was visiting back in 1922, when it was new to him and somewhat different even for modern Australian readers. Much of what we now take to be our history – World War 2, the dominance of America, the rise of Asia, our country's liberation of itself from the European hegemony, the acceptance of 'the economy' as a new form of faith – hadn't happened, and was largely unforeseen. To read Willie Struthers' speech in Chapter 16, about what workers want, and being *mates*, is to be reminded of an almost forgotten political discourse. In one of Lawrence's most electrifying moments, Kangaroo's men count Struthers out. One! Two! They get to Eight! and then a brawl breaks out, three men are killed, the meeting is broken up, police arrive, and so on. The book's climax has been reached and its end is in sight.

My edition of the book has an introduction by Richard Aldington, presumably for the first Penguin edition of 1950, in which he warns readers 'that some of these Australian characters and the scenes between people are wholly imagined or imaginatively transported from the outside world.' What we read about the spirit (or appearance) of the place or people going about their everyday lives is real, he says, but goes on to ask:

Where did he get the vivid scenes of political contest between the Diggers and the socialists? Not from his favourite periodical, *The Sunday Bulletin*, for at that time no such political violence occurred in Australia. Probably

they were a transference to the Australian scene of the bitter contests between fascists and communists Lawrence had seen in Italy in 1920-22.

Later writers have questioned this, arguing that Lawrence, whether on ship to Australia or in conversation in Sydney, had picked up some knowledge of the movement later to come to the eyes of the public as the New Guard, best remembered today for the ribbon-cutting incident at the opening of the Harbour Bridge. Being in no position to comment on this, I will simply say that one of the book's themes is Lovat's attraction to becoming involved in the political life of his day – as a *man*, always as a man; men's politics create, and take place in, a world from which women can be excluded – and an even stronger revulsion from such involvement. Lawrence is a novelist, and it is flattering to his novelistic alter ego, Lovat, to be seen as an acquisition by the ex-soldiers Jack Caldicott and Kangaroo, the man Jack looks up to. Caldicott, I think, wants Lovat to join the movement because he will be a valuable, indeed an *emblematic* acquisition, while Kangaroo has a desire, revolting to this reader, discomfiting for Lovat himself, and ridiculous to Harriet, to possess Lovat by causing him to tell Kangaroo that he loves him.

Loves him? Lovat refuses, even though Kangaroo says that this refusal will cause him to die. He is already dying from an injury inflicted on the night of the political meeting, and die he does. Lovat refuses to say that he loves Kangaroo, just as he refuses to do almost anything else that's put before him. He refuses to enlist for World War 1, and he goes to some lengths to tell the Cornish people

surrounding him why he feels this way, when it would be more prudent to be quiet. A consumptive, he knows there's no chance of him being forced to fight, but he wants to make a stand over his refusal, he does so, and he has a wretched war.

This makes peaceful Australia all the more attractive, when he encounters it. He loves it, and he expresses this love eloquently, many times:

No, no, the flimsy hills of Australia were like a new world, and the frail *inconspicuousness* of the landscape, that was still so clear and clean, clean of all fogginess or confusion: but the frail, aloof, inconspicuous clarity of the landscape was like a sort of heaven – bungalows, shacks, corrugated iron and all. No wonder Australians love Australia. It is the land that as yet has made no great mistake, humanly. The horrible human mistakes of Europe. And, probably, the even worse human mistakes of America.

It's worth noting the word 'bungalows' in that passage. It may be the most-used word in the book. Bungalows are everywhere, especially in the early chapters. Lawrence uses the word not so much for an architectural style, although his bungalows are all free-standing houses, as for a feeling they give him of being lightly dropped on the earth, here and there, somehow embodying the casualness which he finds everywhere in Australia<sup>2</sup>. He is also very amused by the names people give their bungalows – Wyewurk, Torestin (to rest in), and more. Lawrence loves being near the ocean and he goes down to it as often as he can; there simply aren't many people, in Australia, in proportion to nature – fern gullies, the tor that overlooks the house they're renting, the Pacific outside their

front door, and the huge skies that colour at the beginning and end of day. Man is small in Australia, and it's something Lawrence returns to over and over again.

It is said that man is the chief environment of man. That, for Richard, was not true in Australia. Man was there, but unnoticeable. You said a few words to a neighbour or an acquaintance, but it was merely for the sake of making a sound of some sort. Just a sound. There was nothing really to be said. The vast continent is really void of speech.

Lawrence finds this quality of the place both liberating and disconcerting:

And with it all, toiling on with civilisation. But it felt like a clock that was running down. It had been wound up in Europe, and was running down, running right down, here in Australia. Men were mining, farming, making roads, shouting politics. But with all that basic indifference which dare not acknowledge *how* indifferent it is, lest it should drop everything and lapse into a blank. But a basic indifference, with a spurt of excitement over a horse-race, and an occasional joy in a row.

And yet, despite this fascination with indifference, with a passionless existence, with taking things as easily as the Australians appear to do, Lawrence is tempted to join Kangaroo and Jack in their mysteriously shrouded political movement. They press him to join. They want him. Jack imagines he might be useful, but Kangaroo wants his soul. As stated earlier, Lovat resists. He is, after all, a writer, and giving himself to a social cause doesn't come easily. It's

somehow unnatural. This pulling on the part of those who want him, his enjoyment at being wanted and the resistance he feels to being part of something directed by others, provides a recurring theme in *Kangaroo*. Jack and Kangaroo want him as part of a man's movement, and this is where Lawrence/Lovat is vulnerable. Men, in Lawrence's view of things, are mystical creatures. They are the natural focus of the human race and it's women's role to support them, to be their interlocutors perhaps, because it does happen that men don't always know their minds until they're challenged, and I think we have to say that women bring up in men – *man* – a phallic power that surges into them from that dark and unconscious region which Lawrence endlessly refers to as the dark God. This god has nothing to do with the object of Christian worship. Occasional references to Christianity suggest that Lawrence sees it as an overlay which has covered large areas of Europe, whereas his sympathies – his intuitive connections, I think I mean – are with the mysterious and persistent forces that the Celts reached out for in their worship. Lawrence has an off-putting (for me) sympathy for blood sacrifice. It's not something that he instinctively pulls back from; quite the reverse. For a mind influenced by Christianity, this being drawn to dark gods and blood sacrifices is like creeping to the edge of a pit and looking down in fascination to see what will reveal itself, but Lawrence has things the other way around. The Christian, in his view, appears to be fearful, somehow bloodless and half-hearted because s/he won't face up to the forces that are present in man.

Man. One of Lawrence's qualities as a writer is that he doesn't come from the English ruling classes, doesn't possess their fully-

protective set of ideas, and is willing to look elsewhere. He doesn't, in my view, have a very analytic mind, so he uses ideas over and over, changing them as the context suits, repeating words that please him even as he changes them to suit his changing moods. Kangaroo challenges him in an early discussion by asking Lovat 'The phallic you, my dear young friend, what is that but love?' Lovat/Lawrence is ready for this.

'No,' he said, in a slow, remote voice. 'I know your love, Kangaroo. Working everything from the spirit, from the head. You work the lower self as an instrument of the spirit. Now it is time for the spirit to leave us again; it is time for the Son of Man to depart, and leave us dark, in front of the unspoken God: who is just beyond the dark threshold of the lower self, my lower self. There is a great God on the threshold of my lower self, whom I fear while he is my glory. And the spirit goes out like a spent candle.'

You may think this mystical mumbo-jumbo, but it is some sort of reversal of the Christian thinking of his day, or perhaps of centuries. It was something that separated Lawrence from most other writers of his day, and it's linked with that openness of mind which made him a receptive traveller. He was curious. He didn't possess what is today called an establishment view ...

... and yet he was as obsessed as any other European and he knows it, and this is why he finds himself fascinated by Australia. The place simply won't participate in the argument that's roaring in his mind. It's why he's attracted to Kangaroo, Jack, and the ideas, derived from wartime experience, which they long to embody in the peace that's followed the laying down of arms. The violence of war,

and the simplicity of being in a chain of command receiving orders which, even though fatal, must be obeyed, is attractive to them. It's attractive to Lawrence/Lovat too, but it isn't an exact fit with his equally nebulous ideas of obeying the dark god in himself ...

... which, of course, is male, which, of course, means that he and Harriet are forever in or close to conflict. Richard Aldington's introduction sums this up well.

Lawrence himself was greatly interested in the nature of power, and many pages and scenes of *Kangaroo* will show the strange battle of wills between himself and his wife when, after nearly ten years of marriage, he laboured and battled unavailingly to prove to her that the basis of marriage is not perfect love, but perfect submission of the wife to the husband.

Lawrence does indeed give pages to this theme. Chapter 9, 'Harriet and Lovat at Sea in Marriage' is full of it. It does not occur to Lovat/Lawrence that women, too, embody something at least equivalent to the dark majesty/fearful god who enters men from below, the lower doors, as Lawrence puts it. Harriet has her revenge when a wind blows Lovat's hat into the ocean, and he has to dive into the waves to retrieve it. He was talking about aristocracy when this occurred and she gives him aristocracy as fiercely as she can when he has the sodden hat in his hands, standing in the surf with his wet trousers: aristocracy!

'Mr Dionysus and Mr Hermes and Mr Thinks-himself-grand. I've got one thing to tell you. Without me you'd be nowhere, you'd be nothing, you'd not be *that*,' and she snapped her fingers under his nose, a movement he particularly disliked.

Lawrence is fair-minded enough to report this to us, but on the next page he's back on the mysticism of the male, the altar of the great Hermes, and the impossibility of having two masters for one ship. Et cetera.

We may reasonably ask at this point what all this has to do with Australia. What answer can I give? Nothing much, nothing special, quite a lot? The modern feminist might say that the only thing that distinguishes Lawrence from other men – Australian men – is his capacity to articulate what's going on, both inside himself and in the conflict between Harriet and Lovat. Yet there is something distinctive about the battle of the sexes, as Lawrence gives it to us, and it is in the mystery – something he loved, and was always at home with – of the setting. Lovat and Harriet are fighting a battle they've been fighting for years, but this time they're fighting in a new place which Lawrence/Lovat finds strangely quiescent. The landscape doesn't give a hoot! The birds, the sea-birds, even the cows wandering onto the roads, aren't interested. The ferns are untouched. The gum trees stretch their branches, and their sometimes miserable canopies into that clear air that Lawrence loved without the slightest consciousness of these human arguments. The arguments – and how like Lawrence I am being by repeating a word, one use coming hot on the heels of an earlier one – come from somewhere else, they've been carried to these shores by European minds like Harriet's and Lovat's, and they sound differently in their ears because the resonances, the echoes that come back from these new surroundings, are different.

Lawrence's descriptions of Australia are wonderful, quite breath-taking at times, but his real understanding of Australia, his finest achievement in *Kangaroo*, I think, is in the way he makes those old arguments sound a little different when they're located in this world we know so well, by now, but which was wonderfully new to him, back in 1922.

Do we, here in Australia today, have our land under more control than those bungalow-owners did, in 1922? The country's more built-up, more built-over, than it was then, but do the same resonances hold, today? Are Lawrence's observations, his feelings, still true?

These are not easy questions. For my part, I think that we today are a little more at home in/on the land than the bungalow-dwellers of Lawrence's time. We've had eighty-seven more years to learn, we've had more bushfires, floods and droughts to teach us, and of course we've allowed ourselves to open up quite considerably the many meanings, implications for ourselves, of the ways of aboriginal Australia. ('aboriginal' – I use the lower case – was another of those words Lawrence often reached for, in his way of letting certain words become reference points for the changing ideas he had of what they suggested to him.) Even so, I feel, with Lawrence, that the land, the bush – the weather, the climate, all those things the Europeans found strange – are still the testing point for the quality of the ideas we use. Having been brought up in a farming family I am aware of the way that those who work the land know the insignificance of ideas – faiths, religions, creeds, et cetera – before a place which makes no accommodation of itself for

intruding man. Those who lived here before the European invasion adapted themselves to the land, and their control over it – burning, controlling the movement of fish – was modest.

I've said almost nothing so far about 'The Nightmare', the longest chapter in *Kangaroo*. If the landscape of Australia, its presence, provides the resonance of and for the book, 'The Nightmare' is the beaten drum which causes the landscape to resonate. It underlies everything else in *Kangaroo*; it is, in a way, the dark god of the other chapters, forcing its way to the surface when the book is well advanced. The strength of this chapter comes from the anger burning in it. Lawrence is seething. He's not a conscientious objector; he knows that many, many men are volunteering for the front, but he resists.

He would not enter the army because his profoundest instinct was against it. Yet he had no conscientious objection to war. It was the whole spirit of the war, the vast mob-spirit, which he could never acquiesce in. The terrible, terrible war, made so fearful because in every country practically every man lost his head, and lost his own centrality, his own manly isolation in his own integrity, which alone keeps life real.

I'll take the risk of saying that Lawrence's strongest objection to war was that delivering one's soul into the hands of the army would have made it impossible for him to write. What he describes as 'centrality' is, in my view, his idea of the precondition for writing. He wouldn't surrender it, he couldn't surrender it, and he fought not to do so, even though his physical condition meant that he wouldn't be forced into fighting. He didn't want to be anywhere



near the fighting forces. He makes much the same point a little differently on the very next page – something that is very much a part of his way of writing.

Awful years – '16, '17, '18, '19 – the years when the damage was done. The years when the world lost its real manhood. Not for lack of courage to face death. Plenty of superb courage to face death. But no courage in any man to face his own isolated soul, and abide by its decision. Easier to sacrifice oneself. So much easier!

His objection, then, is to the mob spirit; he blames this on 'the stay-at-home bullies who governed the country during those years'. He says, somewhere in the outburst of this long chapter, that what he's experiencing is the death of the *old* England, though he doesn't, for once, go on to explain this. Other writers, however, have said it for him. The young men who left their rural work, their mining and their lowly manufacturing jobs, the men who left their ships, their ferries and jobs raising and lowering the lochs on the canals and waterways of England, took with them the spirit of an earlier, more rural, less centralised way of life, and when they died at the front, or suffered and returned, that aura of the land's spirit which they'd taken with them didn't come back. England the nation had consolidated, solidified, that little bit more. Its expression would thenceforth come from its capitals, from the financial heart of its empire, rather than from the constituent vestiges of its past. Lawrence, self-obsessed as ever, doesn't say this but I feel that he senses enough of it to express it, even if a little indirectly, in his descriptions of losing himself in the farm work he does in Cornwall,

even in the odd incident where he, Ann and John Thomas drive into town and Thomas keeps them waiting before he turns up for the drive home. Where's he been? Pub? No reference is made to the smell of his breath. With an accommodating lady? Lawrence doesn't suggest it. Is he just being provocative? We're not told. Lawrence doesn't want to probe John Thomas too deeply because he represents the virtues of an older England, and the newer version is maddening, because it's caught up in the craze of war. Interestingly, some of the doctors and most of the policemen in this angry chapter are regarded as decent because upholding the old values. It's the new craze that's to blame. Interestingly too, Cornwall, with its Celtic past and its 'pale-grey granite masses, so ancient and Druidical, suggesting blood sacrifice' finds easy acceptance in his mind. He's not at war with the landscape or even its ancient practices, he's at war with war, because ...

... it won't let him be himself. He feels comfortable with himself in the Cornish landscape, which helps to explain why he stays there when quite a few people have set out to make him unwelcome, something that he's both determined, and contrary enough, to resist. He'll stay because he likes the place!

He didn't stay long in Australia, but he certainly liked it. He started writing soon after he reached the east coast:

Poor Richard Lovat wearied himself to death struggling with the problem of himself and calling it Australia. There was no actual need for him to struggle with Australia: he must have done it in the hedonistic sense, to please himself. But it wore him to rags.

By the end of the book, however, after the outburst of anger which fills 'The Nightmare', he calms, and the appreciation of Australia's difference, which was always there, even at the beginning, has become an outpouring of a different sort.

There it is, laid all over the world, the heavy established European way of life. Like their huge ponderous cathedrals and factories and cities, enormous encumbrances of stone and steel and brick, weighing on the surface of the earth.

He goes on. 'They say Australia is free, and it is. Even the flimsy, foundationless bungalows.' (So at last, with the end of the book just around the corner, he tells us what it is about the bungalows – they stand off the earth on stumps of brick or wood; they're not built on foundations of stone sunk into the earth, as buildings are in Europe!) He goes on, comparing the bungalows to Japanese paper-houses. It's the insubstantiality of everything that attracts him. There is an escape from Europe, from being European. Yet Richard and Harriet board their ship, they sail down the great harbour and out the heads, into the water beyond. He doesn't call it 'the Pacific', because that would remind us of the water pounding the beach at Cooe, the home they had at Thirroul. No, he says, the sea – the sea! – seemed dark and cold and inhospitable. Australia is behind him.

It was a remarkable visit the Lawrences made. I don't know if he ever referred to Australia again in later writings, but the book he gave the readers of our country offers a wonderful guide to something we should know better than he did, but it may be, as

most readers of *Kangaroo* will suspect, that it took an outsider to do the job we should have done, and will always need to do, for ourselves.

1. *Kangaroo*, by D.H.Lawrence, Penguin Books, Middlesex, 1954
2. For a description of the house that Lawrence and Frieda lived in at Thirroul, see *D.H.Lawrence at Thirroul*, by Joseph Davis, Imprint (Collins), Sydney, 1989, especially Chapter 3, 'Architectural Carte Blanche'.

## Instead of mockery, a many-sided scrutiny

Glen Tomasetti's *Thoroughly Decent People* (1976) and *Man of Letters* (1981)

At first sight the titles seem innocuous but once the books have been started the reader suspects that s/he is being teased. The name *Thoroughly Decent People* suggests that a defence is going to be mounted against those who might think the book's people were something else; there's an emphasis in 'thoroughly' that sounds like the correction of a view that's in some way different, and probably less charitable. *Man of Letters*, by affirming the scholarship of its central character, implies also that at the other end of his figure there may be feet of clay.

I say these things, of course, after becoming familiar with the books, but I do believe that Glen Tomasetti's titles give us an indication, right at the start, of the ambivalence which we will find throughout her two novels. I say 'ambivalence' because I find that, while reading these books, I am constantly on the alert for signs that may show me what the author intends me to think, and other signals moving me to reconsider what I've decided, thus far, were her intentions.

Now another difficulty. Who *are* the thoroughly decent people of the first book? Are they Bert, Lizzie, their children and grandchildren, who inhabit the book's uneventful pages, go blackberrying in the Dandenongs, and so on? Squeaky Leonard, who tries to seduce Vera, the oldest, and married (!) daughter of

Bert and Lizzie, is certainly not decent, but he maintains a veneer of respectability, as befits a member of a family whose males go to Melbourne Grammar School (his father, we're told, also led a two-sided life). I think Glen Tomasetti has chosen Bert and Lizzie Pater (the Latin word for 'father'; is the author of *Man of Letters* showing her hand as early as this?) to be representative of thousands, and the 'people' of the title is a huge swathe of the population of Melbourne, a city which long regarded itself as respectable before almost anything else. *Thoroughly Decent People* is a book almost without characters, as conventionally understood; instead, at the centre of the book is a class, a type, the way of life of all those many, many citizens who fear the criticism of others like them, and value the integrity of their reputations. Bert and Lizzie feel they are safe only as long as they cannot be seen as anything but decent, controversy needing to be kept out of their lives.

Bert is domineering, or is he? He wants his grandchildren to be like him, but what is he like? The key to answering this question is a long passage about the word 'never'. Never? Yes, never. I've already said that Bert and his family typify certain things, which is consistent with the fact that they are defined via a stream of negatives.

He dropped the tools on the bench and turned to lean against it, folding his arms, his shoulders hunched. 'There it is again,' he thought. 'Why am I thinking NEVER? Never. The word hung like a huge sign in the sky of his mind. Yes, it was

true he'd heard it over and over as a boy.

"Stop mooning about. That'll never get you anywhere."

"That friend of yours, Joe Costigan: he never looks anyone straight in the face. He'll never do any good for himself."

"She's never been the same since she lost her third."

"I know who you've got your eye on. You'll never marry her. You'll never be able to afford it."

Bert hears more of these voices in his mind, and his thinking goes on:

NEVER. The word was like a hammer hitting you on the head, like a door slamming in your face. NEVER. It was a training in anticipating failure, punishment, refusal. Every chance was the last chance. It was a training in standing up in the face of the last blow, in the face of NEVER.

There's a page and a half devoted to explicating this word in the context of Bert's life – all the Berts, hundreds and thousands of them, with, of course, the resultant effects on all the Lizzies, their children and their grandchildren.

It trimmed the abundant life in them to struggle, to pick themselves up and start all over again. It crushed imagination out of them. It made them unyielding, reluctant to give, wary of their own expectations, ready to take whatever presented itself, adept at the grab. NEVER condemned them to pioneering without settling long enough to have anything grow slowly to maturity, to wait and watch.

Glen Tomasetti's net is cast wide enough to hold all the thousands who think, or thought, themselves to be decent people.

Yet for Bert she offers one sad exoneration. He lost his mother somewhere between the ages of four and five, and to this day he's intuitively kind to children up to that age – that crippling moment in his own life – and after they've passed the point at which he lost his connection with the feminine in himself, as well as the mother he depended on, without, perhaps, realising it, after the young, the tiny, have reached that point between four and five where he lost himself, he doesn't have intuitive knowledge of them any more. They are moved, in Bert's mind, into the same world as everyone else, the world where 'never' holds sway as the best advice they can follow.

Seen in this way, Bert may be said to have done fairly well; it's how he sees himself. And Lizzie? How does she see him? Lizzie is woman, Lizzie is her generation, just as much as Bert. She accepts Bert's view of himself as central. He has to be kept happy, if only so that he won't cause trouble. She knows, as does Bert, in his hidden way, that she's the other half of that organism that humans belong to once they've accepted marriage and home-making as being what life's about. What else? Truly: what else? Don't we all grow up in homes? Don't we need love and support to give us a start with our lives? There's something pathetic in Lizzie's acceptance of her situation, and yet there's also a pride as stubborn as Bert's. Who else is going to hold things together, if not a woman who can be relied on to watch, and worry, and calculate, and save, a woman with enough in reserve to deal with difficulties as they arise, as they surely will? Bert's limitations, transformed, become the limitations of Lizzie's life, and they're handed on, of course, to her

five children, their partners, and the children they produce. This transmission, inevitable as it is, somehow drains judgement out of the way we see our social issues. We received them, we found them too large, too ubiquitous and too difficult to do anything about, so we handed them on. How can we escape what no one else can escape? It's like saying the country shouldn't be in a war, so I won't fight. Well, the country is in a war, there's no escaping it, so you have to fight – that's the sort of social logic, the overpowering way of seeing humans, that Glen Tomasetti is offering us as the way that Bert, Lizzie and all who are theirs use to explicate themselves to themselves and to each other. Their decency is social so society's rules reach deeply into their lives, their ... what a different sort of society would call their motivations. Their freedom, their expression of what's known as free will, is not a freedom to find a path of their own, but to accept the pathways that are offered to them: those that lead from their front door to whatever the world has in store.

And what is that? A job, which means a place in society; a home, where society's standards must prevail, however private the family attempt to be behind their drawn curtains; an awareness of their limitations, the compensation for which is the approval-sign of their decency; a holiday once in a while, and modest enough; and those little sub-interests known as hobbies. In the age of the motor car, they can travel, these Berts and Lizzies, into suburbs some way from their own, noting carefully any evidence that the standards of these suburbs do or don't fall below, or rise above, the standards of their own. Thoroughly restricted people, but aware that most of the world doesn't live on the level they've attained: therefore proud,

despite the bind they're in. Glen Tomasetti subtitles her book 'a folktale', and this surprised me when I re-read it recently. Is she, as a writer then, doing what folksingers do, in the presentation of her tale, her people? This is a tricky question, although I think we must accept that that's what she's telling us; why else would she put 'a folktale' on the title page?

What does it mean, to call a novel a folktale? What does it tell us about the way we should read? These questions could be answered in any number of ways, no doubt, but I think that in this case we are expected to think of the events, the characters, as being presented to us, paraded, shown, for the entertainment, perhaps the amusement, of those who read. If I had to differentiate a novel from a folktale I would say that a novel presents us with a story in a way that prevents us escaping from the endless choices of its characters, whereas in a folktale or folksong, the decisions are irrevocable, having been made by now. All we can do is observe the results of those actions, those decisions, and respond, in our reactions, to whatever the storyteller, the folksinger, tells us. A folktale has its meaning built in.

I wonder if that's what Glen Tomasetti was thinking when she put the word 'folktale' at the front of her book? Probably not. I don't think she would want her writing to be tied to any firm definition, as I have just done. I say this because Glen Tomasetti is a subtler writer than my previous paragraph would suggest. Take the moment when Vera, Bert and Lizzie's eldest, goes to the home of the Leonards. She thinks she's going to meet the family, but Squeaky has chosen a time when there'll be nobody but himself at

home. Seduction can proceed uninterrupted. Vera runs away from what's supposed to happen as soon as she becomes aware, but the reader has been sent a signal a few lines earlier, when Tomasetti is acting as a novelist rather than the folksinger she often was.

She walked up the drive and a gardener, pulling out dead petunias, gave her a funny look, she thought. Could he tell that she wasn't used to such places?

Squeaky suggests a kiss. Vera swings her handbag and hits him on the head. She runs for her life, rushing out the front door.

Her high heels sank into the gravel of the drive and she felt she was in one of her own childish nightmares. The gardener was down by the gates she'd come through, like the dog Cerberus at the gate of the Underworld. She was frightened to death and cut across the lawn to the other gates so she wouldn't have to pass him.

Why does Vera go to the trouble of avoiding the gardener? The novelist doesn't tell us, but I think we can say that Vera has realised the meaning of the funny look he gave her as she entered, and feels that to meet his eye again would be to admit how stupid she'd been to get herself into a situation so far from what she'd expected, but a situation which was, in some remote part of her being, perhaps, what she had been seeking? Whatever answer we may give to these questions, there would be a judgement forced on her by a second contact with the gardener which she had every wish to avoid. Escape was what she needed, not a judgement.

A good deal turns on interpreting this correctly. Her parents invite Vera to join them on a drive to Canberra, believing that a

break will do her good, or some such cliché. They know there's something wrong, or something's almost wrong, so, rather than probe, they feel that separation from the problem, whatever it is, might be helpful. Vera accepts, then she pulls out. She tells Reg, her husband, that she wants to stay with him. In her own words, 'I want to be where I belong!' In seven simple words she accepts both the rewards and the restrictions of being a thoroughly decent woman. Reg has to go and tell Bert and Lizzie about his wife's decision, Bert is furious, he jumps in the car to go and blast Vera ...

... but he cools down, and comes back quickly. The trip to Canberra is off. Lizzie was looking forward to going to the nation's new capital, but Bert was only going as a way of getting Vera away from whatever had been troubling her, and now that she doesn't want to leave home, the trip's off. Decency's been restored so what's the point in going? There's none, none at all. Lizzie's hurt, but Bert realises this and thinks of a couple of things he can arrange which he believes will please her. He spends the last brief chapter making these arrangements. He and Lizzie are no closer at the end of the book than they were at the start, but they're together, and their marriage, however stultifying it may have become, is still operative. They're decent people; their marriage is more than they are as individuals; to be a couple is to be something more than either of them can manage separately. The way of life is more than those who lead it.

There is a paradox here. Late in the book's first chapter we're told how Lizzie, helped by her sisters, climbed out her bedroom window to meet the young Bert, how she'd used a party game

(Blindman's Buff) to cause Bert to take hold of her, how she'd got through the window for several nights in order to meet this boy who was to become her man, until her father found out, and intercepted her: 'he'd pulled her to the house by her hank of hair and beaten her on the back and shoulders with his razor strop.' By the time we hear about this, Bert and Lizzie have been a couple for many years, yet they can still surprise each other, and us too, observing them. They are out driving when Lizzie asks Bert to stop outside a house in Clendon Road, Malvern, one of Melbourne's wealthier streets. He lets her look at the place for a minute before he toots the horn. Later, over afternoon tea in the Botanical Gardens, one of those things Melburnians will be doing on the day the world ends, she tells him that she stayed a night in that house before she went on to Geelong to find him. He had never known this. He had always taken himself so much for granted that it had never occurred to him that Lizzie, his wife, had made dramatic steps to be beside him, available and, eventually, married.

So the decent people are married people, and having reached that status, they are not about to undo the knots they've tied. Everything follows from that. They take their wedding vows as lasting. Binding. Life, which was full of 'nevers', gave everybody that one opportunity and anyone who was wise would do their best with it. Glen Tomasetti's account of this way of life, and one version of how a group of people had lived it, is full of delicate observations, balancing what things cost in people's emotional lives, and the silences required to sustain the marital agreements, against the satisfactions and securities of living a life inside the

restrictions of their class and time. For me, *Thoroughly Decent People* is a song rather than a folktale, turning a much-mocked way of life into a humble refrain which its people are proud to sing about themselves, not because it represents anything but a very modest level of achievement but because they can say – they can be aware, they can feel – that they made the best of the opportunities that were offered to them ... once, in a certain time and place, with no alternatives on offer to lure them in any other direction.

Choice was the temptation of a later generation.

I want now to move to *Man of Letters*, so this is a good moment to say a few things about the common features of Glen Tomasetti's writing of these two books. She belongs to that generation of Australian writers and artists who found it hard to look at the Australian version of the mass, post-war society with anything but contempt. When World War 2 ended there was a flock of artists who headed for a Europe that was no longer cut off. Fittingly, this happened at a time when travel, to England or anywhere, was no longer the preserve of the wealthy who had connected British society with Australia's. They fled, these writers, artists, singers and dancers, because Australia was dreary, lacking in imagination ... everything that Glen Tomasetti presents us with in *Thoroughly Decent People*, and yet her voice hasn't the same scornful, ridiculing tone that can be found in the work of some of our most famous, most celebrated, names. In Tomasetti's case, her penetration, though sharp, is un-brutal. She is at home with her decent people, amused by them, but preferring to leave them standing rather than to knock them down. Sandy Stone and Edna Everage they are not. Things that happen to them are real things; real things to

real people. Tomasetti does not belong to that category of artist who needs to show her public that she is superior. I doubt if such an idea ever presented itself to her mind. Even when, in *Man of Letters*, she joined the major movement of her time – feminism, the women’s movement – she shapes her presentation in order to make it both precise and clear to her readers what, exactly, Dorton Serry is charged with, and, if you note, she allows him to recover, at the end of the book, having begun the learning that he needs.

The first half of the book shows the unreformed, unredeemed, Dorton Serry: *Sir* Dorton, having been knighted for saving his university from arousing the fury of a radicalised generation of students. Dorton’s was the wiser head that prevailed. This is only mentioned in passing, but the Dorton that is shown to us, even when he’s at his worst, is a highly intelligent Dorton, able to notice signals and adjust to them, even if he doesn’t know what they mean or why they’re being sent. He’s an old-fashioned man, except that his out-of-dateness is mostly restricted to his ideas of women. They are peripheral to men, whom they should serve. Man’s imagination is central to Dorton’s way of seeing the world, and women are massively important to the imaginative life of man. He knows he’s in trouble when he returns from an interstate visit which has ended badly and discovers something changed about himself when he sits in his garden – his wife, Beth’s, garden – when he gets home.

For nearly the whole of his life, since the age of ten anyway, a long span of years, he’d been in love. He’d been in love with someone or other, always female. He’d had a person to dream about, to yearn towards, to warm his days and nights with what might be.

He’s in his wife’s garden, as I say, but this is no comfort:

The silence that frightened him was in his own head for there, in a space always filled with distant music, *the sirens had stopped singing*.

Dorton is more than a man, an individual, he’s one of a cast of thousands, an act running for millennia, reaching back to the sirens who tempted Ulysses on his way to a home he didn’t particularly want to reach. As everyone knows, the journey was more than the destination. Ulysses – Odysseus – was a man born to travel, and to arrive was to know that his adventuring was over. Dorton is fascinated by women, but what he really wants, apart from being taken to their beds, if possible, is to have them writing to him. His office contains a filing cabinet full of letters, which he dips into at times. Dorton is wise in the ways of universities and their committees. He’s an excellent chairman, and critical of those who can’t manage an agenda full of business to be got through. He’s helped women with their careers, because he knows how to do it and he relishes the fawning, the gratitude, that his skills can cause younger women to offer. They need him and he likes to be needed. He sees himself as the master with the delicate touch. The letters in his cabinet confirm this opinion. They’re satisfying, and reassuring. He is, in the eyes of the outside world, well married, so he’s practically invulnerable, until ...

Until the women’s movement shifts the sand until it almost covers him. Then he’s lost. This is the burden of Part 1 of *Man of Letters* – Sir Dorton Serry discovers, while he’s on an interstate trip, that he’s out of sorts with his times. He’s lost his touch. The



old tricks don't work any more. The trigger for this change – but only the trigger, for it's been coming from a long way back – is a film maker called Con (Costanza). She's beautiful, and smart, and Dorton would love to have her in his cabinet of letters, but this is not to be. He gives her an apple – as to a teacher – and she walks away, leaving us with the impression that she's left the book.

She hasn't. In the middle of the night, after Dorton has had an unsuccessful attempt to create another liaison with Ms Jean Wuthers, a composer – a *woman* composer – whose room is on the same floor as Dorton's, and who travels with him, in an upward direction, in the lift. They have a cup of tea, then Dorton, finding himself bored, says goodnight. But it is not to be. The phone rings. Con (Costanza) is below, with another 'lady'; can they come up? Dorton agrees, and they arrive, leaving the door open as they enter. Why?

A little earlier in this essay I raised the question of whether *Thoroughly Decent People* was or wasn't a folk tale. It's time now to ask the category for *Man of Letters*. Novel? Novella? Novellette? I ask this because the arrival of Con with her lover, a woman called Jude, is the climax of the bad time Dorton is having in his days away from home, and the climax, although very amusing, necessary within the structure of the book, and well-prepared, is rather arbitrary. It's the sort of thing that mightn't be noticed in a song or a story read aloud, but put down on paper it isn't really enough for the hullabaloo it causes. The second half of the book, Dorton's collapse and eventual recovery, are the direct flow-on of the events of Costanza's visit with Jude, whom she suckles, giving her breast

to her lover as they sit on the side of Dorton's bed. Dorton flies into a rage, hits them with a towel, rushes into the passage, crying out aloud ... and so on. Hotel staff come up in the lift, police appear as if by magic, Con and Jude disappear into the stairwell to walk down five floors, and Ms Jean Wuthers assures everyone – other residents have come into the passage by now, snickering about Dorton's women – that he was sound and sane a few minutes earlier ...

It's good fun, it's farcical, it's the stuff of revue, but it doesn't actually connect with the previous scene between Dorton and Costanza, where the young film maker appears to have at least a fleeting affection for the elderly gent whose head she pats. I think the writer has trapped herself here. One of her strengths is that she is not too ideological. Among the many points made to establish her feminist point of view there are also the observations and the complexifications that show us the novelist casting her eye widely for the details that add fullness to the picture. Glen Tomasetti combines the folksinger's wish to make a point well with the writer's wish to let surrounding detail speak for itself in whatever way it will. This, as I say, is a strength, but these two wishes don't quite match when we get to the climax of Part 1, the scene on the fifth floor. Con, for all her beauty and the attraction she carries with her into Dorton Serry's life, is a minor character used to make a major ruckus, and she's whisked off centre stage in order to let the reader's attention focus on Dorton's ridiculously compromised situation. Con disappears when she's no longer needed. This is acceptable, I suppose, if Dorton's given central status in the book – as he is. It is about the man of letters, after all,

and even his wife, the ever-so-capable Beth, is a lesser figure too, despite her rise, toward the end of the book, to national presidency of her native plant organization. Glen Tomasetti is very skilled at making Dorton's ignorance of his wife's activities indicative of his strangely switched-off way of dealing with those everyday things that are close to him. His attention is for the most part attuned to the singing of the sirens, that feature of his life which keeps him in love and makes life worthwhile.

In love? Endlessly attracted? Endlessly distracted, Beth might say, in her practically observant way. It's hard to know whether she's been defeated by Dorton, or whether they've fought each other to a standstill. Win, loss, or draw, with honours even? Perhaps the latter; it's one of the questions Tomasetti leaves open. She doesn't hammer her points hard. She leaves readers room to decide for ourselves. The benefits of this approach are felt when the book's been put down and we start to notice its effects. Both *Man of Letters* and *Thoroughly Decent People* invite us to embrace their contents and ponder them over time rather than make a speedy decision about their meanings. Both books contain humour that's sly, and delicately observed. The writer's invitation is to join her in a certain way of seeing rather than in taking up an ideological viewpoint. The books are no more predetermined at the end than they are at the beginning.

The first chapter is called 'Our Man', and it begins, 'Dorton Serry wrote marvellous letters.' When the book ends, he's writing – beginning – a book of his own. It's called MANY MEN HATE WOMEN. WHY? Sub-title: 'A Critique of Western Myth'. So that

net referred to before is cast wide indeed, and it reaches back, as we've seen, into the time of the Greeks, an almost mythological age for modern minds.

At last he could walk about with a little spring in each step. Marvellous. Pandora, Psyche, Daphne, Persephone, were names to match his tread.

Psyche was perfectly entitled to light her lamp and look at the face of her nightly lover. What woman worth a cracker would permanently take Cupid himself in the impersonal and mindless guise of Anonymous? He could hardly wait to begin.

There's more of this as Dorton rights the recently sinking ship of the self he's captained in a masculine way for the years of his life. Men hate women. He accepts, by the end of the book, that he's guilty as charged, and it's an extraordinary act of generosity by his creator that she allows him to find – with considerable assistance from others, it's true – his own way out of the mess. Only a few pages earlier, we may recall, he was driven to Custom House (proprietor Marion Custom) to be put through various therapeutic processes which it was hoped would lead to a cure. Tomasetti the folksinger, Tomasetti the novelist, isn't in favour of this way out. If he's half the man he's believed himself to be, throughout the book, he should be able to do something for himself. He leaves Custom House and hitches a ride home. Beth may be surprised, and yet again, she may not; either way, she doesn't have much to say. And Dorton? 'He was looking forward to getting back into old clothes in the morning. They were nearly ready to stand up.

A no-hoper's outfit with a sleeping giant inside. He had a sense of achievement.'

It takes him a little while to find his new direction, but he's reasonably quick. In the intervening days he gets the last of the letters in this book, and it's from Doona, a name which I take to be another of the author's sly jokes. Doona tells him she's begun a relationship with the young engineer who had a room in her household, and she says a few words about the thesis which will lead to her interviewing him the following year, if he's agreeable. She writes to him as if the relationship between them is in yet another phase, and she hopes this will continue because, she says, 'I still have a strong affection for you and hope you have some for me.' Glen Tomasetti has been at pains to make us see, throughout her book, that Dorton is a capable and even an admirable man by most standards, that he's respected and sometimes loved by those who know him through working with him. This is by way of mounting her argument so that it's aimed precisely at her target. It's a cultural argument. For Dorton Serry and all those who are like him to get well, to recover, they have to find a way out of the long-lasting, even ancient belief structures that shape the definition and thence the behaviours of woman and man. No less than that will do. It's a major task and it's no accident, in my view, that the job begins with the writing of a book. Dorton will write the book that Glen Tomasetti thinks needs to be written. In that sense, *her* book is only the starting point, the first step, for a lengthy process of re-definition. Men and women will be different, in themselves and in relation to each other. Costanza will be able to make her

films and have her young lover in her arms because it/they won't seem unusual any more. Dorton will have to give up the powers he's practised in using and let his qualities speak – attract – for themselves. There seems a fair chance that he will be able to do it. He's burned all those letters he kept in his filing cabinet. It's interesting to observe how Tomasetti manages this process of recovery. Guilt is kept firmly out! Dorton, sensing that he's in trouble, analyses his way out of it. Beth is useful, and Marion Custom makes a couple of telling points, but Tomasetti, one feels, thinks that men – Dorton and all the rest – have to work it out for themselves and then adjust. Nobody can think that this will be easy, but if enough people make the shift and start moving in what they think is the right direction, something will be achieved.

This, I think, is where the folksinger and the novelist in Glen Tomasetti come together. The book's points are made simply, even lightly, but the change required has been well-defined, and it's right inside the hearts of ordinary people. All of us are capable, and any of us may reject. Who's to persuade us? Not the man of letters, or even his book, which will probably be readable only for the minority, the tiny percentage, who know the names and meanings of the various gods and goddesses Sir Dorton will refer to. The battle will be won – was won, perhaps – in the minds and hearts of ordinary people, sensing that the times are changing for the better, with God alone knowing who's in charge but the people of a certain period feeling that change is in the air, and its banner must be followed, lead wheresoever it may. *Man of Letters* is an extraordinarily effective book, all the more so because it's so

mild, so modest, so free of battlements, boiling oil or all the other accoutrements of radical change. Laughter is said to be the greatest weapon for advancing change, but Tomasetti only rarely makes us laugh. For the most part she's happy to amuse us; I think she would have been happy enough if she could have been reassured that we were still following, interested, amused, getting the points she was making and curious, still, to know where they would lead us.

She only gave us the two novels but each of them requires considerable agility on the part of the reader to notice, first of all, the terms on which they're written, as opposed to the clichés of current thinking, and then to realise the implications they entail. Lastly, and Tomasetti doesn't press this on her readers, we need to march with her for a time, linked in thought, if we're to change any of the things she's shown us to be less than satisfactory for our lives. It's a considerable ask, but she makes her case well.

1. *Thoroughly Decent People*, Glen Tomasetti, McPhee Gribble, Melbourne, 1976
2. *Man of Letters*, Glen Tomasetti, McPhee Gribble, Melbourne, 1981

## Names galore, and the need for disguise

Brent of Bin Bin and the scrutiny of family

When we set out to deceive others, we hope also to deceive ourselves, but the two deceptions may have different aims, pointing us, and the others, in different directions. With this somewhat cryptic statement I start my consideration of the six novels of Brent of Bin Bin, an alias used by Miles Franklin for many years.

Brent was by no means Miles' only pseudonym. Many years ago, browsing through a catalogue of her papers about to be sold by Berkelouw, booksellers of NSW, I came across no less than fourteen names she'd given herself. These included Blake of Bin Bin, Punica Granatum, Plumb Bob, a number of others and, best of all, Mr and Mrs Ogniblat L'Artsau. (This last, read back to front, gives us Talbingo Austral, a tribute to her grandmother and the favorite place of her early years.) Talbingo, Australia; I drove through it one day, before I'd read any Miles Franklin books, and was enthralled. It was the most beautiful place I'd seen. When my reading of Australian literature connected these impressions with Miles, I understood at least a little of what the place had meant to her. Why had she made up so many names for herself? It's normally said that she was hurt by her family's reaction to the use of her real name on the cover of *My Brilliant Career*. This may be so; families are strange when one of their members achieves the sort of fame that family members classify as notoriety. Miles, it is said, was hurt, and wanted to remain hidden. Interestingly, she used her

real name for *All That Swagger*, and a fictitious name for her Brent of Bin Bin novels, several of which are set in much the same locale. Ray Mathew<sup>1</sup> says, 'Disguise is often the clearest expression of self', and I think he is right in the case of the Bin Bin novels, where Miles shows her hand freely while going through the motions of being someone else. More of this later, as and when it's appropriate.

There are six of these novels<sup>2</sup>, published in the following order, or out-of-order, as we may feel:

- *Up the Country*, Blackwood, Edinburgh, 1928
- *Ten Creeks Run*, Blackwood, Edinburgh, 1930
- *Back to Bool Bool*, Blackwood Edinburgh, 1931
- *Prelude to Waking*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1950
- *Cockatoos*, Angus & Robertson, 1954
- *Gentlemen at Gyang Gyang*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1956

What is the best order for reading them? Does it, or does it not, depend on the period of each book's setting? Or is there a theme being developed, by which we can decide the order? These questions aren't easy to answer. *Back to Bool Bool* is almost certainly intended to be the last of the series, if it is a series; one has only to read its last lines, ending with 'FULL STOP', to know that Miles – Brent – means what she's saying. But where to begin? *Up the Country*, which starts with a great flood in 1852, takes us furthest into the past, and is therefore a contender to be read first, but *Prelude to Waking*, set in England between the two world wars, with scattered references to

Australia, has more of an introductory feeling, so that, if pressed, I might favour it as the start of the series.

If it is a series. Did Miles, when she invented a name for herself, something she did often enough, think that the Brent of Bin Bin books would form a coherent whole, linked by something more than the pseudonym? It's not easy to say. There are times, in the six books, when a reader may feel that Miles has a plan, a scheme, and other places where no such idea is apparent: Miles is simply yarning, or 'possuming', as she says of her methods in *Up the Country*. I have little sympathy with Miles telling us that she's possuming. She seems to think that the origins of the term – the way of life of up-country people such as her grandfather Danny Delacey (*All That Swagger*) – is justification in itself, when readers, who also read the books of other writers, are unlikely to be so forgiving, or so patient. The test of a technique is not whether it can be given an up-country name but whether it works in the minds of readers, and Miles' technique in the Brent books is frequently faulty.

So what was she doing? In *All That Swagger*, her other and possibly stronger attempt at a unifying statement, she concentrated on a lineal description of the lives of a family – *her* family – starting with them leaving Ireland, settling in the south-east mountains of their new country, and creating a tradition as they helped, along with thousands of others, to create a new country. *All That Swagger* ends with an attempt to show the same family participating in a newly-grasped vision of radiant art-deco, progressive, modern Australia, with a new child on the way, aeroplanes in the air and the present as open to creativity and vision as the past. In describing

what is, for me, her greatest achievement, I am ascribing to her a unity of purpose which I don't think she fully possessed, though I feel sure that she aspired to it. She certainly, in my view, needed it, and it's this question of unity of vision which underlies and also undercuts the Bin Bin books. How well did she know what she was doing? Miles was talkative enough, but not particularly gifted at self-analysis, so let's concentrate on what she did, meaning the Bin Bin books she gave us.

*Up the Country* is where she starts and where her imagination needs to take us. She was always a woman of the tradition she invokes in this book, and she was happier describing the country as she saw it in her childhood and heard about from her elders than she was, in later years, describing what she saw around her. The passage of time adds a certain sanctity, in Miles' mind, to the most pedestrian and sometimes the meanest, even ugliest, events. Miles was always, I think, somewhat guarded because unprotected in her daily dealings, and was able to mount a consideration of greater moral complexity when dealing with things which had occurred in the historical zone behind her. Geographically, this covered the mountains ranging from south of Cooma to west of Canberra, and out to the drier, flatter areas near Goulburn, all in New South Wales; in terms of time, it covered something like the first three generations of white settlers. Despite occasional references here and there to the earlier existence of aborigines, Miles never really brings them into her thinking, for the good reason that she conceived of Danny Delacey and his like as taking part in a discovery which was almost a second creation. The pioneers had to be first; modern acceptance of the aborigines as having had the land open and understood for

thousands of years was intractable to Miles because it altered the meaning she gave to those first settler lives, heavy with hardship but triumphal in giving European man a new beginning. The Brent of Bin Bin novels are about that opening up of the new land, but also about the old world when, in its turn, it's visited by people from the new world who are adventurous enough to go seeking. Saying this suggests that the Bin Bin novels have a mighty theme, but it's one they don't entirely live up to: Miles' foibles and limitations pop up at almost every point, and yet we mustn't be too critical because her sheer despair, her inability to find anything satisfying enough to be a suitable development of the hopes, ideals and aspirations of the young people, mostly female, who crowd her pages, forces her to turn to the rivers of her land, endlessly flowing, as the visible expression of time, which wipes us all out, sweeps everything away, and is, as it were, the eternal enemy of the positive statements and achievements we might like to make. At once I think of Larry Healey, who had a sometimes shameful, sometimes tumultuous role in *Ten Creeks Run*, but is a different man in *Cockatoos*, where he is to be found on the first and last pages of the book, trudging behind a plough, unredeemed by any hope of achieving wealth, or anything very much, but simply persisting. The things he did in *Ten Creeks Run* seem, as we close the later book, to have been no more than pitiful attempts to escape the trap enclosing him. Here are the last lines of *Cockatoos*:

She left the kitchen by the back door and took the track to the cultivation paddock. Her father met her half-way, the winkers over his arm, while out of habit he looked sideways up to the clear cold sky and wished to God it would rain.

The child put her hand in his. He clasped the warm, soft little fingers in his hard, cold, work-roughened palm as if they were a lifeline. They went towards the house, the ordeal with Dot impending.

"Kindness! Kindness! God help us all to be kind to one another whether we deserve it or not," murmured the sensitive, weary man, but the little girl was gleefully imitating the mopokes that were calling in the scrub beyond the sheepyards, and did not hear him.

At the start of the same book there is a double-page spread of the 'Foundation Families of the Brent of Bin Bin Clans'; there are eleven of these families, each associated with a property name in bold caps, while the family names are smaller. There are scores of names in these family trees, they are the major names of the Bin Bin series, they cover, as already stated, a three-generation span of interconnected families, and yet the strongest statement that Miles can make, at the end of the fourth of her Bin Bin books, is the despairing 'murmur' of Larry Healey quoted above. "Kindness! Kindness! God help us all to be kind to each other whether we deserve it or not."

If that's the best that mankind can come up with, what can nature offer? Miles has two answers. Nature is endlessly rich, various and beautiful – a reinvigorating force – and it's relentless, a force coming from, and expressing, a very bleak, un-Christian eternity. This second idea appears from time throughout the six books and it gets its fullest statement at the end of *Back to Bool Bool*:

All around were deep shadows and enamoured silence where lately laughter and song had echoed, and in the

silence, enlarging it, the Mungee sang its immortal, its mercilessly beautiful lullaby to the boulders and trees, to the shrubs and ferns, to the rust-red road around the sidelings of the rugged hills, to the young lovers' moon and the stars. Oh, a sweet wild song that filled the fragrant night like a sigh from paradise: an untamed triumphant song as the Mungee rushed onward to the Murrumbidgee, to the Murray and the Great Bight, to trade its magic tale for that of the winds that roam for five thousand miles with nought to say them nay, freighted with mermaids' laughter or Leviathans' loves, odysseys of incredible feats of fortitude of men and dogs on the ice in the vast emptiness of the South – all the sagas of Antarctica's adventures, weird or heroic - from beyond Kerguelen, from beyond the Horn, from beyond the Bay of Wales, from beyond the Ice Pack Circle, from beyond the high dead mountains that guard the Pole, straight from eternity.

Immediately after this passage, having made her prose as orchestral as she knows how, Miles gives us 'FULL STOP': her Bin Bin books are done. But nature isn't always stated so extremely; there are times when it's more soothing: here's SP-over-J getting over a foul mood:

The aching immutable stillness had its influence. One might beat with rage against that for an eternity with no effect but to demonstrate human impotence, human insignificance. Nothing came from his outbreak but the refreshing perfume of broken tea-tree, heath, or bracken. The rocks crashed without injury to anyone or anything but a pinprick or two to the stately scrub.

The exercise relieved rage. The quiet restored reason. ... Stanton turned towards home feeling a little sick from foolishness. After all, what had he to go upon? Nothing. ... He was thankful he had said nothing. No one but his horse suspected what a fool he had been, and he was dumb. Far down the gully from whence the music of a creek ascended could be seen leafy bowers of tree-ferns, sassafras, and tea-tree, and spear-pointed trees of matchless grace indicating young timber. Above rose Mount Corroboree, black and forbidding, silent and still for ever, a dignified sentinel above the tree-tops – mile on mile, ridge on ridge of greens melting into hazy blues with distance.

He rode homeward steadily where to the west the white clouds were massing in mountains fringed with molten gold, of magnificent beauty, and presaging a thunderstorm.

These are the mountains, of course; in *Cockatoos*, we are mostly in the drier, flatter Goulburn district, nature isn't so lush, nor rain so reliable, the early settlers are only cockatoos (small selector-farmers) and they're forever struggling, they don't have the dignity of those who went further into the Monaro, and their children, or some of them, want to find a way out. Milly, of course (in *Up the Country*) marries the much older Bert Poole, but the young women who embody Miles' hopes in the later books are dreaming of escape, or have made it ...

... only to find a new form of trap. Sex. Men. Miles, like most of us, was a victim of her time. She was alive, indeed marvellously responsive, to the virtues of early settlement, but equally desperate for a way out. From time to time she shows us that the men of her places and period were aware of their limitations too, but they have



the land to work, and patriarchal roles to fill, whereas women can only bear children and manage households, tasks which some of them perform with grace and others with bitterness in their hearts. It must be possible to get out! Miles dedicated *Cockatoos* to Sybylla Melvin, the central figure of her own *My Brilliant Career*, an unusual thing to do. This is presumably because Ignez Milford, one of the book's escape-seekers, achieves the publication of her first attempt at a book called *NITA: The Story of a Real Girl*. I've already referred to Miles' deficiencies as a manager of her books; she is a deceptive and less than honest narrator. *NITA* provides a good example. Late in *Cockatoos*, six copies of Ignez's story arrive in the post as, we are led to believe, a complete surprise. Rubbish. There must have been a contract, but it hasn't been mentioned. No correspondence between author and publisher? No, because it suited the narrator to have the book arrive unannounced. Miles is in fact only intermittently the 'manager' of her stories. Much of the time she's snatching at things to offer the reader. A graver defect is her way of treating her books as factual accounts of real people – when it suits her – and slipping or sliding towards story-telling when that seems appropriate. Thus, from time to time she will 'verify' her accuracy by telling readers that what she has been talking about is still remembered today by the descendants of the people in her book, the quirks of actuality being brought in to support her fiction. I've already referred to the two-page spread of family trees at the beginning of the fourth Bin Bin book. I find this presentation exasperating, first, because it arrives three books later than it should, and, further, because its usefulness is greatly decreased by Miles' writing; names fly in

all directions, property names, family names, names of children, horses, features of the landscape ... the author assuming that the reader will *know* who or what's being referred to. It's a habit among people who live in a restricted locale to assume that anyone or anything can confidently be referred to in the certainty that locals – those already in the know – will conjure up not only the faces and associations of the people being referred to, but that they will feel about them in much the same way as everyone else. That is, that there is an already-existing map or name-sheet in people's minds as to who is wise (Bert Poole, obviously), who's a stick-in-the-mud, who progressive and so on. It's not uncommon for closed groups, even entire districts, to understand in this formulaic way, but alas, such a way of understanding is also the opposite of the way in which a mature novelist should be working, especially one who is handling a vast spread of characters. There is a contradiction between Miles' frequently expressed yearning for freedom and artistic advancement for her young people, and her management of characters inside the framework of the place that's enclosing – trapping – them. A wiser, subtler, writer than Miles Franklin would be aware of this dichotomy and manage it better.

Occasionally – let me backtrack a little, even contradict myself – Miles proves me wrong. I instance the very last chapter of *Ten Creeks Run*. Miles has spent twenty one chapters showing us the tightly restricted way of life of her region, with its stifled romances, formulaic marriages, and overpoweringly Scottish notions of anti-sexual respectability threaded through everything that happens between men and women, and she has brought us to the point of

making us, like the young women of the six books, despair of ever finding a way out, when she ... I think I have to say she amazes us. Chapter XXII begins with the announcement that Great-grandma Mazere has died. This last chapter puts her to rest, and it does more: it solves – temporarily – Miles' problem as a novelist. Miles, as we know, never married, never had children. She was an outsider, an exception, to the very way of life she's famous for chronicling, in which marriage, the bearing of children, the narrative of families, the continuity of generations, are the stuff of life. Sexuality is continuity however much difficulty Miles had in accepting it. She knows it, and she expresses how it works – for everyone but herself and those young women and the occasional poetically inclined male of similar mind – for those of the region which was her actual and her literary home. Sexuality is continuity, sexuality is life. In an earlier essay I pointed out how obvious this was to the black people of *Coonardoo*. It never occurred to those black people to deny the obvious but the Scottish and other settlers of southern New South Wales accepted the obvious either by denial or by stern control. Things had to be managed at every turn. There's chaperonage everywhere. Nobody gets in a gig or a carriage, nobody sits at table, without concern for who will be close to whom. People seek secrecy, and there's someone listening, watching from out of sight, somewhere. For every letter that's delivered there's half a dozen people speculating about the contents. In *Ten Creeks Run* Miles shows this endless speculation – spying, really – as the basis of public opinion in her district. There's hardly anything else. She gives us pages of this gossiping as her way of showing us the context for the personal

lives of her characters. Indeed, it's a characteristic of her books, and I'm not sure whether this is a weakness, a strength or simply a truth of her Bin Bin books, that the distinction between 'characters' and background people is hardly drawn at all. Everyone's connected, everyone's a part of public opinion, and the distinction between private thought and public opinion is so ill-drawn, so hazy, that it's hard to see how anyone could manage their lives according to what we, today, are inclined to call inner truths. It's such a hard world to live in, and the hardest role of all, at least in Miles' view, is that of the young woman who doesn't want her life simplified by an early marriage followed by children and the management of a household. In this sense Miles' problem is everyone's problem, but it's also the problem of every chapter of her books. She is herself a restless, dissatisfied person in the books, every one.

Then she amazes us with Chapter XXII of *Ten Creeks Run*. How does she do it? With a death. Death is part of life, says the cliché; Miles turns it into summation. The arrival of a death, especially a belated one, makes us aware, fully appreciative, of a life. Great-grandma Mazere's husband had died twenty five years earlier, 'and every Christmas since, a bumper gathering had been rallied on the slogan "It might be Grandma's last." It was a family, nay a town, joke.' This death of old Mrs Mazere has the effect of casting itself back over the events of earlier chapters and changing the way we feel about them; death sharpens the way we see life, heightens it, makes us at least partially accept things we'd previously found distasteful. The death of old Mrs Mazere, and Miles' handling of it, her use of it as a novelist, changes the way we read her books,

most especially the way that the early death of Emily Mazere, who drowned, young and beautiful, on the eve of her wedding, is threaded through the six books as perhaps the most significant thing that is to happen in the lot of them – series or no series.

Emily is not so much the principal character of the books – no one person is that – as their guiding beacon. It may seem to us that she misses out on life, or perhaps evades it, by dying young; Miles, I'm sure, no matter how much she over-used Emily to urge a way of seeing on the unwilling reader, wants us to read the books in a way that accepts the death as one of the ways – perhaps, for a beautiful young woman, it may even be the best – of living. The life cut short may be seen as one where life's miserable or pedestrian features never overwhelm the beauty. The whole series is about being young, and hoping, striving, even desperately, to preserve the qualities which make youth golden and turn them, if possible, into something whereby they are consummated – a word I use un-sexually – by artistic expression. This, I think, explains the odd way in which Miles refuses to let Ignez be proud of the publication of Nita; she's more concerned to develop herself as a singer. At once our minds jump forward to *Back to Bool Bool*, the book that makes the group a series if it is one. How does it end? Mollye Brennan, Madame Austru, returns to the district of her birth, world-famous, an idol for her home people as she is in the world's opera houses, and she sings! A few pages later, the river that claimed Emily Mazere all those hundreds of pages ago claims Nat Horan, a young man whose understanding, Miles feels she has shown us, will connect him in our reading with the earlier Emily: both have died

young. Yet this second death, three generations later, is coupled, as Emily's death was not, with a concert which Miles offers as the musical balance to what's happened in the Fish Hole. Life has been fulfilled, death has reasserted itself, Miles bangs in those last two words, FULL STOP, where, for one or two of the earlier books, she could only offer INTERVAL.

This is the double assertion she wanted to make. Miles is an assertive writer, anxious not to allow the reader any mistake about what she intends. This demands, of course, that she herself be crystal clear about her purposes, and she isn't. Nonetheless, I think the way to read her works is to look for signposts. Miles is not inclined to let us draw our own conclusions. She is, as I've said a number of times, very directive. Shortly after the middle of *Cockatoos*, Ignez Milford (connected by marriage to the Mazerers) gets – escapes – to Sydney; her Uncle Raymond meets her at the station, but their way is blocked by an accident which results in 'a female form' lying on the tram tracks. Ignez is agitated, but Uncle Raymond (one of the Pooles) says, 'Keep cool, my dear. It's no one of any consequence.' It is, as we discover over the next seventy pages or so, a prostitute; Uncle Raymond refers to her as a 'fallen woman' who 'was intoxicated or she wouldn't have been out so early'. There is then a short but fierce exchange between Raymond Poole and Ignez Milford, the writer who's also a singer and a good pianist too, in which the man shows that he accepts the dichotomy of respectable and fallen women, and that the latter variety are, regrettably of course, *necessary*. Ignez, seething, and shaken, falls silent. This incident shadows the rest of the book. Ignez is a young

woman reaching out for the next stages of her life, searching for outlets for the creative, expressive side of herself, and the death of the prostitute (we're told several chapters later that she died) is a warning about the terms on which life is predicated. What does Uncle Raymond say about this?

"It's useless to kick against human nature. You must understand that men are not like women in this matter, and it can never be different. I for one wouldn't wish it to be – it's deuced pleasantly arranged as it is."

Miles has made her point powerfully, but a little too strongly for her own good. Writers, in my view, shouldn't be hectoring their readers, and this incident, and the way it's used, make us aware that Miles lacks the assurance to feel certain of how we will react to what she gives us. It's not that she doesn't have the right to use the incident, or any that suits her purposes, but that the drunken woman, now dead, confirms Miles in her conviction – her authorial stance – that Ignez, and by extension, any sensitive woman, can only get away from the horrible side of life – where men may be found heavily over-represented – through art. Art is thus turned, in my view, from life's expression, perhaps its glory, to another of those many forms of escape, such as gambling. This is one of those self-created problems which abound in Miles' work.

So what are we to think of the Bin Bin books? This depends on how we see them, and there are four ways that I can think of. We may treat them as historical documents, portraying the squatter and selector groups; if we see them this way, their value is obvious and we don't have to bother ourselves too deeply about their aesthetics

or what they lack in craftsmanship. Or, we may see them as an account of Miles' own struggles to get herself out of something which she both loved yet found restrictive; this is the reading most attractive to me. We may, in our displeasure, see them as little more than the shallow novelettes she herself disparaged (see Chapter V of *Ten Creeks Run*). Or we may take them on the terms they offer us and examine them as studies of women wanting, first, to get away, and then to achieve what they've most desired. If we see them thus, the most flattering of the four ways I've suggested, they disappoint us terribly because they offer so little. It seems that those who appeared to escape barely escaped at all. Ray Mathew, whom I've already referred to, sees Miles as a woman locked in the nineteenth century she rebels against. 'It is those mental conventions, that period's thinking which hampers all attempts to deal with later periods in her fiction. For Miles Franklin nothing – from a literary point of view – happened in her life after the publication of *My Brilliant Career* in 1901.'<sup>1</sup>

Let us take a look at the women who appear to escape. Emily Mazere is first, and she does it by drowning, so we can hardly expect others to follow. Ignez escapes, and Freda, and there is also Bernice Gaylord, in *Gentlemen of Gyang Gyang*, who has been the lover (as far as one can tell about such things in a Miles Franklin story) of a man called Vorotnikoff. Everything we're told about this man, up to and including his name, is directive of our reaction; Bernice returns to Australia, and she paints. Anyone who has ever known, and loved, the high country of the Monaro would agree that there is much for an artist to do there, but Bernice's subject

matter, as described by Brent of Bin Bin, can only make one wince. So appreciative are the men of Sylvester Labosseer's station that Bernice, whose first painting was of a group of men working at their commonplace functions, or hobbies, that the artist declares that she will next paint someone's dog! She's painted in France, she's been to the great galleries of Europe, and she chooses a dog, a dog, a dog! Miles has no idea about painting, and precious little of music either. Dame Nellie Melba, who gains a mention or two in the Bin Bin books, is reputed to have advised a fellow singer preparing to visit Australia, 'Sing'em muck', and I have to say that when Miles is talking about the arts she barely knows muck from anything else. She may scorn the providers (and readers?) of novelettes, but her own thinking, her taste, are hardly any higher, for much of the time. And if we turn to her understanding of her own art – writing – we have only to examine some of the tricks of events being made to happen or not happen in *Gentlemen at Gyang Gyang* to decide that she's frequently as bad as those she affected to scorn. I find myself reaching back to those rivers flowing endlessly as time, those cold blasts from the pole, reminding us of the limits to our lives, in order to get back some respect for this writer.

Let us remain a little longer with Ignez and Freda. The later pages of *Cockatoos* sustain the hope that they will find something suitable for their talents in another land, but *Gentlemen of Gyang Gyang* gives us only the *return* of Bernice Gaylord, disappointing to this reader. *Back to Bool Bool* is the test case. It begins at sea, following two ships as they head for Australia. The better class boat is bringing Madame Austras, who is both one of the Brennans of

Bool Bool and a look-alike for Nellie Melba. The crowd on the lesser ship includes Dick Mazere, who has by now a tiny reputation as a poet, and a Miss Timson who turns out to be Freda Healey. Dick has known her only by this adopted name and she has known him as Mr Meyers because the handwritten label on his deckchair has confused people. It's a matter of no importance but it's somehow indicative of Brent the writer that he, as much as Miles Franklin, his creator, likes to deceive us via names.

After the ships, it's Sydney, and then, after a certain amount of travel in the district where they all come from, it's back to Bool Bool. It's Brent's intention that we should see this as art arriving, appropriately but at last, in Bool Bool. The district is having a 'back to'. In what we might term an act of reverse-globalisation, those who've been away are returning to the little place they've come from. Madame Austras, Mollye Brennan, brings a huge excitement with her, but the others acknowledge, one way or another, that they belong to the place where they began. This is both true, and utter rubbish; it's all a matter of the terms and in a Miles Franklin book, it's the author who dictates, or tries to dictate, the terms. Freda, Dick, Bernice, Ignez and even Mollye Brennan are shown to us on Bool Bool's terms, or at least those of Sydney, not of London, Vienna, Paris and the rest. The viewpoint isn't adjusted so we can see Bool Bool from afar. So what lay behind the restlessness of the earlier books? What happened inside the souls of those who'd wanted to get away, once they reached the distant places they'd longed to see? What were their experiences and how did they change them, these runaways from Goulburn, the Monaro, Jindabyne, Cooma and

Dalgety? If a person had been formulated, shaped, in mountainous, outback places, how did they stand up when they reached the outside world? These are questions that the Bin Bin books appear to raise, and the reader can't help but expect some answers, and not of the Vorotnikoff-cliché variety, either.

Answers there are few. Miles doesn't give them. Instead we are treated to Blanche following the 'artists', breaking in on them, accusing them, forever wrenching the discussion, the reader's consideration, back to the wretched, localised terms we know so well from the earlier books. Blanche is such a font of misery that I find myself blaming the other characters for not walking out of the book. How can they tolerate being with her? Miles, if she only knew it, has an important point to make. When Governor Phillip raised the flag over the first white settlement in Australia, the settlement was English. It remained so for many years, but as the years rolled on, children were born to the colonists, the settlement(s) took on characteristics that belonged to the places where they were, not where they'd come from. This formation of an Australian identity was most noticeable among the under-educated and under-privileged. Wealthier people, those with aspirations to show their achievement, had to make themselves resemble, in some way and to some degree, their equivalents in the British Isles. It may be said that for a certain period of Australia's history – choose your own dates – our society lacked a top. The upper reaches of social life were either imitative or simply non-existent, unless you 'returned' to England. Many wealthy Australian families felt they had to take some part in the life of London, even perhaps the court

of the royal family, if their lives were to be fulfilled. (I'm thinking of the Whites, particularly of Patrick's mother – but there were whole classes of such people in the wealthier cities of Australia, even up to World War 2.) The people of Miles Franklin's books, and I include those of Bin Bin, are in an interesting position in regard to this gradual displacement from English society and the development of a self-sufficient Australia which no longer felt that something important was missing from its life. The battling selectors of Goulburn and the squatters of the Monaro, often battling just as hard, were too remote from capital cities to enjoy such social life as was offering there, so they had to make their own. Sometimes they did and sometimes they couldn't. Certain of Australia's writers concentrated on the poorer classes' struggle to make a life, but Miles (incorporating Brent) didn't have the knockabout humour of a Steele Rudd or the wide sympathy of a Henry Lawson. She had pride in her origins and a powerful commitment to show the classes she came from as she understood them, but some necessary element of detachment was missing from her artistic make-up. To put it as simply as I can, I don't think Miles ever found peace with herself, so she couldn't develop the calm, all-encompassing voice that her subject matter demands. Reading *Back to Bool Bool*, I feel that the author is as frustrated as I am by the endless, self-justificatory whining of Blanche, but Miles (Brent) has found no way to silence such people. She is still, to some degree, at their mercy and under their control. To me it is no accident that Blanche walks through the last of the Bin Bin books unchanged, unsoftened, while those who

have been overseas and lived according to other modes, revert, on their return, to the ways they once sought to abandon.

To read the six books is to be forced to the conclusion that those who escaped found nothing very much while they were away, desperate though they might have been to go. Freda, who, we are given to understand, has the intellect to do almost anything, is pursued by Major-General Sir Oswald Mazere-Poole (married, with a wife back in England, where he spends a good deal of his time). The Major-General takes Freda on a trip through the Monaro, and they take adjoining rooms at a hotel, the Major thinking that Freda will allow him entry through the connecting door, but this is not what happens, despite Freda's anticipations of a few pages earlier.

He put his hands on her shoulders and stooped to kiss her, found she was trembling, and saw terror and appeal in eyes accustomed to dance with fire of intelligence and humorous mischief. "Good God, Freda!" he whispered. "Weren't you expecting me? You don't mean to say –"

"Oh yes, of course I was expecting you, at first, and then I wasn't, and I didn't want ... and I hoped you didn't mean ... and – I at least ... oh!" she had her small fists in her mouth and her eyes wide like a child dreading a draught.

Having got her book and her characters into this position, Miles gets herself and her readers out of it by making the Major General, who is, after all, a Mazere and a Poole, extraordinarily good-humoured. While we are still wincing at what's been done to us by the novelist, Sir Oswald becomes jovial, reassuring, sympathetic. In some inexplicable way the sexual failure makes Freda even more appealing to him. Is this supposed to correspond

to some psychological reality? I doubt it; I'm more inclined to think that Brent of Bin Bin is so caught up in the pleasure of bringing the escapers home to Bool Bool, the country of the author's childhood and growing up, that nothing will be allowed to stand in the way of her enjoyment. The second half of *Back to Bool Bool* is some of the happiest and most confident writing that Miles Franklin ever gave us, silly as it may be at times. This occurs despite the sexual frustrations to which we have become almost inured by now – Madame Austru can't have the Dick she loves, Sir Oswald can't have Freda, Dick can't have Freda, Blanche can't have anybody (she doesn't deserve it, we whisper gleefully), and Laleen – this is where Miles/Brent is most resolved – can't have Mollye's accompanist, the composer and conductor Nat Horan. The river that claimed Emily, long ago, is to have him. Miles/Brent writes the death with assurance, understatement, she is so certain of what she's doing. Emily's death is repeated and the lore of the swimming hole is added to. Intensified. Miles has achieved her aim in becoming Brent; she's asserted death and its ally, frustration, as equals to the continuity of life through sexuality, birth, and more conceptions. Those who step aside, like Miles, and those who are wrenched aside, like Emily and now Nat, are the contradiction – because moving around life's cycles in the opposite direction – of those who follow the cycle in the way that's regarded as normal. So perhaps the answer to my question of a few pages back is that the Bin Bin books are a series when Miles/Brent finally realises what she's about, and they aren't when she's groping for her way – possuming was the word she found for this.

The Bin Bin books are infuriating, not least when the author, without so much as a glance over the shoulder, or any sort of apology for having misled us in the past, can say something like ‘... the untravelled Australians in their friendly deference were infinitely preferable to those who had been abroad and were smattered with Europeanism.’ Did all those restless young souls, desperate to escape their limitations, achieve no more, in the end, than become ‘smattered with Europeanism’? The words I’ve just quoted come very late in the sixth book (third to be published). Miles knows what she’s saying because, at last, she knows where she is in her sequence. A couple of pages earlier she refers to the words of Larry Healey, Freda’s father, that I’ve already quoted from *Cockatoos*. Freda is thinking:

I suppose the river sang like that to the dancers long ago,  
such a little while since really, and yet they are all gone. We  
shall be gone too before we can accomplish anything. There  
is time for nothing, only to be kind – scarcely time for that ...

The negativity of this, and of the great concluding burst that Miles/Brent gives us before that final FULL STOP, make the Bin Bin series, in my view, the counter to, the other side of, Miles’ determined optimism in *All That Swagger*, where family pride in achievement and the ongoing nature of life are strong. That was a book by Miles under the name she shared with her family. The Bin Bin books are hers in a more private, personal way, the subject matter is similar enough, but the writer’s viewpoint is darker by far. Miles and Brent, if I may hold them separate for a moment longer, were novelettish writers at their all too frequent worst, lacked

technical accomplishment and the artistic detachment that allows writers to create structures that by their shape and form are *ready* to contain what’s later to be expressed within them, but Miles and Brent were determined, and dogged too, in setting out to achieve their aims. Miles, like the people she wrote about, couldn’t reach the things she wanted to do overseas – she couldn’t even make herself particularly happy there – so she had to come home and put up with herself inside the limits she felt as an unfortunate but unshakeable part of herself. Hence the restlessness, the impatience that’s so readily discernible in her writing; but, as so often, if you want the qualities of the writer you have to accept the drawbacks because they’re connected. Miles Franklin, and her opposing self, Brent of Bin Bin, are an excellent example of this.

1. *Australian Writers and their Work: Miles Franklin*, by Ray Mathew, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1963
2. Editions referred to in the writing of this essay were as follows:
  - *Up the Country*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1984 edition, ‘edited more severely than Miles Franklin herself would ever have allowed’ (Publisher’s Note)
  - *Ten Creeks Run*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, first Australian edition, 1952
  - *Back to Bool Bool*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, second edition, 1956
  - *Prelude to Waking*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1950
  - *Cockatoos*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1954
  - *Gentlemen at Gyang Gyang*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1956



## Good, better, best/Never let it rest Till your good is better/And your better best.

A delayed reaction to Joseph Furphy's (Tom Collins') *Such Is Life*<sup>1</sup>

On the farm where I grew up, we had a furphy. That was the name for a cylindrical water tank, sitting on wheels, with shafts so that it could be pulled by a horse. These tanks were made by Furphy Brothers of Shepparton, Victoria, and in a dry land they were ubiquitous. The once-famous doggerel could be found on the bulging ends, in English caps and in what I was told was shorthand. As a child, I was fascinated; the well-known lines were not exactly optimistic but they leaned in that direction, something rare in the world of farmers.

Joseph Furphy, who wrote as Tom Collins, was one of the brothers who produced these tanks. John Barnes<sup>1</sup> and Miles Franklin<sup>2</sup> speak of his hours spent in a room he added to his cottage near the Goulburn River, a place of much recall and conversation, I have no doubt. In his room he could turn his unremarkable life into a great deal, even, perhaps, a book that would outlast the way of life he chronicled – it's his word – as a bringing to literary birth of the age of wool. Many years ago, on a visit to Paris, I was asked to explain to an American woman the meaning, the context, of a picture she had on her wall which both puzzled and interested her. It was George Lambert's 'Across the Black Soil Plains', and it was later than Furphy's account because the wagon was being pulled by horses, not bullocks, but those huge bales of wool were as I had

known them in my childhood, when they were moved by trucks, not animals any more. A tradition had moved on.

And a tradition has to be created in the first place, and that leads me to ask – is this a silly thing to say? – if the tradition is first created in the mind? Surely the mind, the imagination, follows reality; surely it can't actually precede it? Or is it that reality and imagination are inseparable, as I am inclined to think, two things that have trouble divorcing each other, and are always being re-tied, re-bound, in the minds of writers. I have a feeling that Joseph Furphy would be of like mind in this matter, difficult as it is for his readers to do much more than guess at the intentions of this remarkable writer.

Look at the devices he gets up to! He has in his possession, he tells us, twenty two consecutive editions of Letts' Pocket Diary, one week to the opening, 'all filled up, and in a decent state of preservation'. He closes his eyes and picks up the diary for 1883, closes his eyes again and opens at random. 'It is,' he tells us, 'the week beginning with Sunday, the 9th of September'. What follows, in the Furphy version of the origins of a fiction, is a development of things noted in the little diary, a chronicle, not a romance, for which form of writing he makes it clear that he has little enthusiasm. Marcus Clarke, Henry Kingsley and others have fed the public insipid versions of reality, Furphy says, and he'll have none of what they've put on the public's plate. What we'll get from him is the

fair-dinkum reality; hence his elaborate fandangle of diary entries and his scheme of delving into notes written long before, as if these, in some way, could not be recreated according to the whims and fancies of an author. The diary as origin of the tales, the use of narrator Tom Collins as the mask for Joseph Furphy's intentions, are the elaborations of a complex mind seeking to convince, to prepare us for something our minds may not be ready for, something which, in fact, is far from what our previous reading had led us to expect.

Furphy is in no doubt that he has something new to present, on a background that's very old. His chosen scene is two or three hundred miles from north to south – in the old measurement; *Such Is Life* is a work of the British empire – and a little less from west to east, from Echuca to Albury, as he tells us in Chapter III, one of the funniest things ever written in our country. Even this early in my reflections on Furphy I find myself wringing my hands, throwing them up in despair, or any other cliché you choose, at the prospect of trying to explain, or illuminate, the methods of a writer who is apparently as clear as crystal yet as devious as a Borgia plot. What on earth is he doing? At once I want to simplify my question, and turn it into, what has he done? This latter version gives me the advantage, or help, of history. I can use the century between Furphy's presentation of his manuscript to *The Bulletin* and the writing of this essay to help me find a position from which I can see his achievement a little more clearly.

Yet it's as hard as ever. In a recent conversation with Chris Wallace-Crabbe (sorry no footnote, I simply ran into him at the airport) he described Furphy as a pre-post-modernist. Yes, that's

right, pre-post. Silly, isn't it, but it's true. In the golden age of *The Bulletin*, when everything was simple, when people were developing the views which historians have had a century to sort out and tidy, Furphy was writing prose which he knew, and expected the reader to know, was a construct, written for a purpose or perhaps many purposes, and which, in its effects, might contradict or separate from his narrative like diverging tracks in the Riverina district of New South Wales.

Diverging tracks: Furphy was a self-educated man, and it shows, at times. Whether you think this is a strength or a weakness will depend on many things, including your views on the question of whether an education enslaves by binding you to things proposed by earlier writers, or releases your mind for fresh thought by summarising the thinking that's already been done. Or something else entirely. Those weaknesses and strengths I referred to are also traps: which is which? What may be a weakness to you may be a strength to me, or vice versa. We are, once again, making our way across a landscape which hadn't been visited by the European mind until quite recently. Furphy knows this and has chosen his territory well, because he knows it, having worked there himself as a bullocky and as a minor government official for a couple of decades before he wrote about it. My own family settled in the southern end of this area at about the time he chose as his period, and this familiarity, his and mine, makes me aware of the strange dichotomy of the landscape and his writing about it: his realities are correct in every detail because he knew it all so well, but in some strange way,

the more 'factual' the book is, the more clearly it declares itself to be a construct of the human imagination ...

But a construct the likes of which had never been seen before. Furphy himself knew he'd done something new. In a letter to J.F. Archibald of *The Bulletin*, he described his 'full-sized novel *Such is Life*; scene, Riverina and northern Vic.; temper democratic; bias, offensively Australian'. Famous words. *Overland* magazine has used them for decades as a banner for its policies, though 'offensively' has been omitted. Furphy, the self-educated man who worked with his brothers on the production of farming equipment at the same time as he wrote his novel, had no objection to being blunt if he felt it was called for. His amusement at the characters in his book who think that such superiority as they possessed in the England of their origins gives them a like superiority in the colony of Australia, is apparent. The men of the Riverina, the bullockies, teamsters, station hands and guardians of the stock and water supplies in the enormous paddocks, are all, mad as they may be, genuinely expert in matters of survival. They've got to be if they want to survive themselves. Everybody understands everybody else. Again, they've got to. This is all the more amusing because many of the people portrayed in the book are recent arrivals and Furphy/Collins sets down in considerable detail the laughable, baffling and barely decipherable 'Englishes' of the Germans, Chinese, Poms, Scots, half-castes or what have you as they communicate whatever's in their heads with people of other races and/or nationalities. So much of our modern understanding of outback Australia and the people who developed its character – the

people whose experiences have provided a basis for the story of a nation's foundation – is based on the things chronicled – that word again – by Furphy that we are amazed that such coherence could be formed from such confusion. It isn't possible! But it is. Such is life, Furphy tells us, over and over, hammering this simplicity into us so often and so hard that we're eventually forced to ask ourselves what he means by it and why he's determined to drive it into our thinking.

Let us pause to think about this. Such is life, he says, again and again, and such is *not* life, he tells us once and only once, as far as I can recall. Almost everyone who hears the title of the book, or runs up against the quotation of its theme-thought, will remark that Furphy's words are the words used by Ned Kelly on his way to be hanged. They are not only Joseph Furphy's words, they are words of their time, and this is an important clue.

'Such is life' is a statement of acceptance. It concedes that you can't win. As one of my friends goes on to say, 'There are only several ways of losing'. In choosing a particular way of living, you are choosing your end-point, the way by which you will eventually be brought down. In the case of the common or garden workers in Furphy's book, this has already happened. As early as Chapter 1, when the itinerant Collins meets the group of men who give his chosen setting its human flavour, it becomes apparent that few of these men are Riverina born and bred; they've come from somewhere else, there's a disaster or a failure behind most of them, and the poverty of their lives is something they've accepted because it's a great deal better than nothing. They're in an endless battle

with the station owners. Pushing their beasts along dry tracks, they need feed and water every day and will only get it if they cut a fence and slip their beasts into places where they're not supposed to be. Station owners are on the lookout for this, and so are the humbler men employed by the stations, though they may be ambivalent in their loyalties, being battlers themselves. The owners and/or managers of the stations are also in an ambivalent position. They need the bullock teams to get supplies in and produce out, but they want any grass and water for their own stock, not for the transport teams, which must, therefore, be made to keep moving. Ultimately it is the land that suffers from this conflict. Stations are overstocked because most of them have overdrafts which need to be reduced, and quite a few of the itinerant workers are aware of the pieces of property which are most suitable for 'free selection' under the Land Acts of the 1860s, designed to give the small man a chance to become a landholder alongside the earlier band of squatters. Such laws as regulate this situation are made in the parliaments in Sydney and Melbourne by men who may or may not be familiar with the lands they're regulating, so that it is the station holders and the lesser beings who work for or against them who have the real, on-the-ground knowledge of the matter, and they are the men whose doings and endless talk enlivens the pages of Furphy's book. What does Joseph Furphy think of this world he's describing? This is easy:

I replaced the glass [telescope], thinking, with sorrow rather than conceit, that I could make a better world myself.

And a couple of chapters later:

"I say, Collins – don't split!"

"Is thy servant a dog, that he should do this great thing?"

"Second Kings," whispered the poor necromancer, in eager fellowship, and displaying a knowledge of the Bible rare among his sect. "God bless you, Collins! May we meet in a better world!"

"It won't be difficult to do that," I replied dejectedly, as I withdrew to enjoy my unearned slumber.

The itinerant men in Furphy's pages are the spiritual antecedents of Australia's soldiers of two world wars – men who, having nothing, demonstrate a certain generosity of spirit against the surrounding void, and a dogged determination to maintain and express their dignity even though their circumstances don't support their efforts. Furphy needed, I think, to create a world separate from London and all the links between the worlds of English business and the places where wool was grown, shorn, then carted on hulking wagons that were easily bogged when rain fell on the black soil plains. He needed to be out of sympathy with the destinations that lay beyond that rectangle, that patch of Riverina, if you remember, where he set his action ...

Action? Furphy tells us, any number of times, that he's out to do something more difficult than offer a plot with appropriate denouement. In one way or another, and by means which he will have to improvise, because what he's attempting to do has never been set up as a goal by any writers before him, he wants to show us life in a form that's new to the world, and this commits him to the philosophising that I earlier described as the musings of a self-

educated man. 'Educated' men haven't written about the worlds he wants to show, so he has to devise his own ways and means, and the amazing, the wonderful thing about his book is that he succeeds.

He's very confident that he can do what he's set out to do. Here's a passage from the start of the second last chapter.

They have tied me to a stake; I cannot fly, but, bear-like, I must fight the course. Ay! your first-person-singular novelist delights in relating his love-story, simply because he can invent something to pamper his own romantic notions; whereas, a similar undertaking makes the faithful chronicler squirm, inasmuch as – Oh! you'll find out soon enough.

What will we find? Furphy has answers here and there, usually early in each chapter, when he's musing about the meanings of the things he intends to show. His style's discursive, each of the seven chapters dawdling across the countryside like a team of miserably fed bullocks, yet in each case there's a thread or threads tying things together, sometimes forcing us to think about things less painful than the central theme of the chapter if it's too painful, as it certainly is in Chapter V, at the heart of which is the search for and eventual discovery of the lost child Mary, aged a little over five, who's found dead some twenty miles from the place she regarded as her home. Mary left home because she thought her father had left home, and she set out to find him. Lost child stories are a part of Australia's bush-writing tradition, but never so wrenchingly done as this, because never so well prepared. We met Mary three chapters earlier, when Collins and the reader found her delightful, but two things about this chapter gave the reader warning. Clever

as the little girl is, she's fallible, as we see when, after a discussion of how she will have to go away to school one day, she writes her name. The capital M has five downward strokes instead of four, and two letters are transposed, thus - MRAY.

And there's another signal too. Collins, approaching the shack where Mary's parents live, observes a swaggy settling down to sleep. Collins thinks of greeting him but decides that the man has decided not to approach the dwelling until it's too dark for him to be given the job of cutting firewood; rather than that, he'll have a sleep. The man is later found dead, and the discovery sent a shudder through this reader, because I felt that the death was too close, too pertinent, to be the swaggy's death alone, but was death in a more general form, never very far from anybody, and not far enough from Mary, who, button-bright as she may have been, was vulnerable through being unaware that she'd misspelled her own name. There is also, in Furphy's account of the incidents surrounding Mary, something intended, I'm sure, but unexplored, about the tension between Mary's father – adored by the child – and mother. Furphy is clearly on the man's side, and just what this expresses about him and the marriage in his own life, I cannot say, but there's something weighty, downgrading, in the darkness surrounding this matter.

Perhaps I can link this question of Furphy's misogyny, or is it marital disappointment, with the relationship the reader senses but can't altogether grasp between Furphy, the ultimate creator, and Tom Collins, the minor – very minor – government official who wanders through the book as its apparent narrator. My edition<sup>1</sup>

has no mention of Joseph Furphy on spine or title page; without the introduction by editor John Barnes there would be no mention of Joseph Furphy in the book. A book without an author? A book written by its own main character? Did I say this was a pre-post modern work? I did. (There's even, on page 340, a passage where Collins, talking about his meerschaum pipe, wonders whether he smokes it or it smokes him!) Where is the author, then? Who is he? If we interrogate the book along these lines we're forced to go looking for Furphy, but he's hard, almost impossible, to find ... and yet we know he's there. Who else caused Tom Collins to lose his clothes in Chapter III? Who caused the mighty wind that blew Tom's hat away at the start of Chapter VII, and then prompted Jack the Shellback to give the bare-headed Collins a replacement?

"I'll fix you up for a hat," he continued, in language of matchless force and piquancy. "Bend her; she'll about fit you. I dropped across her one day I was in the road paddock."

'She' was a drab bell-topper, in perfect preservation, with a crown nothing less than a foot and a half high, and a narrow, wavy brim. She proved a perfect fit when I 'bent' her. I wore her afterward for many a week, till one night she rolled away from my camp, and I saw her no more, though I sought her diligently. Take her all in all, I shall not look upon her like again.

This is the farcical hat Tom Collins wears throughout the final chapter, but we can't help being aware that it's Joseph Furphy, the almost invisible author, who's put it in his way. Someone, and it's got to be Furphy, is causing the unexpected to happen from time to time, because Furphy, for all his statements about plots

and denouements, does believe in these devices, so long as they contribute to the creation, the elucidation, of meaning. His book's about the way life treats us and what we can discern of purpose or the lack of it in these frequently unjust dishings out. In the last pages we learn that a man – a swagman, Collins calls him – was jailed for three months for the burning of a haystack in Chapter III, a matter which caused us to laugh heartily at the time. A man was put in jail? Yes, and as the book ends, the unjustly treated wanderer encounters the man who really lit the stack, but doesn't recognise him. Is this because of the dark glasses he's wearing, the silly hat, or something else? Collins doesn't quite tell us, but he knows well enough who took the punishment for what he did himself. This is not his only deceit. He's caused other men to tell stories about him so that they'll reach the ears of Mrs Beaudesert, who fancies Tom for her fourth husband. The first three husbands left her considerable wealth when they died, money that Tom Collins doesn't have, so that if Mrs Beaudesert was successful in leading him to matrimony then it would be for reasons of respectability or even – heaven help us! – true love. But this is not a book about true love. It's a book about men who are, for the most part, living at a distance from the places where their lives were formed. It's the Riverina and in Furphy's telling of its tales, it's a place without a past, a stage for the acting out of the quaint to farcical events he's chosen to tell us. Its characters have made their mistakes elsewhere, they've been stripped of identity and character in other places, and they've found a new place, an almost un-historical stage for their later-in-life actions. This explains, I think, the way the book ends:

These men are deaf to the symphony of the Silences; blind to the horizonless areas of the Unknown; unresponsive to the touch of the Impalpable; oblivious to the machinery of the Moral Universe – in a word, in a word, indifferent to the mysterious Motive of Nature’s all-pervading Soul ...

And to conclude, his last lines are these:

Now I had to enact the Cynic philosopher to Moriarty and Butler, and the aristocratic man with a ‘past’ to Mrs Beaudesart; with the satisfaction of knowing that each of these was acting a part to me. Such is life, my fellow-mummers – just like a poor player, that bluffs and feints his hour upon the stage, and then cheapens down to mere nonentity. But let me not hear any small witticism to the further effect that its story is a tale told by a vulgarian, full of slang and blanky, signifying – nothing.

Let me not hear, the book says, at the end, and I think it is Joseph Furphy who is talking, rather than his alter ego Tom Collins, let me not hear that it all signifies nothing. A double negative it may be but we are meant to take it as a positive. Furphy is sure that he’s given us a tank that holds real water, and we can drink from it if we’re not too proud.

Why the Riverina? Furphy worked there for two decades before he added that room to his Goulburn River home and started to write. John Barnes quotes another Furphy letter:

Before this [writing of a yarn] was finished, another motif had suggested itself – then another – and another. And I made a point of loosely federating these yarns (if you understand me); till by-and-by the scheme of “S’Life” suggested itself.

Then I selected and altered and largely re-wrote 7 of these stories, until they came out as you see.

The key word in this for me is ‘federating’; unusual as it may seem, and almost inapplicable to the business of writing, it was in the air at the time because the six states of Australia had recently done the very same thing. Midway through Chapter II Furphy speaks of his country with surprising eloquence: ‘Our virgin continent! How long has she tarried her bridal day!’ The long paragraph beginning in this way ends with ‘The mind retires from such speculation, unsatisfied but impressed.’

Gravely impressed. For this recordless land – this land of our lawful solicitude and imperative responsibility – is exempt from many a bane of territorial rather than racial impress. She is committed to no usages of petrified injustice; she is clogged by no fealty to shadowy idols, enshrined by Ignorance, and upheld by misplaced homage alone; she is cursed by no memories of fanaticism and persecution; she is innocent of hereditary national jealousy, and free from the envy of sister states.

Then think how immeasurably higher are the possibilities of a Future than the memories of any Past since history began. By comparison, the Past, though glozed beyond all semblance of truth, is a clinging heritage of canonised ignorance, brutality and baseness; a drag rather than a stimulus. And as day by day, year by year, our own fluid Present congeals into a fixed Past, we shall do well to take heed that, in time to come, our own memory may not be held justly accursed.

So time itself, and its endless movement, is to be our conscience, and we must face these judgements alone because we are separate from the rest of the world. It's not hard to break this down into a statement that the rest of the world has had its chance and it's now Australia's turn to make a play for greatness of a different sort, a new sort, never seen before. Why else would Furphy separate the Riverina except that it's his case study to see what the new men are like when they're considered on their own? If he had been a sociological novelist he'd have linked his people and their place with the world outside themselves – Sydney, Melbourne, London, and the ancient cultures he so frequently refers to. He doesn't. The outside world is mentioned often enough but it's the rectangle he's defined for himself that occupies him. It's where humanity can be studied. Forced to give account of itself. It's been observed that Furphy doesn't talk about shearers, who move as freely about the Riverina as the teamsters, but he doesn't need them. They're not so different from the bullock men that they can offer anything fresh ... and it's not types, so much, that Furphy the writer is after, it's yarns. Stories. As he himself said 'Then I selected and altered and largely re-wrote 7 of these stories, until they came out as you see.' He describes himself, repeatedly, as being a chronicler in order to prevent us noticing that he's an artist. One of the pleasures of reading Furphy is to perform what the financial world calls a 'due diligence' on one of his chapters, observing its digressions, surprises, movements and unexpected intrusions. He's writing in expression of an aesthetic which takes its principles from the life he knew in his years on the track. I've referred to him as a self-educated man;

one of the characteristics of such people is that they know what their problems are because they've never been trained to mix the thoughts in their own head with other people's interpretations of them. It is a little easier for them to stay focussed. Furphy makes great virtue out of keeping his eyes fixed where he wants them; he could never have allowed himself so many diversions and sideways shuffles if he hadn't been certain of where he was – that rectangle two or three hundred miles deep and from Echuca to Albury wide, which he boxed in at the beginning. Furphy is a prime example of the writer who draws strength from limitation. His chosen year, 1883, could have been any other year, but it wasn't, it was chosen, arbitrarily enough, but with some good reason no doubt, to be 1883, and then he chose the days of his diary – or so he tells us! – as the starting places of his stories ... and then he alters his plan! I think this is all a conjuror's sleight of hand to keep our attention where he wants it – where he can best control it – while he works his tricks somewhere out of sight.

His tricks? Where and what are they? He has so many of them, some of them simply verbal, others philosophical. Here's a good example of Furphy/Collins at word play:

"And he was just as good on the piano as on the fiddle, though his hand must have been badly out. Mooney thinks je jibbed on singing because the women were there. Alf's a mis-mis-mish--dash it"-

"Mischief-maker?" I suggested.

"No.-Mis-mis"--

"Mysterious character?"



“No, no. –Mis-mis”--

“Try a synonym.”

“Is that it? I think it is. Well Alf’s a misasynonym – woman-hater – among other things. When he comes to the station, he dodges the women like a criminal.”

Philosophically, he’s at play a good deal of the time, but often enough, he’s serious. This is usually signalled by reference to something in the Bible, or a mention of Shakespeare; late in the book he devotes a couple of pages to a contrast between horse-man and Hamlet-man, these figures roughly approximating to the Riverina types he’s writing about and the great statements about humanity in Shakespeare as the primary representative of European culture. Horse-man and Hamlet-man link Furphy’s intentions to those of other writers in a contrasting way.

A novelist is always able to bring forth out of his imagination the very thing required by the exigencies of his story – just as he unmasks the villain at the critical moment, and, for the young hero’s benefit, gently shifts the amiable old potterer to a better land in the very nick of time. Such is not life.

Such is not life. Joseph Furphy was one of our most thoughtful, most serious novelists, determined to give us a novel unlike any he’d ever read. Australia was a new country – aboriginal Australia scarcely existed in the cultural understanding of his time – and it required new methods to record – to chronicle – its ways. There could be no looseness, of method or construction, in the doing of this task, yet Australian life, certainly in Furphy’s time, rejected many of the methods and constructions of England, the great model

for our social life. What to do? The problem couldn’t be solved unless it was contained, and yet – such was the nature of the life Furphy sought to portray – the life inside his stories had to seem loose, unconstructed. Furphy’s methods had to be as new as the vast array of improvisations that his countrymen adopted in order to cope with the new problems they faced. The stump-jump plough was a source of pride to the farmers of my childhood, a thing as necessary and as unfailing as the water cart from Shepparton to be found on farm after farm. To open Furphy’s famous novel is to open up the phase of Australia’s history that I was born into, late in it as I was in arriving. His family’s carts were a part of my world and the world of his famous book overlaps the world I grew up in. His methods, as I’ve tried to show, were even more radical, reaching into a world that didn’t exist on the side of the Goulburn where he wrote. The writing of *Such Is Life* was an extraordinary creation and it brings to mind the odd phenomenon that it is often the first example of some new type, or style, which comes to be seen, a century or two later, to be the most representative of all. The innovator looks more like the type, when, eventually, it’s defined, than the followers. Why this should be so I won’t attempt to say.

Finally, a confession – I hadn’t read *Such Is Life* until this year (2009). I bought it decades ago but left it sitting on my shelves until it occurred to me that it might give rise to an essay. So, and finally, again, I read it, and loved it. Why hadn’t I read it before? I think I had it in my head that it was probably dull. Never have I been more pleased to admit how wrong I was. It’s a marvellous book and the product of a singular mind.

Singular? Aren't they all? Henry Handel Richardson, Frederic Manning, Patrick White, Alan Marshall and the rest? It's the unique individualism of our writers that makes us see that by being so different from ordinary people they are in fact like ordinary people. They are ourselves writ large, written as we'd like to have written ourselves. Why they are not observed and talked about like sports stars I've no idea. Most of us can hit a tennis ball or kick a footy but the ability to deal with the worlds surrounding and often invading our minds is another thing altogether, and far more important, surely, far more worthy of attention, as this series of essays sets out to claim.

1. *Such Is Life: Being Certain Extracts from the Diary of Tom Collins*, first published 1903, my edition published by The Discovery Press, Penrith NSW, 1968, with an introduction by John Barnes
2. *Joseph Furphy: The Legend of a Man and his Book*, by Miles Franklin in association with Kate Baker, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1944 and dedicated 'For Australia'

## Style: often mentioned, less commonly analysed

We've all seen men in pizza restaurants spinning the base of their next pizza high above their shoulders before they flatten it on a bench to ladle on tomato paste. Style, we say, without thinking of the word we're using. Style; it's a word applied to writers all the time, but I have a feeling that it's used to cover many functions and that as often as not the word is used to replace thinking rather than advance it. To say that writing is stylish is what I would call a gestural response, the reader's thoughts being directed without further explanation. 'Stylish' is enough, it seems.

In a book published some years ago (1) I quoted passages from Judith Wright, Morris Lurie, Helen Garner, Olga Masters and Hal Porter by way of showing the different ways these writers used the folding of sheets to establish a variety of points. The sheets were folded five times, in as many different ways, for each of the writers to make a point, or perhaps an impression; the job was done differently each time. How could it be otherwise? Anyone even faintly familiar with these writers would be able to attach their names to the passages quoted. Try yourself out if you doubt me; it'll only take you a moment to find the book on my website, and the quotes are there for you to test yourselves. Easy, you'll say if you do it.

Why's it so easy? Because each of these writers has a distinctive, a personal style. They've shaped the way they write according to the nature of their personalities, and they've learned to use prose, that

thing we share with everyone around us, in a way that's responsive to the peculiar combination of impulses and insights which form their writing personalities. A mother, woken from her sleep by one of her children calling, knows which one it is, and reaches its bed ready to act in an appropriate way – appropriate, that is, to the nature of the child who's called. Children are different, as we all know, and writers are different too.

How do writers form their styles? Is a style a strength, a limitation, or a coupling of the two? Can we name a group of writers, as I did in the paragraph above, and find things they have in common, or things that keep them apart, one from another? Is there anything that a writer can be taught, as part of a development or training process, beside the ways to identify and respond to those forces, inside them and out, which will give rise, eventually, to the style which is to be theirs? These are difficult questions but I shall try to make something of them, if I can; the first difficulty comes with the word 'style', which carries the load of so many meanings attributed to it by so many people. Style? Style? What is it, this thing I've set out to examine?

The first thing about style is that it allows recognition. We look at a piece of writing and we know it's by Hal Porter, or Patrick White, or Billy the Blacksmith. *This* piece is so clumsily written that it must be by Blind Freddy, an old mate. In earlier essays I've admired the style of Hal Porter and grumbled about Patrick White's.

Why? Because the stylistic bravura of the first brings me pleasure, while the latter's diversions from the norm offend my sense that prose belongs to everybody, and therefore a personal style is an accommodation by the writer to those surrounding him/her, and vice versa. Readers have to find a meeting ground with the writers of their choice. Writers, in their turn, have to find that point which they and their readers will agree to call their halfway house. This is where reading and interpretation will take place. Writing is, after all, more than an assertion, though it is that; writing is a mutual activity whereby imaginations can meet and make some sort of music – I speak figuratively – together. Writing tests the willingness of a society to give its writers their heads. Societies with puritanical stresses in them will insist on blocking sexual expression; others will encourage it. And so on. When writers form their styles these styles will certainly be, among other things, responses to the ways by which their societies, surrounding them, exercise their ways of understanding and their willingness to take on new ideas at all.

What is style? I hope that by now I have opened up this question a little, though perhaps I've confused it. Let me go back a little. Style was, I imagined earlier, the peculiar and very personal way that a particular writer dealt with a range of problems, first of which was and always will be the business of finding ways to use words which allow the most highly developed characteristics of the writer's vision, and the quirkiest, to come through language – that common property – to the mind of the reader. Style, I said, was recognisable, so that a reader could glance at one writer's way of mentioning the folding of sheets and know which of our

writers expressed the matter in that particular way. To be able to do this involves a certain sophistication. Readers need to have read enough to be able to recognise those personal habits which mark one writer's approach from another's. Is this only a matter of appearances? The style is the man, runs a saying. Let us add 'woman', at least in our minds. The style is the man. Is the man, therefore, the style also? Presumably. When the two are so closely coagulated that they cannot even be thought of apart, then the fullest, richest expression is possible. The style is more than an individual's way of handling words, it's an agreement that releases writers and readers into each other's arms. Good reading, every bit as much as good expression, becomes possible. That peak which writers and readers are always seeking becomes visible and therefore attainable. Joy!

It would seem, then, that we are ready to take our next step. In what direction? I think that we should look at the idea that a style, once developed, is somehow set: inescapable. Readers are probably responsible for this idea, which is a lazy one; writers are more likely to be aware that their style may change, and is probably changing according to the dictates of that part of their thinking that is not consciously controlled.

I've already mentioned Hal Porter, perhaps the most stylish of Australian writers; let me now bring forward his friend, the poet Kenneth Slessor. Slessor is much admired for his poem 'Five Bells', in which he reconciles himself as best he can to the death by drowning of Joe Lynch. Two biographers of Slessor (2 & 3) have reproduced pages of his sketches for this famous poem, and a study

of these pages is most instructive. Let us first remind ourselves how the poem, as we now have it, begins:

Time that is moved by little fidget wheels  
Is not my Time, the flood that does not flow.  
Between the double and the single bell  
Of a ship's hour, between a round of bells  
From the dark warship riding there below,  
I have lived many lives, and this one life  
Of Joe, long dead, who lives between five bells.

We may treat this as an introduction, I think; then the poem proper begins:

Deep and dissolving verticals of light  
Ferry the falls of moonshine down. Five bells  
Coldly rung out ...

Deep and dissolving verticals of *light*; Slessor's sketch lists, one under the other, and very neatly, no less than fourteen alternatives to 'light'. And 'light', the word eventually used, is not among the fourteen words considered. What about the second line? Slessor's sketch is different from the line we have today, but he appears to have needed, early on, to continue his thought with a strong, a noticeable verb. Today – and forever, now – it's 'ferry', but this choice wasn't easily made. Slessor's sketch lists twenty four alternatives. Twenty four words, a selection he set out for himself before he changed the line so that none of them were used. 'Ferry' it became, and down came the falls of moonshine with the word; it's not hard to see why the choice fell on 'ferry', because Joe died by falling from a ferry into the waters of Sydney's harbour, but this is something the reader is

expected to know, and isn't directly told, so that the word 'ferry', used as a verb to bring the moonshine down – in other sketches it's 'moonlight' – is the only mention, however indirect, of the situation of Joe's death. He fell from a ferry and drowned, but ferries aren't mentioned in this quintessentially Sydney harbour poem except as a verb, not a noun, in the second line of the poem-proper, and 'ferry', obvious as it seems to us today, was not even included in the first twenty four words Slessor considered!

It's worth mentioning that even so sonorous a thing as the poem's title – Five Bells – wasn't easily arrived at. Slessor's sketches have the refrain of the poem as 'Four bells' and elsewhere as 'Six bells'; it's strange to see these abandoned and to us almost improper words in the fastidious poet's hand. Four bells? Six? We've accepted five, now, and the matter's gone beyond whatever hesitation and testing took place before the choice was made for five, five, Five Bells! Look at the poem's ending and see if you can imagine that the number could ever have been anything but five?

... but all I heard

Was a boat's whistle, and the scraping squeal  
Of seabirds' voices far away, and bells,  
Five bells. Five bells coldly ringing out.

*Five bells.*

Slessor was one of the most exact of our poets and it's fascinating to watch him searching for the words that would give his poem that precision which we generally attribute to him as an inevitable part of his style. But there's something automatic about our concept of style, something necessary, as if the poet could hardly help himself

writing in the way he did, when the truth is much more uncertain. The famous precision of Slessor's style had to be searched for, tried and tested, and the words that would eventually embody what we think of as Slessor's style were endlessly considered and reconsidered before being granted their place in the overall design. This suggests to me that style can only be considered after the hard work – the really hard work – of writing has been done.

Let us look into this a little further. I've already mentioned the alternatives Slessor wrote down for 'light'. The line, let's not forget, started like this:

Deep and dissolving verticals of ....

Of what? Here are the words Slessor listed: stars; ice; air; brine (?); smoke; crystal; azure; foam; blue; dew; mist; glass; gauze; ether. And of course, light, the word he eventually chose, which isn't there! If we, continuing our search for meanings of the word style, consider these words, is there anything we can see? I think there is, not so much in the words themselves as in the reasoning that led Slessor to list them. Each of them – not separately, perhaps, but when placed together by Slessor in a list – possesses or appears to possess – possesses briefly, let us say – an element of sensuality which I think was the characteristic that Slessor wanted most. The word had to be compatible with 'deep and dissolving verticals', and with 'ferry', when that word had been chosen; the word Slessor was looking for was not so much vital in its own right as a suitable response to, or embodiment of, the ideas on either side. It was a sort of mirror-word, a chevalier word, as Slessor might have said, handsome enough in itself but able to set off its position, as an

ensign's uniform might set off the beautiful woman he's escorting. (Slessor might have approved of that – or he might have thought it corny!)

This brings us back to Slessor's choice of the word 'ferry'. It's natural for the ordinary reader to misjudge this business of choosing a word. Most readers do only a limited amount of writing, and their struggles can usually be expressed by that question which so many of us have uttered into the air of an unsympathetic room: 'What do I want to say?' Implicit in that question is the idea – fallacious, in a discussion of style – that saying is a matter of choosing the right words. The fallacious idea that many readers have is that writers are forever searching for *le mot juste* – the one word that's right. It's true that writers are happy when *un mot juste* arrives, but the search for it is only occasional. A happy choice of words is hardly more than a happy birthday, fine in itself but what about all the other days in the year? Having a good year is better than having a good day, is it not? Having a good year can be compared, for a writer, with having a good answer to the question forming in his/her mind – what am I going to write about? What is that impulse, lurking down there like a creature that feeds on the sea-bed and hides among the rocks? Can I get a good enough view of this thing to let me know what it is?

Let us take a further step. Let us say we've identified the lurking sea-beast, that is, we know what it is we want to do. How do we begin? This is both easy, and immensely hard. I have an answer which will satisfy nobody. We must begin at a point that allows us to move with the simplest possible logic to the end. That

is to say, we must begin in such a way that the end of our journey is implicit in the way we began it. Sounds simple, doesn't it? It is simple, and therefore it's hard. Simplicity is one of the hardest things to achieve. The German pianist Artur Schnabel once said of the music of Mozart that it was too easy for a child to learn on and too hard for a concert pianist to perform. Do you see what he means? Simplicity is the hardest taskmaster for anyone striving for perfection. If we're struggling with something complex, people will admire us for doing a difficult job well, but if we're struggling to present something simple with the perfection it calls for, and we can't do it, people wonder what's wrong with us, that we can't properly do something that – they say, they think – anyone could do!

The first step in writing is to identify what it is we want to do. The second step is to identify where we need to start, and that implies, as I've just said, that we will be able to find an easy – a simple – path from beginning to end. That further implies that it's our job, as writer, to give our readers not only an interesting and at least partially enjoyable journey if they travel with us, but that the journey, when ended, should seem to have been simple.

This means, or I think it means, that the writer should sense, before s/he begins, the dimensions of the whole undertaking, being ready to follow it in all its excursions and side tracks, in the certainty that all will help the reader to that satisfactory ending where all that can be explained is explained, and the inevitable mysteries are at least identified for further thought. A writer can't do much more than that. Notice that my ideas, as presented thus far, aren't about

the choice of words at all; those problems, if they are problems, lie ahead. In my experience, choosing words isn't very hard once these underlying problems have been solved. Slessor, in my view, wasn't choosing between fourteen or twenty four alternatives for one little spot in a longish poem, he was trying to find his way, and I think we can think of those lists of alternative words not so much as synonyms, nor even as competitors, or alternatives for each other, but as signposts pointing in a variety of directions. If he'd chosen this word here, he'd have had to choose other words there, because the direction of the poem would have changed. Its identity too would have changed because with a different endpoint it would have been a different poem.

So our questions are, first, what do we want to do, and second, how and where do we start/end? As questions, they're simple enough, though fiendish too. We've not yet reached, I hasten to point out, the question of style, though everything we are doing has a bearing on the nature of the style we'll need to employ. Let us imagine, and I'm smiling at this, that we've answered these questions and we're ready to start. We have now to proceed with the fewest number of bumps, distractions or puzzles for the uncertain reader. That is to say that our readers should feel no moments along the way when they feel lost and suspect that their guide is as lost as they are. If this happens, they will lose confidence, and if that happens the journey is doomed to end in some frustrating place far from its intended conclusion. This must not happen! Our forward journey needs to be carried out with confidence. We know why we're travelling, we know where we want to get to, the broad

aspects of our travel plan have been decided, we've chosen our vehicle, we've thought ahead, we're carrying spares, we've money and access to more, all we've got to do is drive! If we are writers, we travellers, we are now at the point where we can think about how we drive, or to vary the expression, the style we'll use to carry out our intentions. Style is the how of writing, not the where or why, though all these questions touch each other.

It will not have escaped the reader that, having raised the question of style, I've finally answered it with a metaphor: style is like – I'm into similes now, having reduced my claim slightly from its ambit – style is like driving once the destination and overall route have been chosen. That's what style is like (simile), that's what style is (metaphor). Let's explore this idea of driving for a moment. Most of us can drive, most of us have been driven, and we have our preferences, don't we? There are drivers I find reassuring, others that are good enough for me not to worry about, and there are others that make me feel vulnerable, a feeling I'd rather be without. There are a few drivers I wouldn't get into a car with and sensible drivers know they fall into this last category if they've been drinking. What's the similarity between driving and a writer's style? It's this: a different driver makes the journey different, and a different writer makes the experience of reading different, even when the topic under discussion is near enough to being the same. Writers have in common that hugest of subjects, the life around them, the life they've led, the lives they know. These things are so large they can only be talked about by making a choice, and the choice of subject, as I was trying to establish earlier, is not a matter

of style but a decision, or perhaps a choice, of the writer before s/he can exercise the skills of style. And yet the two are connected. The writer's personality is involved in the choice of subject matter, the way of opening it and the way of ending. This we already know; the style is in the way of doing. Let's take some examples to give us a chance to look, close-up, at these things. I mentioned Hal Porter and Patrick White a little earlier, so let's begin with them.

An intervention first. In the series of essays of which this is a part, I've made it my business to quote writers frequently, because it's my wish that readers should come away knowing what it is about each of the writers that led to their inclusion. As a critic I may say what I like but as a presenter it's my duty to let the writers speak for themselves; this means, dear reader, that you have, whether you've noticed or not, been presented endlessly with examples of each writer's style.

Back to Porter and White. Hal first (4):

Once upon a time, it seems, but in reality on or about the day King Edward VII died, these two corpses have been young, agile and lustful enough to mortise themselves together to make me. Since the dead wear no ears that hear and have no tongues to inform, there can now be no answer, should the question be asked, as to where the mating takes place, how zestfully or grotesquely, under which ceiling, on which kapok mattress – no answer, anywhere, ever.

I am exactly one week old when the first aeroplane ever to do so flies over my birthplace. On aesthetic grounds or for superstitious reasons I am unvaccinated; I am superstitiously and fashionably uncircumcised, plump, blue-eyed and



white-haired. I have a silver rattle, Hindu, in the shape of a rococo elephant hung on a bone ring. I crawl. *The Titanic* sinks. I stand. The Archduke is assassinated at Sarajevo, and I walk at last into my own memories.

And now, before we undertake any discussion of the methods employed in the above lines, a reminder of Patrick too (5).

In spite of her exhausted blood and torn feet, everything in fact which might have disposed her to melancholy, she was throbbing with a silent cheerfulness; until, from somewhere in the distant sunlight, an actual bird announced his presence in a dry, cynical crackle such as she associated with the country to which she and the convict were condemned.

Both quotations are short, but if we look at them closely we should be able to see a thing or two. Porter first. The corpses he mentions are those of his mother and his father, the only two corpses, he tells us, he's ever seen. The first, his mother, causes him to shed floods of tears; the second, his father, none at all. This distinction is made at the book's opening but why this should be so, it will take us the whole book to find out. Hal loved his mother as he loved no one else, and Mother loved her first-born in a way that couldn't be, and wasn't, repeated. Each was special to the other. Nonetheless, and be that as it may, a story has to be told, and the form is an autobiography, so its central figure has to be brought on – and is! He has a rattle, this baby, he crawls, he stands, he walks. Simple? Inevitable. It's everyone's history, unless they're crippled, and this child isn't. The trick is the spacing of these steps to maturity, and the interspersal between them of things that tell us of the world the child is entering – the rattle is silver, and Hindu; the *Titanic* sinks;

World War 1 starts; and the world's memories are ... not replaced ... added to by the memories of the writer – 'my own'. This simple, dichotomous presentation of the child and the world into which it is arriving is as masterful a piece of writing as one could wish to find, masterful because Porter's presentation – his realisation – of himself will be, as he must know, even at this early stage, as personal as it's possible to be, while the world can be brought forward with a few reminders of things well known to any half-literate reader. *The Titanic* and the assassination at Sarajevo. The child, Mother's first-born, is given a place in the world. The world is given a place surrounding the child. Its child? The question is implied. Does the world belong to us, as individuals, and do we belong to it? I think the answer to both questions is inescapably yes. We can't be separated from our time. Thus Hal's use of language, at the start of his greatest book, shows that his style is more than arbitrary, it's the embodiment of his way of looking at, of living in, the world. There's a highly individualised person shown in theatrical contrast with the wider world surrounding. If we go to the end of *The Extra* (6), his third and final vol of autobiography, we find the individual coming home after a journey to countries far away. The contrast, this time, is between the traveller returning to the room he vacated months before, and the clocks – the clocks! – which had to fill in time while he was away: either that, or stop, as Tam-Tam the German clock has done, needing, now that Hal's home, to be wound again. Tam-Tam has to be brought back to life, as its owner was once brought to life, decades before.

And now to Patrick White. The passage I've chosen to represent him – and I think his work probably contains a greater variety of styles than Porter's – seems unremarkable in its way of speaking, until you look more closely at what's being said, and how it expresses White's own position in life, and in particular his position in the land to which he returned in mid life. Ellen Gluyas, having been shipwrecked, has been taken in by a group of blacks; Ellen lives with them, then escapes with one of their number who is not what he first appears, but an escaped convict. They travel through the bush together, these two, making for 'civilisation', and, as I've described in an earlier essay, they reach its boundaries, at which point Ellen, but not her companion, leaves wandering behind. But is civilisation as good as the hopes Ellen ascribed to it, when rescue was uppermost in her mind? Civilisation as she's experienced it is English, and more recently the colonial form of English to be found in Tasmania, in convict-ridden Sydney, and in the lives of ship-board men. If she's to give up the native life she's been reduced to – or we might say discovered – she would like it to be for something better than she's likely to get in the tiny settlement existing at Brisbane. The country's empty of civilisation, or at least its more satisfying forms, and the dry cynical crackle which White presents is as much the sound of the whole country as it's the sound of a bird. This is no accidental coinciding of meanings, it's the very heart of the ambivalence White felt once he opted to resume existence in his homeland. His homeland? Sometimes he felt so, and sometimes he didn't. The key word is 'condemned'; it's obviously the word for the convict, but it's applied to Ellen too; she

too is condemned to be where she is and one of the things that gives *A Fringe of Leaves* its greatness is that Ellen and her guide, escaping, if that's the word, from the blacks, are not necessarily directed towards something better. They may be and they may not; that's the question White, ever so boldly, leaves open. In calling the bird's sound a dry cynical crackle White has affixed to the bird a trove of associations, many of them critical, or unpleasant, which he's collected in his years away and his later years of return. The bird which the escapees hear is speaking with a huge amount to say; this peculiar way White has of placing loads, caches, of meanings in unexpected places, disconcerting and sometimes alarming places, is the cause, I think, of most of the difficulties readers have in dealing with him – accepting his style, I think I mean to say. It's not easy to be comfortable with him because he's frequently uncomfortable with himself.

This discomfort is not a reduction in his quality as a writer, however, and many of his readers, as we know, find it to be the other way around. He's all the more willingly accepted by readers who feel the same discomfort with aspects of Australian life that he kept away from as best he could.

I hope to say more of this in a later essay on Shirley Hazzard, so will leave the matter there.

Before closing this essay on style I would like to make a few remarks about my own stylistic searches. They will be no more than personal but other writers and a few readers may find them interesting. For what they are worth they are offered here.

As a boy at school, I read widely. There were books we had to study but we were advised to read more broadly, and I did. I found reassurance when I discovered the Prefaces of George Bernard Shaw. Each of his plays was published with a discussion of the issues it raised, and these were written in an argumentative, expositional way I found ... essential. I was at the stage of searching for values myself, so I didn't care for works of literature that offered glimpses and glances without any hints as to the preferred or even correct interpretation. I am describing the state of being young, when one wants to know, to be informed, and never, please God, to be caught out looking silly because wrong. Bernard Shaw was always right, or he could argue so well that he seemed able to demolish the arguments put up to counter him, and this I felt was marvellous. He could do what I as a young man in search of a path through life couldn't do.

Years passed, I decided I would write about Gippsland, the place where I'd been working for twelve years, and it seemed to me, since I was an outsider, that is, not a Gippslander myself, that my writing style would have to be expository. I would be outlining my discoveries, and showing what I'd discovered to people who were even more outsiders than I was. I did not imagine myself as addressing my writing to those who lived in Gippsland itself. I rather doubted if they'd want to read what I had to say because I'd done what a native-born Gippslander wouldn't do – I'd packed my bags and left. How to write? My years of teaching had affected me. I'd learned always to step toward the audience and never away. Make bold statements then show what you mean by them.

If you have doubts, work them out in private and don't let the reader see you in any semblance of confusion. Bernard Shaw was my model in assertive self-confidence; his sentences were shapely and his vocabulary large. His longest sentences were arguments in themselves, while his short sentences – when they came! – were pithy. The man had wit. I had Shaw behind my shoulder as I set off on that first great prose undertaking, for which, of course, I wasn't really ready. Nobody is. It's only when you've written a few books that you're ready to think about the writing of books, because you don't know what you're doing until you've done it, silly as that may seem, and is.

Looking back on that first book now, there are places where I'm happy with the concordance of style and subject, but other places where they don't seem a very good fit. There's nothing to be done about this. Every painter, composer, choreographer has to do a first work, and will be lucky if that firstness doesn't show, at least in places. The greater test of a style is when a change is needed, and has to be found. This came, for me, when I was preparing my fifth book, *The Garden Gate*. This was a novel with a large cast of characters, and although one of them was central, being the link that held the others in the book's story, none of the characters' way of seeing, and living in, the world could be allowed dominance over the others. I needed an approach to my writing which allowed any of these characters in and out of the spotlight at any suitable moment. The personality of one character mustn't prejudice the arrival or departure of others. I wanted the reader to assume that even while his/her attention was focussed on one person, all the

others were proceeding with their lives, out of sight. The prose that I needed to write my book needed to convey this generality of focus to my readers.

How to do it? I didn't know and I didn't know anybody who could tell me. What I did know was that my style had to change. It had to alter itself so that it suited the new task I was intent on setting myself. I've described elsewhere (7) what I did; I dug out a recording I'd bought years earlier, and been puzzled by, of Debussy's opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*. I began to play this recording, over and over, asking myself what it was about Debussy that I wanted not so much to learn as to absorb. I absorbed, as best I could, for two years, until I thought I was ready. My prose, when I started to write the book, was different. It was more mobile and it was ready to jump in any direction at any moment. That felt right! I was pleased. What else? I began to think about prose, what it could and couldn't do. I became envious of musicians, because music could speak simply, or with great complexity. It could use contrasting themes at one and the same time. It could be loud or soft, fast or slow. It could use huge forces and then reduce them, or vice versa. It seemed able to do a great deal that prose couldn't do – or so I told myself.

This was a challenge. Perhaps prose could do these things that music did, but writers hadn't striven to achieve them yet. I decided to work towards making my prose musical, that is to say, that it should possess the attributes I admired in music. I worked on with *The Garden Gate* and when I finished the book I assumed that my writing style would revert to something like it had been before. But it didn't. The business of turning prose into music, or

making the one resemble the other, continued in an underground way. I'd changed my style forever, or rather, I'd handed control of any choices of style I might make to the demands of whatever I might decide to write next. I realised, after a while, that much as I loved and admired the music of Claude-Achille Debussy, I loved and admired – I was in touch with – W.A.Mozart more. I wanted to write prose as Mozart wrote music, and I was conscious that it simply couldn't be done. The composer was too good for anyone to follow, or try to imitate, and he'd written at a certain time in history that had passed. European history – world history – had darkened since the Enlightenment! Nonetheless, I knew what I wanted. I had an ideal, I was prepared to pursue it, it might not be achievable but it could be an influence, pressing in from time to time.

I won't say that I changed my style but I certainly allowed it to change. I welcomed what was happening. Eventually I wrote a little memoir called *Mozart*, trying to find that exhilarating sprightliness and lift which is in his music. It's time, though, to put aside the names of famous composers and ask what I was doing, or allowing to happen to, my style. The famous names are indicative, they point the mind in certain directions, but it's prose that we're talking about and it's hard to hold prose pure because it has so many different jobs to do, some of them earthy, some sublime, some matter of fact and day to day, some of them matters of inquiry into things we struggle to understand. In a way, we make it harder and harder to answer questions about our writing styles as we go further with our development because, as stated earlier, the style is the man/woman, it must respond as the writer develops, matures, and the writer can't, simply can't, know everything about him/

herself because the writer uses writing to catch up with his/her development, not to define it. The writer who's too absorbed in himself isn't absorbed enough in what else is going on. The writer needs to be unselfconscious about style in order to let style do what it's supposed to do – that is, act as the pipe that brings the waters of experience and meaning to those who need a drink. We may say that a certain writer's style is static, or in transition, according to whether or not the writer's mind is static or in transition. Is the writer's personality absorbing new experience, and being modified? If so, the style of expression will be changing too, if only subtly. No? Then the style can stay still, for a while. In this sense style is a barometer displaying many facets of the person who's in charge of the writing, always assuming - as for the most part I don't – that the writer is in charge of what's being written, rather than the books themselves being in charge (my general view). A barometer: a measure: a method of calculation but not the substance being measured, which is personality, after all, another concept that's mysteriously difficult to define.

The style is the personality's way of expressing itself. We haven't got any further, have we, than 'The style is the man'? No further at all. Perhaps the problem's with the nature of the question we put to ourselves. Perhaps we can't get a firm answer at all, but there's no doubt that style exists.

I have a silver rattle, Hindu, in the shape of a rococo elephant hung on a bone ring. I crawl. The *Titanic* sinks. I stand. The Archduke is assassinated at Sarajevo, and I walk at last into my own memories.

I crawl, I stand, I walk, says Hal, and what does Patrick say?

... she was throbbing with a silent cheerfulness; until, from somewhere in the distant sunlight, an actual bird announced his presence in a dry, cynical crackle such as she associated with the country to which she and the convict were condemned.

Let's look at them again:

... I walk at last into my own memories ...

And:

... the country to which she and the convict were condemned ...

The style is the man, and there's certainly a difference, isn't there?

1. *Oztralia*, Chester Eagle, Trojan Press, Melbourne, 2005. Immediate reference is to the chapter called 'The Land (4)', pages 50 – 58, but see also chapter called 'Owning Ourselves', pages 107 – 121 for further quotations from Australian writers. The book can be located at the [trojanpress.com.au](http://trojanpress.com.au) website, under the menu item 'Our Books'.
2. *Kenneth Slessor: a biography*, Geoffrey Dutton, Penguin, Melbourne, 1991
3. *A Man of Sydney: An Appreciation of Kenneth Slessor*, Douglas Stewart, Nelson, Melbourne, 1977
4. *The Watcher on the Cast Iron Balcony*, Hal Porter, Faber & Faber, London 1963
5. *A Fringe of Leaves*, Patrick White, Jonathon Cape, London, 1976
6. *The Extra*, Hal Porter, Nelson, Melbourne, 1975
7. See my [trojanpress.com.au](http://trojanpress.com.au) website, go to 'Our Books', scroll down to *The Garden Gate*, then click on 'About the Writing of this Book'.

## A place too big: Australia as a collection of regions

The Australia I grew up in had seven million people, a third of what we have today (2009). Our land mass is not quite as big as America and somewhat smaller than China but it's the emptiness, the vast areas not filled with anything, that give us a feeling of our country's size. We come now to the greatest paradox about this land – its unity. We can go to the bottom of Tasmania and find our way back, up the coast or inland, to Cape York, and, though the country will be changing all the way, and the vegetation and the birds, the transitions will be gradual; we won't have a feeling of separation, of losing one thing and entering another, or if we do, it will always be within a feeling of connection, one part to another. The same holds true when we travel east to west, or west to east. Despite the Nullarbor and other desolate stretches from the Kimberleys to the Bight, we'll never be in doubt that our move is being made across one great land. There are state boundaries of course, but as we cross them, they feel artificial; the land, we tell ourselves, has no idea that it's changed from being Queensland to being New South Wales!

Against this unity, however, there's diversity. The simplest way to see this is to look at a map – and they exist, these days – showing the locales of Australia's aboriginal groups, pre-white settlement. The land mass so inscribed breaks up into scores of territories, with not a straight line in sight because the aboriginal boundaries were responsive to local conditions – water, things to eat. It's hard to imagine two aboriginal groups separating

themselves along a watercourse, as New South Wales and Victoria did in 1851, nor laying down a state for a settlement, as the English governors did when they created the states which consolidated to form our country. It's hard to imagine aboriginal groups settling a boundary along a line because they didn't understand the land that way. The straight line, which has been such a factor in Australia's settlement, is a statement deriving more from ignorance, or perhaps indifference, than from knowledge. Knowledge is more inclined to cluster than to separate and if we think back to the days before white settlement, the clustering of knowledge took place among mobile or even very mobile groups, so that it was an endlessly changing map that we'd need to draw to schematise the life and knowledge of the great south land.

And yet, for better or for worse, we speak of the Australian character, Australian literature, the Australian parliament in the national capital, surmounted by our flag, and defended by our navy, army, et cetera. We speak – or we don't, depending on where we stand on certain matters – of Australia's literature, our music, our arts. We speak of a national opera company, a national ballet, as we speak of a national cricket team, of which we're meant to be proud.

And yet, again, this can only go so far because it isn't exactly how we feel about our country, a place of many different parts as much as it's a whole. I'm thinking of something which surprised

many readers when it appeared in 1964, a piece by Hal Porter about South Gippsland (1), where he was living with his sister and her husband at Hedley, near Yarram. He'd been drawing as he moved about the district, and he would never have lacked for people to take him around, he'd been observing in his sharpest way, and he set down what he'd seen:

Fashionable painters would have the world of mugs believe, it seems, that Australia is a beige waste littered with dehydrated tree-roots, blanched heifer-skulls, and larrikin Kellys. That, maybe, is one truth. It does not work for South Gippsland, Victoria, where, for example, in November, ditches and drains and soggy depressions are clogged to overbrimming with lacquered buttercups; hawthorn hedges are clotted with curds of blossom; here are dandelions and brier roses and gorse – pre-Raphaelite stuff, dewdrops and all.

His characterisation of South Gippsland goes on for pages, drawings and all. It was an Australia, or part thereof, that he loved, understood, and made his home for some years. This I understand well; I fell in love with Gippsland, though I'd come from the Riverina, and had only to return to it, after a few years away, to know that something of me would always belong to the places where my father and his father had come from, in and among the stretches of flat land where the Murray and its tributaries and billabongs dawdled between their mountains and the sea. From plains to mountains! The basis of my life had shifted, and I'd added to one understanding, one set of lore and legend, another, long known to others but new to me.

Years passed, as I am fond of saying, and other regions opened for me. Far north Queensland, central Australia, stretches of Tasmania, and the south-west of the country too, where the Southern Ocean and the Indian Ocean bump each other for access to the beaches of Australia's far left corner, as one looks at a map. What a huge, what a varied yet marvellously unified place! But one place, or many, or both?

This is where our writers come in. It's both, but it's only when we know the regions that we can merge them to know the unity as well. The whole is made up of the parts, and some of these parts have been explored, others not, some have been well expressed while others wait for voices to bring them to life. If you go to north-east Victoria, zone of the Kelly gang, follow them down to Euroa or up to Jerilderie for their hold-ups, you'll find writers there, Max Brown among them with his *Australian Son*, and once the shooting's died away at Glenrowan you can follow Max to the western outback in *The Jimberi Track* and *The Black Eureka* (both Australasian Book Society, 1966 and 1976), or in some of the stories in his later collection, *Buttered Toast*, (Turton & Armstrong, Sydney, 1999). You can drop down to the bottom of Western Australia for Katherine Susannah Prichard's *Working Bullocks* or you can swing up to the goldfields for Gavin Casey's *It's Harder for Girls*. You can go after Christopher Koch (*To the Islands*, *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*), or Donald Stuart (*Yandy*). The land has been given an imaginative dimension that will spring to life whenever there's a downpour of interest ... something which happens all too rarely, I fear, in an age saturated with entertainments manufactured for the soothing

of our minds. Writers are normally described, in a way that suits publishers, as wanting to meet the public via sales, but what writers want is readers, and having worked long and hard in their solitary cells, they'll take any path that's offered to reach them; hence their ease of control for publishers. Writers are occasionally, however, glimpsed with other writers; here's Hal Porter again, talking of his compatriot scribblers in Adelaide, not long after an account of a vastly different meet of writers in Edinburgh, where exhibitionism knew no bounds:

What's intoxicating about them off-stage isn't so much their being members of one craft, or individually remarkable, but their high-lighted Australianism. It's they, not politicians or academics, gurus or other picturesque lunatics who, by their solitary labours, give a phosphorescent glow to the name 'Australia'. It's they who strain to grasp the ungraspable, and leave their findings for Posterity to prowling around sniffing at truths about a unique continent. Journalists make sordid events seem more commonplace and one-dimensional than they are. Authors, desiring to leave a deeper and more permanent impress on the sensibilities, deal in many dimensions.

He goes on to list names, some of them behind him in the past, others contemporary:

Henry Handel Richardson, Eleanor Dark, Kenneth Mackenzie, T.A.G. Hungerford, Eve Langley, Kylie Tennant, Miles Franklin, Thea Astley, Vance Palmer, Marjorie Barnard, George Turner, Thelma Forshaw, Randolph Stow, Ian Mudie, Elizabeth Riddell, Nancy Phelan, Hugh Atkinson ... the cavalcade is long, and stumbles by silhouetted against its

own perpetual sunset ... leave gift-wrapped observations for the unborn to read.

'Perpetual sunset': what does he mean? I think he's referring to the thing that caused him in the same book (*The Extra*) to tell us about the last time he saw each of a number of writers he's known, notably Kenneth Slessor (Farewell, thou pilferer!), a man brought marvellously to life in Porter's pages. We might say that they all live, even if only mentioned, because their work's acknowledged as bringing the country to life inside the minds of those who dwell in it. Their books, their poems, may be ignored but they simply refuse to drop completely from sight. Once printed, and brought to life in a few readers' imaginations, they exist. Whatever's cased inside them is always available, now, for anyone who cares to look. The saying is the thing. The perceptions would be lost if not recorded, but, having once been recorded, they can lie dormant for decades, quiescent but innately challenging, invigorating to anyone who bothers to notice, and listen.

Writers, even the blustery, self-opinionated ones, are the self-analysis of a society, the inner life, the source of ideas and inner consideration. Life goes on around us every minute of every day, but then it all happens again, inside the imagination, brought back to be considered in another way by those who have a gift for this sort of thing. There will always be writers we can relate to easily and others who are closed books. This is nothing new. We have to find, each of us, those writers who quicken our minds so that we live our lives – or those parts of it we're prepared to face again – a second time. It's commonly said that those who aren't prepared to



learn from history – history and story are basically the same word – are condemned to repeat it; we could add to that the thought that those who can't repeat their lives inside their imaginations hardly live a first time, let alone a second. Half a century ago it was common for psychologists of a certain sort to talk about humanity's hierarchy of needs, but these people never had any place on their variously constructed ladders for the imagination, which should have been placed, sitting, on the very first, and top, rung! Mankind without its imagination in full flight isn't even alive, and it's in the imaginations of artists, writers among them, that the rebirthing takes place. Writing is no luxury, it's one of our most important activities, a surprising number of people aspire to do it, but only a limited number of them achieve very much. Every second person says 'I could write a book!' and there's also the saying that there's at least one book in every life, if only the story could be written.

The stories are written, of course, by the people whose work I've been considering, but readers, and even more the non-readers, in this country have been shy of giving writers and their books what's due to them. This is why, finally, this series of essays is being written, but I fear I have broadened my discourse a little too far and too early, so let me now restate my theme of my country's literature being a collection of regional statements. This is, I know full well, the opposite of another well-known way of looking at literature, namely the idea of a canon, a list, a cluster, a sort of gentlepeople's club of great books. People whose judgement of books is aesthetic, or they believe it is, normally think in this way, judging books, eliminating or relegating most, allowing a selected few into an

inner sanctum. People of this sort allocate books a ranking, and they reserve a privileged place for those they think worthy. A large number of people think this way, even if only by default, whereas the opposite way of looking is closer to geographical than aesthetic. Regions, areas, locales, are expected to produce a literature focussed on what's special about their place. Any place worth knowing has its literature, its art, making it worthy of consideration – even a visit!

I imagine that these two ways of looking at books have their origins in two ways of looking at the world. Do we take ourselves as central, and concentrate on things that add quality to our vision, our way of seeing, or do we take ourselves largely for granted and focus on learning about the world around us? The former view, making the individual centrally important, calls for 'quality' and satisfaction; the latter view, more concerned with what's out there than with the central self, is prepared to pick up knowledge wherever it can be found. I find myself, when travelling in areas I want to know about and which haven't yet produced much by way of 'literature', buying roughly written memoirs or little histories by people who have no training because if I don't read these sources, there won't be any other, and because sometimes the writings of the unlettered tell readers things that they'll never get from specialists.

Sometimes, with this kind of writing, it's the things unsaid that are most eloquent. I've recently been reading *Seventeen Years Wandering among the Aborigines* by James Morill (actually Murrells), dated 1864 (2). The modern reader will find that what s/he most wants to be told isn't there. Readers of 1864 may have been

enthralled by accounts of ships crashing on rocks and parties of survivors finding their way across the ocean (and the Great Barrier Reef in this case) to shore, but when a white lad survives these early dangers and has seventeen years with the blacks, causing him to write with such sympathy and affection that you conjecture that he must have become one of the tribe in at least some shape or form, the silence, the barrier inside the writer's mind, is most frustrating. I am speaking of an insoluble problem. Writers address their readers, and James Morrill's readers would have been shocked to hear of a white man partnering black women, perhaps having children. Did this happen? Who can say? James Morrill doesn't, yet something about the way he speaks of his Townsville area people suggests to this reader that he was young and adaptable enough to join his rescuers as much as they were willing to accept him. How far was that? He probably didn't know himself, and he was certainly inhibited, on his return to white civilisation, about telling of his commitment to the blacks' way of living. So he said what he felt free to say, and it wasn't very much because most of what he had to tell them – and us, a century and a half later – fell in the area of things unsayable. We are left guessing. We can surmise, of course, but what we come up with is a modern fiction and can't be verified.

This brings us to the imagination's limits. People may have an array of feelings, experiences, reactions and ideas but if they don't write them down, they're lost. Intuition can only take us so far. People must be open enough to tell us what's in their minds, or we'll never know. Was Porter right to call Slessor a pilferer, taking

unwritten poems to the grave? Perhaps; we'll never know. Or was it that Slessor realised that once he passed a certain point there was nothing there? We'll never know, will we? We don't always get answers to our questions. I say the imagination has limits; perhaps 'limitations' would be a better word. Limitations, defects ... The imagination liberates, but it doesn't always know what it's doing. The imagination runs the risk of not knowing where it is, of forgetting the ground under its feet in favour of staring into space. And yet, as I've said several times, without our imaginations we're hardly alive, and the nation's literature is the life of its imagination. We have to deal with the things inside us, pressing on the linings that keep us together, functioning. Every one of the books discussed in these essays had to be written because something urgent pressed on a writer's mind. Literature, if seen completely in this way, would have to be an inner, a psychological, process – and it is. And yet, books are redolent of the places of their creation. I've criticised *Voss* for not being able to leave the world Patrick White knew, and I've praised Furphy's *Such Is Life* for restricting its field of action to the Riverina, which Furphy knew well. All writers' minds have limits, and these are linked with the areas they know and the forces and influences that anyone living in the area would be exposed to.

So it is not entirely unrealistic to think of literature as belonging to the region, the group of people, the place, where it was formed. I speak of something highly inexact, but substantial nonetheless. So where do we go from here?

The place to look, I think, is the boundary of the nation we are considering. This would seem easy to define, since it's an island

nation. Let the high-tide line be the boundary! The real boundary, however, is to be found inside the mind, and it's the place – the confusion, more probably – where the home-grown meets the globally shared. If we read accounts of the early settlement of New South Wales, we find that the whitefellas and the blackfellas were very curious about each other; curious – and scared. In those earliest days of contact, the numbers on both sides were small, but before too long more and more settlers – and convicts – arrived from England, and the black people's population declined from loss of land, disease, massacres, and – this mustn't be ignored – loss of heart. They could see that they were losing. The newcomers sought to settle a land they didn't understand. Certain things did well, others didn't. They fell on the trees with axes, they unleashed hard-hooved animals on the soil. They created an entirely different style of economy. They linked it to the world outside. They went exploring. New settlers kept arriving; they're coming still, today. What led to the almost-extirpation of the black people was the relentlessness of the invasion. It gave the black people little chance to regroup. Their way of life was so well-balanced that it could hardly recover from the disruption it experienced ...

What has this to do with our nation's literature? Quite a lot. Everything that takes place in our country takes place in a context of competing world-systems. Paradoxically, the stronger side, the nearly-always-winning side, has the weaker understanding of the land which is in dispute. The black people, in their fightback, have to convince the white people – who are endlessly reinforced in their ignorance by the ignorance of newly arriving migrants – that the

foundation of western capitalism – endless growth – is impossible, and dominance must give way to working within what's available. Globalisation will force this realisation on people eventually, but we are still a long way from general acceptance. The best ally the black people have in their recovery is the land they understood so well. It simply won't allow the European-American civilisation to do whatever it likes wherever it likes. Unfortunately, its lessons are taught in a way that's destructive; if irrigators take too much water for their own purposes, gum trees die downstream. Wetlands dry up ... and so on. This process of adaptation – the land to the purposes of the settlers, and the settlers to the land they're learning to use, and actually, and not surprisingly, to love – is going on all the time, and it's a little different from place to place, region to region. Australia is many places, and it's one. Its places are vastly different, and yet the struggle I've just described is common to all. Similar processes are going on everywhere, each happening in a local way. People's minds are everywhere engaged with the same issues, but the issues take different forms, according to whereabouts they're placed in the continua I mentioned, early on – north to south, east to west.

People live, they digest their experience, some of them put it into words. There are humble memoirs, scratchy letters, government or council reports ... and there are occasional works that set the imagination alight. 'Henry Handel Richardson, Eleanor Dark' ... what was it, again? ... 'the cavalcade is long, and stumbles by silhouetted against its own perpetual sunset ... leave gift-wrapped observations for the unborn to read.' The country's life is in its

literature, and its literature rises out of its life, if all's proceeding properly. Things are different from place to place, though, so we have to be travellers, wanderers, to know what our country has to say.

Start at the bottom: *For the Term of His Natural Life* takes us to Port Arthur prison settlement, a place remembered for its darker side, and not its more progressive – but that's an historian's argument, and readers of Marcus Clarke will know it his way. Price Warung gave us the dark side of convict life too, and not so much about prisoners who got pardons, or emancipation, married and had the early citizens of our land. I say 'the bottom'; I mean geographically, on the way to Antarctica ... but if I start chronologically, at the beginning of my own life, I remember the Riverina, and the belt of redgums following the Murray a little way to the south of our farm. I saw many sights which, reading *Such Is Life* several decades later, could be projected on a screen as a backdrop for the action. Tom Collins had told his story, and I didn't know about it – yet. I turned twelve, I went away to school in Melbourne. To this day, aged seventy six, I can remember waking in my dormitory that first morning, and seeing, out the window behind the opposite row of beds, a house the likes of which I'd never seen. Storks made of stone paraded its parapets. The thing stood high, as no dwelling in the Riverina stood. 'What's that?' I asked. Nobody knew. They were new kids, like me. In the months that followed I got opportunities to look at the strange house, standing in Labassa Grove, Caulfield. Aha! Now you know its name. It had been built with goldrush money, elaborately as possible, in the way of the late

nineteenth century, by people about whom I knew nothing. Time passed, in the way it has of doing – in the way that brought me across the years between seeing Talbingo for the first time, driving home to the Riverina from a visit to the Snowy Mountains hydro-electric scheme, to reading in a book that Miles Franklin had stayed with her grandmother at that very spot, and had loved it ever after – years passed, and I read the poetry of Kenneth Slessor:

I thought of what you'd written in faint ink,  
Your journal with the sawn-off lock, that stayed behind  
With other things you left, all without use,  
All without meaning now, except a sign  
That someone had been living who now was dead:  
"At Labassa. Room 6 x 8  
On top of the tower; because of this, very dark  
And cold in winter. Everything has been stowed  
Into this room – 500 books all shapes  
And colours, dealt across the floor  
And over sills and on the laps of chairs;  
Guns, photos of many different things  
And different curios that I obtained ..."

Joe Lynch had lived in the tower room of the house that I saw, that first morning of my six years at boarding school, and something like twenty years had to pass before I discovered this, and felt that it had meaning for me. What meaning, you may ask, for we all know that when we are excited by some discovery other people merely comment, 'So what?'

So what if Joe Lynch had lived for a while in the tower room of a quaint house that's stuck in my mind because I first saw it when

my young life encountered a dislocation? Does that bring Joe, or Slessor, any closer to me, and what does it matter if it did?

What does it matter, indeed? I find it matters terribly to me, as if a cloud had lowered itself to tell me that my life would change by its words. I've used the word 'imagination' a lot in this essay; let me switch to 'illumination'. Poetry, when it's working well, sends shafts of light into our minds. It causes us to see things differently. It brings us into touch with a numinous world that we know surrounds us, almost all the time, but makes itself felt – or visible – only occasionally. Each of these experiences tells us that things are not quite as we'd previously understood them – there's another layer there, connections we hadn't had made for us, until we realised ...

Realised what?

Consciousness is always trying to enlarge itself for our benefit. We have limited minds, limited capacity to deal with perceptions when they arrive. We need to know more than we will ever know. We invent the idea of god to cope with our shortcomings. Knowing as little as we do, and understanding less, we're reassured by the idea of a transcendent intelligence out there, understanding all the things we can't understand and untroubled by the questions we can't answer for ourselves. The idea of god is a comfort! But as we grow up we realise that it's a walking stick and we become too proud to use it. Brave souls, we are! But we stumble from time to time, and doubt if we're as sure-footed as we need to be. Our doubts are well-placed: we aren't. We look around, and we're grateful for the insights of our poets, our artists, composers and

writers because they give us at least something of what we want to know. Troubled by the death of Joe, Slessor asked himself:

Where have you gone? The tide is over you,  
The turn of midnight water's over you,  
As Time is over you, and mystery,  
And memory, the flood that does not flow.  
You have no suburb, like those easier dead  
In private berths of dissolution laid –  
The tide goes over, the waves ride over you  
And let their shadows down like shining hair,  
But they are Water; and the sea-pinks bend  
Like lilies in your teeth, but they are Weed;  
And you are only part of an Idea.

Slessor goes on, doing his best to work it out, finding the limits of his poetry as he finds the limits of his mind, and, in finishing his poem, accepting that he will, before too long, finish writing poetry because it can only take him so far, and he wants to go further but knows, having questioned the absence of Joe, that it's simply not in him to get any further than he has in his great poem. I count it a privilege to have been brought a tiny bit closer to Slessor's poem by reason of knowing that house, that tower room where Joe lived for a while, so that I have a step, an open door, into 'Five Bells', and can travel with the poet fractionally more easily as we bring ourselves to face those ever so final words, five bells. They are the end of everything, or so we say, but things go on, forever surrounding us, and when we consider our imaginative lives, it is a help if we can find steps of entry, open doors, between the world around us we know well and the world of illumination which writers open for us,

every once in a while. Writers need help, and all our little tricks, to get ourselves from one world to the other. Readers need help too, and the regional references in a piece of writing – the things that can cause a reader to step back and say, ‘Oh yes, I’ve been there’ or ‘I’ve seen that place at the very same time of day!’ – are a help, an encouragement, to help us take the imaginative steps we need to take to share the illumination that good writing can bring.

1. ‘Hal Porter’s Australia: South Gippsland and its towns’, illustrated and written by Hal Porter, in *Australian Letters*, Vol 6, Nos 3-4, Adelaide, September 1964
2. Republished by David M Welch, Box 503, CMB 19, Virginia, Northern Territory 0822 in 2006 as No. 1 in *Australian Aboriginal Culture Series*; the full title in 1864 was ‘Sketch of a residence among the aboriginals of Northern Queensland for seventeen years, being a narrative of my life, shipwreck, landing, on the coast, residence among the aboriginals, with an account of their manners and customs, and mode of living. Together with notices of many of the natural productions, and of the nature of the country’.

## *Tirra Lirra by the River*

Writers belong to their time. Jessica Anderson was born in 1916, and *Tirra Lirra by the River* was published in 1978. If we wish to furnish the years between, we'll need a world war or two, a depression, a terrifying nuclear bomb, and we mustn't forget a couple of waves of the women's movement, altering the consciousness of somewhat more than half the human race. One way to see this change is to examine the claims made by activists demanding a different interaction of males and females, and a related and somewhat more cooling way to look at it is to ask how far, if at all, the clamour, the public disturbance, actually changed women's lives. *Tirra Lirra* is something of a case study in this respect. It begins by bringing Nora Porteous, a woman in her seventies, home to the house where she was brought up, a Queenslander on stumps, with fourteen steps to get to the living quarters, and Brisbane around her, the city she couldn't wait to get away from. At the beginning of the book she's back, and at the end of the book she's still there; she's been unwell, she's spent a lot of time sleeping, she's had visits from the doctor and some neighbours who feel she needs to be looked after. She has this need, yet she's tougher than they know, and there's an awful lot of remembering, and evaluating, going on as she recovers her strength. Travel's wearied her, and there's also the invisible stress of readjustment. The book is a journey too, backwards and forwards in the life she's had, which she's in the business of assessing. There have been ups and downs, a terrible marriage, a

few weeks of happiness in a shipboard romance, a ghastly abortion, a certain satisfaction with her dressmaking skills ... there's a whole life to be weighed up, once it's been recalled, and, in the eyes, the judgement, of the women's movement, Nora has been the classic female victim of the patriarchal times, and yet ...

And yet!

Jessica Anderson has a second theme to develop, and, like Helen Garner in *The Children's Bach*, she uses the poet Tennyson to introduce it.

From underneath his helmet flowed  
His coal-black curls as on he rode,  
As he rode down to Camelot.  
From the bank and from the river,  
He flashed into the crystal mirror,  
'Tirra lirra' by the river  
Sang Sir Lancelot.

The young Nora is crazy about poetry:

... I was – am – a person of undisciplined mind, and in spite of the passion I had for poetry, I could seldom hold more than a few consecutive lines in my head. The poetry in my head was like a jumble of broken jewellery. Couplets, fragments, bits of bright alliteration, and some dark assonance. These, like Sir Lancelot's helmet and his helmet feather, burned like one burning flame together.

She goes straight on to tell us about a night when she was walking home after visiting her friend Olive Partridge. Something causes her to put down her music case, and she lies on the ground, having unbuttoned her bodice to release her breasts. The moon shines down on her, highlighting her breasts, and, she says, she fell into a prolonged trance, from which she was woken by the approach of a horse, 'a big bay, walking slowly and pulling grass with thievish and desperate-looking jerks of the head'. Nora jumps up, adjusts her clothing and goes home. Something about her nature has been revealed to her. Years later, back at home in that high-stumped Queensland house, she thinks what her London friends Lisa and Hilda would have said if she'd told them.

'Of course, Nora, you were looking for a lover.'

And Hilda. 'But of course! As girls did in those days, without even knowing it.'

Nora accepts this as true enough, but only in a limited way.

And I would probably have said, yes, of course, because in these times, when sexuality is so very fashionable, it is easy to believe that it underlies all our actions. But really, though I am quite aware of the sexual nature of the incident, I don't believe I was looking for a lover. Or not only for a lover. I believe I was also trying to match that region of my mind, Camelot.

So Camelot is more than a place of story, it's part of her mind, and she becomes aware of this when still quite young.

... I was a backward and innocent girl, living in a backward and unworldly place. And consider, too, that the very

repression of sex, though it produced so much that was warped and ugly and cruel, let loose for some natures, briefly, a luminosity, a glow, that I expect is unimaginable now, and that for those natures, it was possible to love and value that glow far beyond the fire that was its origin.

Even to set down, as simply as possible, this alternative path of thought which is shown us early in the book, is to make me aware of the risks involved in assessing *Tirra Lirra by the River* in any formulaic way. Jessica Anderson is affected by her historical time, and our interpretation of its movements is relevant in forming a reaction to her book, but there is at all times another side to what she's telling us. Her method of writing, I think, contains a warning. Don't accept the formulaic, doctrinaire interpretation as anything but a first response, useful perhaps, but limited, even wretchedly so if it persists in ignoring the other levels that are available to the sympathetic reader.

So, having given ourselves this warning, let us look for another way of reading this book which, I notice, my edition (Picador/Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 1978) refers to as a novel, whereas I would classify it as a novella, something I do because the term 'novella' is a diminutive form of the word 'novel' and this normally implies that the writer has performed the difficult trick of making something which is apparently small imply an unexpected range, scope or size. This certainly applies to *Tirra Lirra*.

Another way of reading. How else can we look at the book?

It's essentially the story of one woman, and she tells it herself, yet we notice that she pushes things out of her mind if she doesn't care to look at them. We're told this in terms of things being



invisible on the far side of a moon. If she can't see them then she doesn't think about them, though occasionally the moon spins of itself to remind her of something. With a narrative method working along these lines we can hardly expect much analysis. The knights of Camelot were no more or less thoughtful, or introspective, than anyone else of their period. There's a rare assertion early in the book's second half and the way we come to it is indicative, in my view, of how Nora's, and Jessica Anderson's, mind works.

I had lost my distaste for London. The Georgian terraces that had formerly seemed repellently chilly I now saw as formal and peaceful. I never lived in one of them. It was always my luck to find accommodation in houses of a later date, usually Victorian. But these too were spacious and solid. I never once lived in an ill-proportioned room.

Lucky Nora! She should have tried modern Melbourne! Or she might have wondered about her underlying certainty that she will leave London one day to return to Sydney. Instead she buys curtains and a Persian rug for her new quarters, and then, impulsively, she makes a decision to go into business for herself. A brass plate will be needed, her friends tell her, so she puts one up:

NORA PORTEOUS – DRESSMAKER

The confidence of capital letters speaks loudly in this quiet book. In the very next line Nora says something about herself:

'I have come a long roundabout way,' I remarked to David,  
'to find out who I am.'

*Tirra Lirra by the River* is then a journey of discovery. Jessica Anderson allows her central figure to speak for herself, to find

her own way through the various experiences that return to her mind now that she's back in Brisbane, with most of her life behind her. It's as if the writer is listening to her character's wandering thoughts and sometimes disjointed utterances, reaching out with skilled, or do I mean well-trained, fingers to grasp the important threads as they appear, and assist them in finding the shapes they need. Skilful as she is as a shaper of narrative, it's not easy to catch her at her work. The whole thing moves unobtrusively, with flashes of irritation as a minor character – Jack or Betty Cust, for instance, or Lyn Wilmot – cuts across her train of thought. Nora doesn't want, or expect, her thinking to be diverted, although she has some skill in hiding this, as in fact she hides a good deal of what's happening inside her. This – to revert to my earlier line of thought, about feminism or ignorance-of-feminism as giving us a way to interpret the book – shows in the numerous occasions when something within her comes to the surface, usually surprising Nora, finding her unready:

I no longer thought of Sir Lancelot. The war, and the boys under the camphor laurels, had obliterated him. But perhaps not quite. At intervals all through my life, sometimes at very long intervals, there has flashed on my inner vision the step of a horse, the nod of a plume, and at those times I have been filled for a moment with a strange chaotic grief.

It's tempting to think of Sir Lancelot as a motif impelling the book along, but it doesn't seem to work that way. He's more of a reminder, I think, of levels of the mind that are not in use but may surprise us at any time by causing us to do something, or see things in a surprising way, thus pushing Nora's story – and ours too, by

implication – in some new direction. Schematic descriptions of the ways in which the mind works – the subconscious sending bubbles to the surface, and that sort of thing – have no appeal to Jessica Anderson. In fact, scanning the surface of her prose in an attempt to discern her methods of writing, I would say that she is hardly an analyst at all, but operates on the assumption that whatever's important will make itself visible at some suitable occasion, so long as writer and readers are ready at all times for whatever comes. A disturbance in the lower, out of sight realms of the psyche usually means, within the world of this book, that something unexpected is about to be introduced. In the previous quotation, for instance, Jessica Anderson tells us about Nora's 'strange chaotic grief'. In the very next line she goes on to tell us how, one morning when she was at the Custs' shop – this was before she went away – she 'wept and wept'. Why, she asks, and at once tells us that she can't remember. What she does remember, a few lines later, is someone practising the piano in a room upstairs – 'the vacuous up-and-down march of piano scales played with boredom'. Nothing develops from this at the time, but a hundred pages later Jack Cust's brother Arch re-enters the narrative as the one who was not only practising the piano but doing so in a way that he knew would attract the attention of young Nora, visiting the house beneath him. Arch was, as an immature lad of thirteen, developing the habits of the girl-chaser that he was to become, though he married eventually a girl of eighteen, when he was thirty nine, and, Nora tells us, they lived happily ever after. Arch now lives far to the north of Jack and Betty Cust – and the returned Nora Porteous – but he sends

his brother a case of pawpaws once in a while, and Nora takes delight in eating one of them ... all of which might appear to be of no consequence except that Nora is alive to these little connections between parts of herself she knows about and parts she doesn't, and is aware, too, that these unexpected connections are clues, perhaps, to other connections, invisible ones, to the characters of those who act on them without thinking. *Tirra Lirra by the River* is a book of recall, or perhaps I could say a book constructed using recall, a rather arbitrary, unpredictable building method, but one that's uncommonly effective because it's so true to life. Most of us can point to aspects of our lives that we feel we can explain quite well because we have sufficient understanding, but for every one of these there are others where we don't really know why things turned out as they did. Nora Porteous is not the sort of person who knows why things turned out as they did. She represses; she denies. Her understandings only arrive in flashes. Much of the time she makes little attempt to control events, so that when she does, it becomes doubly significant.

After the failure of her marriage, she gets on a ship to England. On board the ship, she has an affair. This lasts for the six weeks of the voyage, then Nora tells her lover that when the ship arrives there will be no further contact. No meetings, no messages. The affair will end with the journey, as if it had all taken place out of time, and would be destroyed when clock and calendar resume their sway. When the ship docks, the man's wife is there to greet him. Jessica Anderson offers no description of the wife, and indeed, she goes further than that: she never tells the reader the name of

the man Nora is making love with, happily, and walking the decks with, talking. This is as close as her life comes to Camelot – or is it? Camelot is there as a reminder of the dimension it exists in, but the dimension is never offered up for the judgement, or even the consideration of the reader. It exists, and after that, no more is said. One feels that to try to analyse Camelot, even to find out a little more about it, would be disrespectful. It's as if we are not intended to know too much, but rather, it's our lot to find our way between the things we can know, and either avoid, or yield to, all the other influences as they crowd in.

For us, Nora's shipboard lover has no name. For his wife and his five children, he's another quantity altogether, but readers are only allowed to know him as Nora knew him, happily, anonymously, briefly.

A little later, on shore, Nora discovers that she's pregnant. She has an abortion, and it's a horrible experience, not that she allows her feelings to show before her friend Olive, who helped to arrange it. The doctor is disgusting and he hasn't done the job as well as he might, because Nora bleeds for days. When the bleeding stops, she makes a decision, or perhaps it's already been made. '... never again did I have sexual contact, of any kind, with anyone.' Again, and as usual, there's no analysis of this, no reasoning offered; a fact, stated as baldly as possible, is allowed to speak for itself.

Commonsense would tell us that many women would have acted differently. Commonsense is not invoked by Jessica Anderson. This is what happened to Nora, this is what Nora did. This was the outcome ...

It's a very confident technique for telling a story. For recalling a life. It puts the reader firmly on the receiving end, and quite negates, in my view, any post-modern ideas about the reader having ownership of the text. Where, exactly, is the energy in the text? I think it's in the associations brought to mind by things as they're mentioned.

The reader is being tutored in a way of considering a life.

Late in the book, Nora has a bad night. She wakes from a dream, sweating, and changes her sheets. Betty Cust visits her in the morning, and the two women, one of them dressed for church, the other walking about when her doctor would prefer her to stay in bed, explore the garden. Nora has already decided that she will live in a couple of back rooms, one of them an enclosed verandah, which were the rooms where her sister Grace lived the last part of her life. Betty Cust mentions Grace, and Nora's mind looks for ways to evade the comparison, but it's underway in the reader's mind, and can't be stopped. The two of them talk about Grace, and compost, and her opinionated views on gardening. Grace is closing in! Nora discovers that Grace has slept on what Nora regards as the back verandah, and this leads her to ask Betty if she thinks Grace was happy. No, says Betty, and a moment later she says it again. Grace is closer! The exchange between Nora and Betty Cust has drawn remarkably close in a few simple lines. Why wasn't Grace happy? Betty says she doesn't know. Did Grace know why she wasn't happy? Betty says, 'She once said she did.' The reader feels with Nora in the words that follow.

'What did she say?'

'That for the whole of her life, she had tried to have faith, and that for the whole of her life she had only opinions.'

This is the heart of the scene and the reader knows it. Nora admits to being touched by what she's learned of her sister. She changes the subject, and a moment later she announces that she must go inside. Betty, looking for something positive to end the meeting, hopes Nora will resume her sewing.

'Oh I know you can't do that fine work any more. But you're so clever and artistic, you can't give up your lovely sewing.'

This looks like an unproblematical conclusion, but it's used with skill; Jessica Anderson's footwork is very, very neat. There is a line space, and then:

But she is wrong. Although I am growing stronger every day, and although my hands, blessed by sunshine and Doctor Rainbow's care, are more pliant than for years, I shall never sew again.

We must presume that she doesn't, just as she once decided not to let a man close to her again. Her decisions, once made, are final. She is showing us, as is her creator, the processes by which the elderly prune things from their lives once they realise they're not needed any more, or perhaps once they're known to be beyond renewal. At such times a cut-off has to be made in order to make way for those things which can and will be allowed to continue. Nora moves on to talk of the letters she writes, and receives. Olive Partridge, a successful novelist, and based in or near the London Nora has left, says she intends to visit Brisbane to see her mother; she further proposes to visit Nora, 'if you wish me to'.

I take down her last novel and look at her photograph on the back of the jacket. How fine she looks, how stately and authoritative. No doubt I shall still annoy her. 'Yes, do come,' I reply. 'We shall sit and quarrel under the mango tree.'

Then she thinks of Lisa and Hilda, and Fred, who lived with them in London:

I find myself thinking that we were all great-story-tellers at number six. Yes, all of us, meeting in passages or assembling in each other's quarters or in the square, were busily collating, and presenting to ourselves and the other three, the truthful fictions of our lives.

'Truthful fictions'; the book has only two pages to go when she gives us this. Nora's in Brisbane, her friends on the other side of the world. She will see Olive when Olive comes to visit her mother. What else has she to do? Is there any resolution to be found? Yes and no. I began by suggesting that Nora's story is a case study in the abuse, or at the very least the misuse, the downgrading of women. The doctor who performs Nora's abortion is such a classic example of a woman-hating professional – a professional woman-hater? – that one can see no hope for any improvement in her circumstances, because if he is representative – and clearly he is – then the society that produced him is in desperate need of redemption. It needs the cleansing which the women's movement is about to give it. Yet this is not Nora's life's work, and neither is it Jessica Anderson's. None of us ever lives in a world that's as it should be. We must find our own ways of getting through the turmoil. For someone as elderly as Nora, this means revisiting the meaningful moments of her life and

asking what they mean to her, and what they once meant, and why the two meanings don't necessarily coincide. I've already referred to the way Jessica Anderson moves her prose about, here and there. Her mental processes, quirky as they may be, are in control of its movements. Look at the last page. She thinks of her father, as he was when she was young. His face returns to the face she now knows him by, the face in a photograph. Within a line or two, she's in a 'choking chaos of grief'. Grief; we've encountered it a number of times in the book. Like Camelot, it's always there. Camelot! Between father's photo and that choking chaos of grief, there's a moment when Nora's memory's invaded by 'that old chimera, the step of a horse, the nod of a plume.' Sir Lancelot is near, for one last and final time. She's already been walking, looking for the river, the river of her city, Brisbane, which both is, and isn't, the river by which the knight called 'Tirra Lirra!' She couldn't find the river because houses have been built over the old points of access. It's still there, of course, but the river she once knew isn't there any more because it's in her mind, and always was.

What's left? The memory of the black dress which, we presume, was being put over her head so she would wear it at her father's funeral, a memory which runs straight into the nod of a plume, and the plumed heads of the horses at her father's burial. A voice says that the funeral was a fine ceremony and, to the surprise of this reader, she ends her book with what I think is an entirely new thought, one of those stepping-off points she's introduced many times in order to get us thus far:

I think it consoled me, a little. I think ceremony always has,  
a little.

I've already said that I am unprepared for this last thought. I'll go further and say that ceremonial behaviour means following an order that's already laid down, and has therefore a pre-existing condition in the minds of those who participate in it. That is, a ceremony is moving because it follows an agreed sequence of things that must happen. This, to me, has been the opposite way of working from that of Jessica Anderson's narrative, which has arbitrariness as one of its principal virtues. In that sense, the last move she makes in the book is the largest and most arbitrary of all. This seems quaintly but pleasantly appropriate, to me, but I wonder if that's how it affects you, dear reader?

By way of concluding this essay I would like to say that *Tirra Lirra by the River* has been almost the hardest to write about of the many books I've dealt with. As I said at the outset, it's wide open to a systematic, feminist interpretation, but Nora didn't live that way and one feels that, whatever ideas Jessica Anderson may have absorbed at various points of her life she would never have allowed them to do more than influence her along the way. She strikes me as being too far-sighted to let any one system manage her thinking for her, and every one of those sideways steps, each and every recall of Sir Lancelot and his horse and the plumage they shared, is a reminder of the flowers and fields, the variety, that lie outside any system of thought.

## The goddess allows herself to be seen But not forever; Shirley Hazzard's *The Transit of Venus* (1980)

I began the previous essay by saying that writers belong to their time; Shirley Hazzard was born in 1931, half a generation after Jessica Anderson, yet they are alike, I think, in possessing a certain wariness about the times and places shaping their work. In Shirley Hazzard's case, this is most obvious in the satirical, indeed sarcastic way she treats the United Nations in *People in Glass Houses* (1967); after reading it I can imagine the famous filing cabinet not wanting any more writers within its walls. She's lived in Europe too, and before I get onto *The Transit of Venus*, her most highly regarded novel, I want to dip into *The Bay of Noon* (1970) because it contains a passage which I find evocative of an Australian writer's awareness of having found another, and very different, home. The book's set in and around Naples (the isle of Capri's visited frequently, in the Neapolitan way) but the passage I want to quote is set in Seville:

Watched over by a sombre waiter and one or two wintry guests, the two of us made up, from a dish of salted crackers formed in letters of the alphabet, love-words that we spread out on our little table. We had managed to compose an indecent phrase or two before the waiter's approach forced us to eat our words. Looking out our bedroom window before dawn we saw a group of cab-drivers in the street below warming themselves at a bonfire lighted on the pavement, while one of their number read to them from an outstretched newspaper. The following morning we were told that the Pope had died.

When I came across this passage I thought at once of Charmian Clift (1) and George Johnston (2), both of whom – but Charmian first, I think – wrote about a night when they went to sleep in a room above the festivities in an Italian street and woke, some hours later, as three bent-legged old musicians, two with violins and one with a pipe, let their music lead them away before a new day arrived. Clift's version is magical, while Johnston's account is about the instincts of a passionate woman who has magic in her blood, a magic perceived rather than felt by her observing partner. In both cases – Johnston/Clift and Shirley Hazzard – the reader knows that what's being offered is *echt*-European, and couldn't happen in the country these writers were born in. 'The following morning we were told that the Pope had died.' We'd hear about him too, but he wouldn't be the same Pope, would he? In Europe, we'd know him as a fixture, a landmark and very close; in Australia we'd know that something important, and European, had found its end, but our own, and very separate, because distant, world would be largely unchanged. The Pope's death, and the elaborate procedures for his replacement, would be matters reverberating on our shores rather than belonging to them. The relation between the people upstairs in bed and those still active in the street below is harder to define, but it suggests the greater density of life in Europe, the inability of its people to separate themselves from the political whole of which they are tiny parts. We are tiny, too, in Australia, but our awareness

of this comes when we set ourselves against the huge spaces that surround us, aware of our insignificance, not in a human power- or belief-structure, but when seen against a place that's too eroded to care about us. The land tells us we don't matter, whereas in Europe this is made clear by the demands and rivalries of other people.

Shirley Hazzard's books move easily in this European world. In fact she does so many things so easily that we're likely to overlook the scale of her achievement. Take the title of the book for an example. On page 15 of my edition (King Penguin, Middlesex, 1983), a character called Sefton Thrale tells Caroline (Caro), the second of three sisters, that she owes her existence to astronomy. He means that she, as an Australian, would not exist had it not been for Cook's mission to take the Endeavour to Tahiti in 1769 to observe Venus crossing the face of the sun. The discovery of Australia and its subsequent settlement can therefore be regarded as an extension, an outcome, of English science. The tidy-minded reader can move on feeling that the title's been explained, but will find as the book reveals more of itself that 'Venus' is not simply the planet but its meaning as the goddess of love, and love itself is shown to be the transitional phase of a woman's life in which she readies herself for the passionate exchange which will turn her into ... a mother, an older woman, a cluster of experience, a being who has worked through passion to reach a state of fulfilment. The reader will perceive – surely? – at some stage that most of us have to pass through a version of this change, and that those who manage to avoid it are to be pitied, or seen as lesser for the path they've taken. Very late in the book, when Caro's sister Grace has at last

come to feel the withering power of passion, she says, 'Women have to go through with things. Birth, for instance, or hopeless love. Men can evade forever.'

How true is this? Casting my mind over the events of the book, as put before us by Shirley Hazzard, I am inclined to think that men do not so much escape the consequences of their actions as try to avoid them by using the male-made levers of social control. The book's prime example is the use made by Christian Thrale, Grace's husband, of his temporary secretary, Cordelia Ware. Christian's regular secretary, Miss Mellish, is away for three weeks, so he engineers a 'relationship' with her replacement; for him, it's like turning on and off a tap when the bathroom's otherwise unoccupied. Cordelia, on the other hand, experiences it fully, as does the reader because by this stage we've learned how to read Shirley Hazzard's book; the more that Christian pretends to be tactful, reasonable and considerate with Cordelia the more, we know, he's hurting her. The greatest shortcoming of men is to not possess, or admit to owning, a language of emotion. We (men) won't admit our feelings and therefore won't or can't recognise their consequences. Are women, therefore, to be envied? Copied? No.

With these prospects and impressions, Grace Marian Thrale, forty-three years old, stood silent in a hotel doorway in her worn blue coat and looked at the cars and the stars, with the roar of existence in her ears. And like any great poet or tragic sovereign of antiquity, cried on her Creator and wondered how long she must remain on such an earth.

Grace and her two sisters (strictly speaking, a sister and a half-sister) come from Sydney, hence the earlier observation about

them being outcomes of Cook's discovery of their country's east coast; it took the greater part of the book for this reader to perceive that they are affected more profoundly by Venus via the planet's metaphorical character. All the characters grow older. Time is not only registered by the movement of heavenly bodies but takes place inside each and every one of us. Transition is as natural a state for humans as transit for things above. The book's title is also in transition because it sums up a realisation, not only inside the characters themselves, but in the mind of the reader. *The Transit of Venus* is a book that changes its readers and this is a purpose of its author. Anyone reading the book closely will not fail to notice the very clear intentions embodied in the writing. One example of this can be observed in Hazzard's way of turning well-known sayings back to front:

Never did they dream, fingering those toys and even being, in a rather grown-up way, amused by them, that they were handling fateful signals of the future. The trinkets were assembled with collective meaning, like exhibits in a crime, or like explosives no expert could defuse. Invention was the mother of necessity.

Here's another:

"This awful place. So alone. If only we could get back to Sydney," Dora was howling, "where we were all so happy." Tranquillity recollected in emotion.

A third: Cordelia Ware, already mentioned, is brought in to take the minutes of a Cabinet meeting. She's new, none of the men have seen her before, and she's very attractive:

It fell forward, the flag of hair. An arm came up to pass it uselessly back over the shoulder. A page hastily turned. A gazelle in the room. China in the bull shop.

Shirley Hazzard has her eye on the way the world's going every bit as much as on the delicacies of her characters' feelings. From time to time she stands back from her people to show the world moving too: the start of Chapter 29:

In America, a white man had been shot dead in a car, and a black man on a verandah. In Russia, a novelist had emerged from hell to announce that beauty would save the world. Russian tanks rolled through Prague while America made war in Asia. In Greece the plays of Aristophanes were forbidden, in China the writings of Confucius.

On the moon, the crepe soul of modern man impressed the Mare Tranquillitatis.

The point, in that last line, could only have been made by someone alive to words as living things, having intentions of their own, one of them being to insist on their lasting character. 'The Mare Tranquillitatis' still has meaning, though the language that gave birth to it hasn't been heard for centuries. And as for soul (sole) and 'impressed', what can I say?

Another technique of Hazzard's that reveals her unwillingness to waste a word is her habit of cutting clichéd sentences short. Her confidence in her readers takes the form of flashing a few words and leaving us to supply what it is clearly beneath her to do more than grant a passing mention. Here's Christian Thrall confronted by a wretched Cordelia Ware:



Christian got up from his desk – and it seemed that year he was ever sinking down or rising up at that desk, as at some anchorage or place of prayer. “Cordelia,” he said, coming over to prevent her approach. “I cannot possibly. This is not the place for. The last thing either of us wants is.”

Words are not to be wasted, though most of us, including some of her characters, waste them all the time. Daily life is largely, though not always, a waste, because it’s used to subdue, or eliminate, opportunities for the passions that are inside almost everyone. Cordelia’s mistake, apart from being desirably sexual, is to believe that her potential for passion can be fulfilled; that is to say, her inner feelings tell her that love is about to flare in her life when she is seen, though she hardly realises it, as an opportunity by the married man who is her boss. She might have been cleverer, more cunning, but she was not. Shirley Hazzard, who’s also created Caro, sister Grace and the dreaded, awful, half-sister Dora, brings in Cordelia to show us as simply as possible what could have happened, and did, in a way, happen to Caro, the central character of the book. Paul Ivory, the playwright, is Caro’s lover quite early on and they’re still connected, in that remarkable way by which once-lovers can never entirely separate themselves from those to whom a sexual engagement has bonded them. Hazzard shows us the young Paul and the young Caro in bed one afternoon, and the use she makes of this situation is a measure of her ease with her characters’ sexuality. Paul is engaged to Tertia, who’s heir to a castle not far away. He’s in bed with Caro when Tertia drives up to the house of love and calls to Paul. He whips on a shirt, grabs a tie, and presents himself at the window to speak to her, on the ground

one floor down, standing beside her car. He’s a playwright, this is a scene, and he’s playing it well enough when Tertia’s expression tells him something’s changed. Paul knows without turning his head that the naked Caro is now behind him, partially visible, and that she’s decided to cut through the play-acting to make a statement of her own. Everything’s changed without a word being said. What has Caro done? She’s played the highest card in the pack, the joker known as truth. The words between Paul and Tertia are annulled and voided by the sight of Caro’s body. Her body and the feelings it contains are a greater truth than any words. This is something that can’t be said very often because it’s too revolutionary to allow any platform to be built on it.

In the previous essay and at the start of this one I referred to the fact that Jessica Anderson and Shirley Hazzard predate the modern feminist movement, and yet they overlap it too, and I find myself again and again, in *The Transit of Venus* as in Anderson’s *Tirra Lirra*, reassessing the claims and achievements of the politically organised women’s movement against the claims and insights of these two writers’ work. It seems to me that the writers, Hazzard especially, undercut the arguments of the women’s movement because what they ask for their women is not a claim that men can grant, because both writers, and again I say especially Hazzard, by concentrating on how different women are from men, show us that women’s lives and men’s lives are led so differently alongside each other that considerations of political equality, rights and so on, barely touch the larger questions of making the two pathways compatible.

It is not as if either writer is in the least forgiving of men, or women, who can't or won't see the truths they are making clear, but are forcing us to withhold our actions until we know what it is we are actually going to do, and what benefits will flow to whom as a result. Let me put that question to myself. After reading *The Transit of Venus*, what changes would you – I – make to the world? None, except the impossible one: I would like the whole world to be a little more aware, all of us, of what we're doing to each other when we do those things we think are natural, but are natural only to ourselves. Does anything need to change? Yes, the limits of our understandings, our ideas of what's natural, need to enlarge a little, at least, and at best they could expand as far as they can. You will see at once how likely that's to be. Is Hazzard's writing any use, then? Is anyone the better for her work having been done?

Perhaps it's because I'm an incurable optimist that I think something has been gained from reading *The Transit of Venus* a couple of times recently. I can make a distinction which would not have occurred to me a fortnight ago. I would distinguish between what I will call a rich sadness – one that comes from an ever-broadening of the understanding – and its counterpart and cousin, which I shall call a deprivational sadness. Grace, Caro's sister, experiences the latter (see an earlier quote about her, above). Caro, too, experiences deprivation, loss, at certain times throughout the book, but it's her miracle, and Shirley Hazzard's achievement, that these losses finally come to enrich her. She marries, at last, a man called Adam Vail, and her life with him is good; when he dies, she's 'available' again, for a while, she re-meets Paul Ivory who tells her

how he murdered – really – a man by leaving him asleep in the path of a flood, and this is used by Hazzard as a way of re-introducing Ted Tice, one of the first people we met in this book. Ted Tice is married by now, and his wife Margaret is a sort of double for Caro's sister Grace because Margaret is shown as a fine woman who ought to be loved wholly and entirely by her husband, but isn't. She's living the form of a marriage but the passion that should enliven it isn't there. Can such passion – proper passion, I think Shirley Hazzard wants to tell us – be found for everyone, all the time?

No. It can't be guaranteed. Life's a hazard too. As the book ends, it seems that Caro will resume the connection with Ted which might have taken place right at the beginning. Were their two lives wasted, then? Who's to say? Will they be able to pick up what they once had, potentially, together? Possibly. Perhaps. Who knows? Human beings, as shown to us by *The Transit of Venus*, are full of passion, and these passions must – simply have to – be controlled, managed, which means that caution and custom will be brought in as advisers, counsellors, when passions take little notice of guidance or advice. To live a life of passion can only be a dream but to live a life without passion can only be seen, after reading a book such as this, as a dreadful, disfiguring loss. The book ends with Caro on board a plane taking off:

They wore devices to shield their ears from the roar.

The roar could be seen, reverberating on blue overalls, surging into the spruces. Within the cabin, nothing could be heard. Only, as the plane rose from the ground, a long hiss of air – like the intake of humanity's breath when a work of

ages shrivels in an instant, or the great gasp of hull and ocean as a ship goes down.

The last words are a reminder of what's only mentioned at the beginning of the book; Caro's parents were drowned in a shipwreck, when the girls whose lives we've been following were residents of Sydney, in far-off and little-known Australia. Is it an 'Australian' book? Is that a category we can use? I think – *think* – Shirley Hazzard would give the question little thought, but would say, 'If it helps you to think of it that way, why not?', meaning you're wasting your time and you've wasted my book. It's perhaps time to mention that before I re-read the book under discussion I read *The Great Fire* (Virago, London, 2003), and I'd read almost a hundred pages when I decided I needed to start again. There was something wrong with my reading. So I began again and greatly admired the book, but even so I hardly knew what to say when someone asked me what 'great fire' was being referred to. I was going to say the scorching of Hiroshima, and I suppose that's a distantly feasible answer, but in fact Hiroshima's more firmly referred to in *Transit of Venus* ... so what was the great fire? My answers grew broader the longer I thought about it: it was the second world war, it was human history in the twentieth century, it was life itself, that all-encircling, strangely restrictive presence which, in being greater by far than any human passion, has the effect of making it unlikely, most of the time, that human passion can have any satisfactory fulfilment. I swing these thoughts to Caro and, to this reader, they feel correctly applied. She might have had a child, but she miscarried. She might have been chosen by Paul Ivory the playwright, but would that

have meant she had a better life? Probably, almost certainly not. Paul Ivory is talented and skilled, as his successes in the London theatre make clear, but he chose Tertia, her castle, her class and all its luxuries, hypocrisies and successful ways over the life he might have had with Caro.

Remember Caro coming to the window, her body bare beside Paul Ivory in his shirt? Tertia, Paul's fiancée, was too clever for Caro; she knew her man, and probably most men, better. She got in the passenger seat of her car, and Paul ...

... do I need to finish? He went down and drove away with his fiancée, and on the way they stopped, and, we are told many, many pages later, she got him to make love with her. If we'd learned this at the time it happened – that is, a page or so later – we'd have been amazed that Paul could succumb so easily, but, told about the choice Tertia imposed on him after we've had time to absorb the effects and before we learn the cause, it's clear enough. Paul Ivory, the playwright, knows how social choices are put in front of people in order to make them decide, and he decides. He wants to live on a certain level of English society, and he makes the enabling decision. Caro, though, comes out of this much the better in the way Hazzard shapes her writing. Caro forces Paul to show himself for what he is, and she does it without a word. She rises from her bed as naked as the day she was born and intrudes her reality into the situation. Tertia gets her way. Tertia gets Paul. Not a bad match, thinks the reader, quite appropriate, really. We're not silly enough to think that they'll be 'happy' together, but neither do we expect that that's what they want. They want life on a certain social plane and they

know, both of them, how to get it. But so too does Caro. She wants life to not only be true to, but also to fully express, dramatically, the passions inside her, and that means, in my view, that she's the right person to be at the heart of a novel by Shirley Hazzard.

If this is wisdom, it comes late to Caro, and is very hard won.

So Shirley Hazzard's writing strikes a balance, quite a traditional one really, between the inner demands of her characters and what's going on around them. Whenever she feels the need she shifts our attention to the politics of the wider world, leaving it to us to make the connections she intends between the personal and the public. Sometimes I feel her smiling as she gives herself a page to show us that the things she's told us are happening to her characters are happening to others, too, in places we mightn't expect. Chapter 17 is largely concerned with a woman called Valda who works in the same office as Caro. Mr Leadbetter, the administrative officer, asks Valda to sew on a button for him, and she does so, very deftly. There is a suitable exchange of courtesies:

"Thank you, Valda, I am not handy with such things. And would jab myself to pieces." It was important to show appreciation.

To this, Valda replied, echoing his own benevolent thoughts:

"These are small things to do for one another."

So far so good; but a week later, Valda asks Mr Leadbetter to change her typewriter ribbon. Women are not mechanically minded! He tells her to get one of the girls to help; she says they won't want to dirty their hands. Mr Leadbetter is furious, and he puts a note in Valda's file that she 'tended to be aggressive over trifles'. "'Tended"

was official code for going the whole hog.' Shirley Hazzard tells us a good deal more about Valda's warfare on men's privileges and stupidities, and it's amusing, and pertinent, but she brings it closer to Caro all the time, as if Valda's real challenge is to women even more than to men.

"You feel downright disloyal to your own experience, when you come across a man you could like. By then you scarcely see how you can decently make terms, it's like going over to the enemy. And then there's the waiting. Women have got to fight their way out of that dumb waiting at the end of the never-ringing telephone. The receiver, as our portion of it is called."

Such meeting of the minds as takes place between Caro and Valda is not repeated elsewhere in the book, and Caro, one senses, is a little jolted by Valda's ideas, against which she defends herself:

All this was indisputable, even brave. But was a map, from which rooms, hours and human faces did not rise; on which there was no bloom of generosity or discovery. The omissions might constitute life itself: unless the map was intended as a substitute for the journey.

These at least were the objections raised by Caroline Bell.

Valda, for her part, 'considered Caro as a possibility lost. Caro might have done anything, but had preferred the common limbo of sexual love. Whoever said, "When you go to women, take your whip," was on to something deep, and deeply discouraging.' I am inclined to think that Valda's office warfare and her reaction to Caro and vice versa is included in the book to give a perspective on the

way Caro and her sisters – all the other women – live their lives. They are, perhaps, unlike Nora in *Tirra Lirra by the River* in that they don't arrive in England with alternatives in mind. One may reasonably say of Caro, turning back to Ted Tice as the book draws near its end, that she's unliberated, but the counter to this is that it's been clear from the beginning that neither has she been enslaved. In this sense *The Transit of Venus* is a very challenging book indeed, challenging in the sense that a feminist movement based on the novel would not so much urge women to claim what they've been denied as urge men to see what they've denied themselves. That's to say that the effect on one male reader is to show that our ideas of what's male and what's female are interactive, rather like chemicals that are inert as long as they're kept apart but potent indeed when brought together. It's the interaction that counts, but what interaction? Valda with her tricky forms of office protest – making the men's tea according to their many and varied instructions – rather frightens the other women in her office, so she talks to Caro ... and Caro's different. Caro's aware of her own passions, her desires and wishes, and she knows all too well when they're being satisfied and when she's at a loss. Caro's is the central awareness of the book, and in that sense Valda is a reminder, helping to define Caro via the form of a challenge rather than to unseat her. It's worth reminding ourselves that Valda doesn't reappear outside the chapter that's hers, while Caro's there from beginning to end.

The reader may feel that I'm over-emphasizing the feminism or otherwise of the character Caro, but I feel that the theme of whether or no people live in a way that can be called ideologically

correct, and whether that gives them any greater or lesser likelihood of happiness or any other form of success is one that's not only threaded through *The Transit of Venus* but can also be found in *The Great Fire*, published two decades later (2003). Here are a few lines from the later book:

'Look ... I was seventeen when I married. It's true that Jason was on the way, but we'd have married anyway, Geoffrey and I. Also true that it didn't work, and that Geoff was a drunk. However that may be, one is surrounded by unhappy couples – divorced, separated, shackled together by children – who had the appropriate ages and were sober as judges. Brides who were photographed in *Country Life* flashing their radiance and their rings, and in their right minds. There is no greater lottery.'

In the work of Shirley Hazzard the issues I am raising are linked with others even closer to her way of seeing and thinking. One such issue is the alternation, in the life of any one person, of what I called before the personal and the public. From *The Great Fire* again:

The man, instead, went to his own room and to his table – to those papers where the ruined continents and cultures and existences that had consumed his mind and body for years had given place to her story and his. He could not consider this a reduction – the one theme having embroiled the century and the world, and the other recasting his single fleeting and miraculous life. Having expected, repeatedly, to die from the great fires into which his times had pitched him, he had recovered a great desire to live completely; by which he meant, with her.

Close to the end of the same book, the character Helen is waiting in New Zealand for a moment of readiness to take her to her lover, the man whose thoughts we've just shared. Helen sees the same things in a slightly different way:

From the day's sensations, Helen could retrieve the solitude that never now completely left her. And was able to think of how they had read about the past, which was full of desires and dreams and delusions, so that the planet seemed entirely charged with human wishes, existing for the most part silently and in vain.

Silently and in vain? It's one of the wonders of Shirley Hazzard's writing that she is thinking always of everybody while also of the person she's drawing in front of her. All her people matter because they're all in that lottery she mentioned, whether or not *Country Life* featured their photos, whether or not they've sat around glossy tables for meetings of their country's Cabinet. Society's important and without it we can't exist, but all of us, each and every one, have to strike our own bargain, balancing what's expected of us with what we want, and dream about, for ourselves. Few writers have a better sense of this balance and where it is at any given moment than Shirley Hazzard. I find myself in a state of sadness at concluding this series of essays, but I'm pleased – relieved, really – to be able to end where I do.

1. 'Three Old Men of Lerici', by Charmian Clift, 1953
2. See pages 108 – 110 of *Clean Straw for Nothing*, George Johnston, Collins, London, 1969

## An afterword

It's two years almost to the day since I began writing about Australian writers and their books. I don't think I asked myself, when I began, where and how I'd end. The earliest essays were easy because the books fell open at places I'd read many times before. For the most part I was putting down the thoughts I'd been having for years. This changed as the series developed. It occurred to me on a number of occasions that the book in hand was not as I'd remembered it; indeed I frequently wondered how I'd misread it so badly when I'd read it years before. This tells us that books change as readers change, and tells us also that a book can have as many interpretations as it has readers. And yet, as we all know, a consensus does form, and certain works get to be seen in certain ways. There's no preventing this, and it's a means by which a book becomes publicly owned, part of a country's life, and memory. The books I've written about in my thirty eight essays have all attained that status, in my opinion.

This is not the same thing as creating a canon of great works, a process I distrust because certain people, opinionated critics, mostly, are usually too influential in the creating of such canons. Ordinary readers come to feel they must obey what's been said by supposedly better minds. This flouts my idea of how a good reading of a book is achieved. I don't like canons of literature and I do like good reading.

Which leads me to a point I have a need to make, about my choice of writers and books as the subjects of these essays. Readers will notice that a number of well known names are missing, and that the missing include many fine writers who are active today, or have been until recently. I can hear people challenging me, 'How could you write about our literature and leave out X, Y & Z?' I should answer this. I think the simplest thing I can say is that I decided, early on, to respect my own limitations. Like any other reader, I've had books open in front of me which have forced me to admit to myself that I wasn't doing justice to what seemed to be a good idea, or that I could see that a writer was doing his/her business with skill but I simply wasn't able to react to the writing in the way that it required. I am a writer myself, I've read reviews of my work that blamed me for what was really the shameful ignorance or wilful blindness of the reviewer, and this has made me seethe with displeasure. As a writer, I feel I must be true to other writers, and that includes keeping away from their work unless I can enthuse about it in the way I would like if the work was mine. It's a necessary courtesy to stay away from another writer's work unless I can do it justice, and it's a fact of life that we all have limitations and can't do justice to everybody's work, just as we can't understand every other writer's work in the way that was intended.

Hence my silences. If you think I should have written about X, Y & Z, write about them yourself! I say this seriously. Most books

disappear too quickly. They come out with publicity (if they're lucky), they're reviewed on arrival, then for the most part they disappear. It's assumed that if they're not made into films then they've died. They haven't, they've moved into the underworld of secondhand books, they're no longer earning the authors a cent in royalties, and their longer, underground existence, which may be quite an influential one, is also one that keeps them out of sight. The secondhand book is like a wonderful old fruit tree, shady, harmonious, well-loved by those who know it, but well out of sight of those who are walking past the front of the house. My thirty eight essays have been more of a stroll through the lanes, with some peeping over old fences, than a drive through the main thoroughfares, but I have enjoyed my journey and I hope my exploration of books I've loved will persuade others to do the same for other books. There are always writers out there hoping their books will be read, valued, understood ... and wanted.

C.A.E.