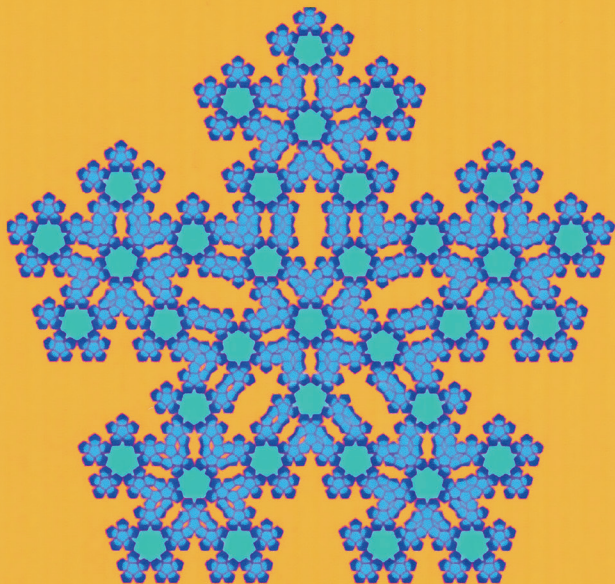


Castle Hill

a memoir



Chester Eagle

Books by Chester Eagle

Hail and Farewell! An evocation of Gippsland (non-fiction, 1971)

Who could love the nightingale? (novel, 1974)

Four faces, wobbly mirror (novel, 1976)

At the window (novella, 1984)

The garden gate (novel, 1984)

Mapping the paddocks (non-fiction, 1985)

Play together, dark blue twenty (non-fiction, 1986)

House of trees (reissue of *Hail and Farewell!* 1987)

Victoria Challis (novel, 1991)

House of music (stories, 1996)

Wainwrights' mountain (novel, 1997)

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Running The Race (novel, 2010)

A Mob of Galahs (librettos, 2011)

(See also mini-mags over the next page.)

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Mini-mags

Escape (story, 2004)

Hallucination Before Departure (memoir, 2006)

Mozart (memoir, 2007)

Travers (memoir, 2007)

So Bitter Was My Heart (memoir, 2008)

Keep Going! (memoir, 2008)

Who? (memoir, 2008)

At Baldy's Feet (memoir, 2008)

Othello's Rage (memoir, 2009)

The Saints In Glory (story, 1991/2009)

One Small Step (memoir, 2011)

Castle Hill (memoir, 2011)

My Gippsland years were full of passions, and one of them was a desire to reach Castle Hill, at the edge of the Moroka plateau, overlooking the Dargo-Bairnsdale road. I already had a fixation on Mount Baldhead, which I could see from the back of the school where I worked, then this second obsession added itself. Both peaks could be seen from the road to Lindenow, where I lived for a year; to travel home after work was to be reminded that my life had acquired two poles, summing, in a way not then clear to me, all that had come my way in the east of the state, the word 'all' referring not only to the experiences I'd had but the means by which I made sense of them ...

... temporarily. Twelve years might seem a long time to live in one region but, looking back, the time seems just long enough to mature me to the point where I was ready to become a functioning citizen in the metropolis I'd left and to which I returned.

Mount Baldhead's meaning only became clear to me many years later when I completed the novel *Wainwrights' Mountain*. I thought I had understood Castle Hill at the time I reached it but it's only now, in writing this piece, that I am beginning to see what the second peak meant to me then, and has become for me since.

Here's a little of what I wrote in 1968, my first year back in Melbourne:

This eminence, seen from the western side, looks like a higher plain raised above the plateau and guarded by a sheer face resembling the irregular rock walls of the Incas. From the east it has more the air of a fortification, savagely eroded, with numberless ledges and crannies to catch the snow. At sun-up, in winter, inspecting the crag from forty miles distant, it is

common to see a glittering lacework of white hung over the eastern edge. For a few wonderful seconds it has the sun to itself before the light drops on to Bleak Hill to the left and The Pinnacles to the right. By mid-morning the snow-lace has gone from the Castle and you must look further round to Wellington and the Gable End for the ice-creamy drifts that put a nip in the air, even on a cloudless day. When the wind comes out of the west and grey clouds scud through the foothills, people in Bairnsdale rub blue fingers and say, ‘Sssswww, straight off the snow.’

I could see the Castle from the back yard of my house in Bairnsdale when I went to the clothes line, the outside toilet, or the car that would take me to work. It was far away and yet inside me. I needed to go there to find a part of myself. I was forever asking how to get to this place, and a handful of people knew something about the track; you parked your car at Castleburn Creek, on the Dargo road, you found your way along the stream and after numerous crossings, you followed a ridge that took you higher and higher until, at about four thousand feet, you reached ‘The Jump-Up’. Tired as you might be, that was when the hard work started. Getting to the plateau involved stretching and straining rather than jumping, but when you found your way through the trees, the Castle was a grand sight, almost attainable. Anyone with experience of bushwalking will know that reaching a peak is easier than finding one’s way back, because going down, though easier, involves maintaining a direction. After my first preliminary excursion I made sure I carried a compass, not intending to get lost between the Castle and the edge it overlooked. The compass wasn’t needed once the Jump-Up had

been reached and the descent began, but taking the right direction on leaving the peak and not getting lost before the track was reached required sightings and a modest amount of vigilance for the un-practised bushwalker that I was.

Castle Hill. I never knew who named it and this was interesting, because humbling. I'd already been in the Mount Baldhead area with Sid Merlo, who said of that peak, 'There's his majesty!', making me aware that sometimes words from the mouths of those not used to speaking for effect had a stronger claim, were more poetic, than things said by the educated. The name imposed a certain reverence on anyone who approached it, surely?

It did. When, with a group of friends, I managed to climb the Jump-Up and get to the plateau from which the Castle rose, I had a feeling it would change me. I'd already been told about it by Bill Gillio, a Briagolong bushman who'd ridden and worked in the mountains for years:

'Your best way's round the far side. Eh? Like, that's from here, yeah, the east. There's big sorta crevices there, you'll be able to get up one o' them alright, oh, you might have to hand each other up a bit, you know, but you'll be alright.' And on top? 'Oh, there's nothing much really. You git a good look out though. See jist about everything.'

And so it was.

Everything includes almost all the towns of Gippsland. They lie unnoticed by day, in the blur of distance, but by night each shows itself with a sprinkling of lights. On a full moon night, with heaven's stars diminished by their queenly competitor, these shine out of an ocean of

black as if the firmament is reversed, until the moving lights of a car set one identifying its destination. *There* is Lindenow, there Bairnsdale, there Stratford, Sale and Maffra, an hour's journey indicated by the flick of a finger.

It was cold on top, we had sleeping bags, and we lit a fire, wondering if anybody on the lowland might see us if they looked out as I had done so many times, dreaming of what it might be like to look down.

Magic, mystical night! The old rockpile sits up like an offering left by the retreating earth, a place of exposure to the void. To lie there is rejection, the world put away, the self opened in ecstasy for the shining white light. An opulent moon floods the Castle top and half the planet besides. Leaf-edges glitter and smoke-grey branches rise out of shadow. The valleys breathe out a mist that laps against the rim of the high country. In the early hours of morning it steals over the parapet and washes against the Castle. Then the sun announces morning, the breeze lifts and swirls of mist fume about as if hot springs are gushing. The sun is a red spot, swelling and fading, then the mist clears, the wonder fades, and one is left with Gippsland spread quietly around and a long, long walk to the car.

It is a peak of experience, unwillingly left. It hurts, tramping down, down, down, to think of the old crag accepting noon, sundown and night, moon, mist and sunrise with the blandness of immortals. If one could only stay there forever ... but the mind must go on, seek further ...

That was what I wrote on leaving Gippsland. I went back often in those days, looking with admiration and occasional longing as I sighted the peak from the highway east of Sale. Once or twice there were mountain trips that took parties of friends close to the western side of the Castle. I never climbed it after 1965, mainly because I had a feeling that I didn't need to. I'd said what it meant to me in my first published book. There wasn't much more I could do, or so I felt until something occurred to me that I'd not thought of before. This is not easy to explain but if I put it simply it seems that in fact, having once discovered the Castle, I never left it.

I think the Castle is where I've been living ever since that first ascent, or was it perhaps the last? Either way, it's permanent now, it's *my* place, and I've adapted it, in ways that I would never have imagined, back in 1965, to be my lasting home.

The best way to explain this rather cryptic statement is to return to the book I've already quoted (1), and look a little more closely at my reasons, my *need* for reaching, no, for *attaining*, Castle Hill. I find myself talking about honey!

Mr Nevin's hives would be little white cubes in this country where prospectors go looking for lead, tin and copper, and his bees would go roaming in the shy-flowering bush, and his square-nose truck would come out of Tubbut again ... but there never was any more honey. 'No, we're not getting it now. No demand, you know ...' No demand! Where was Gippsland's pride? The shops had lines of jars labelled Barnes and Allowrie, full of honey blended to a standard taste. People dropped it in their wire baskets while

Everett of Swifts Creek made wonderful honey from the white box in the Tambo Valley, *Eucalyptus Albens*, and he and Albert Borrow at Glenaladale and a dozen others sold most of their product to big companies and co-operatives, when one taste of it in a Gippslander's mouth should bring to mind hives lit by sunlight pouring through box leaves and tea-tree, hives that would be loaded on to trailers and moved away to wherever the bush next broke out in flowers. There were scores of magazines in Mr Jones' newsagency ladling out vicarious enjoyment of violence, doing the sex tease, inviting the reader to condemn queens of vice while drooling over their doings. I hated the blindness of people who ignored the divinely beautiful place they lived in, to enter the crude world which the lowest-common-denominator press, radio and TV offered the popular imagination. And so the search went on, and I aspired to find the way to Castle Hill.

So my yearning for the peak overlooking the Dargo Road stemmed from a dissatisfaction with the people I worked with and for in my regular existence. I wanted to be above them, and away. I could make my peace with ambivalence if I could get high over the world and look down. From afar, the blemishes that disgusted me would scarcely be visible and I could make my peace. I could select everything I loved and admired, and co-exist with the rest. At a distance, and from a suitable height, it would be close to bearable!

That was what I thought as I tapped my keyboard in 1968, recovering the years I'd put behind me when I moved to the city. The loftiness, the lordliness, of Castle Hill suited me very well. Some people can live a lifetime

with such attitudes but I, it seemed, had to find some other accommodation.

When I left Gippsland I went teaching in Preston, a dreary, stubborn suburb on the northern side of its city, largely treeless, home of subject-people. Those who were being educated wanted to get out, those who thought it was better than the places surrounding it wanted to get in. I looked on it with scorn. It seemed to me a place for minds enslaved, a place desperate for whatever the experience of the arts, some exposure to the life of the imagination, could provide. There were no flat-top peaks in Preston! It dawned on me that the limitations of Gippsland had been made considerably more than bearable by the relief of nature – lakes, mountains, wattles flowering along the highways, trees, storms, snow, the sound of waves on the Ninety Mile Beach on nights when winds brought waves pounding on the shore. These were still in my mind, but their realities were far away. I could make trips back to Gippsland with my family, but city life, which I'd re-embraced, wouldn't allow me to keep living in the old way.

A substitute had to be found. My teaching, central to my life for many years, changed its tactic, even though it still centred around making my students different, if possible, from what they were. In Gippsland, I'd based my teaching on the limitations of people who seemed, to me, a little too secure. They needed to know more and I tried to lead their minds into larger worlds than they were (too) comfortable with. In Preston, it annoyed me that even the brightest young people, and there were many, had an instrumental view of education. They wanted to know the tricks of getting qualifications as a way of getting out. If you could move up in society – that is, earn more money and buy better things to live and drive around in, if you could

marry beautiful and successful people, then you'd *made it*. Making it involved getting out, but with a minimum of changes to the self. Trickery was not rejected as a means of getting out. If it worked, it was probably okay. It seemed to me that the people of Preston had come to believe the idea-systems that made them slaves. They failed to see that the dreariness of the place where they lived had become second nature in their thinking. Their suburb was flat, in the broadest sense of the word. Their definitions of life contained no high ground, no places of the spirit, no peaks to which, or above which, one might soar. Dubious semi-religions like scientology infected the area and had to be fought. Old faiths, like that of Anzac, the country's military tradition, hung on grimly. People saw that sport created avenues for at least a few Prestonians to reach fame. Quiz knowledge was real knowledge. I remember my scorn when I heard that an orchestra practised regularly at the Town Hall. A symphony orchestra? Pig's arse! The tradition of European music couldn't survive in a place like this. Teachers had a job to do, and the main component of it was to prepare young people in ways that they and their parents hadn't dreamed of, for getting out.

Up and away!

I can't be sure of the effect such remarks will have on readers, especially those who have never been associated with schools and teaching. Readers, particularly parents, may object to the attitude that people can't be left as they are, but must be improved. Others, prepared to spend large sums of money on their children, may be seeking some form of the ideas I'm expressing here. Schools with high fees like to think that their graduates are in some way better than the average surrounding them, that is, that the ordinary is never good enough. Tipped into a school with

no traditions in the humanities, no resources, no considered courses of study, the only choices facing me were to despair or to create the tradition – the *higher ground* – that I saw was lacking.

And so, in my teaching career, and as a vital part of it, I sought to create that higher ground, a satisfactory place for engaging with whatever else life dealt out to the people I had been employed to teach. They had been struggling, on their endless flat, for an eminence that didn't exist. We would see if we couldn't raise the ground beneath their feet a little, at first, then, eventually, a very long way indeed.

When we finished, they'd find that they too had an elevated view, a system of values and perceptions which they could use to transform the world they'd been placed in.

What did this mean for those of us who were teachers, especially in the humanities?

It meant that we saw ourselves as proponents of civilisation, that state so difficult to define, and that we saw our students as needing to be led from incomprehension to that state of manners, knowledge, awareness and perception to which we – rendering unto ourselves the power of definition – gave the status of civilisation.

Teachers looking on the world in this way could hardly expect to be popular because the young, like everyone else, crave to be accepted as they are. The idea that humanity needs improvement – or in its strongest form, redemption – is one of the leading facets – curses, perhaps - of the civilisation that came to this land from Europe. (The Chinese, having no truck with such ideas, concentrate on the creation of harmony instead.) For teachers, on the other hand, there is an attraction in such ideas because the teacher at the front of the class (Note the positioning!) has the moral advantage of stating where the students, sheep

in search of pasture, should be feeding. In the dangerous situation of the sheep turning into beasts to attack, or flee, the teachers' alleged superiority is something that can be clung to, even wielded.

This may seem far from any consideration of a mountain that had captured my imagination, but I am trying to establish a link between the feelings that drew me to Castle Hill and those which governed my attempts to teach city students in a way that did them some good, whether they admitted it or not. I was quite happy to be working for the future effects, not for the short term.

Preston looked pretty hopeless, one would have said, but a combination of personalities and happenings assisted the changes I wanted to make, and, after some years, I found myself in nominal charge of an operation of which one could reasonably be proud. A powerful teaching department had created itself in the mire of northern Melbourne. Students benefited in all sorts of ways. They went on to universities and on again from there. That crude, desperate need for an escape had been re-formed, channelled, so that people were getting out, as they wished, but doing it via the route of a personal transformation accepting the need for thought, scholarship of at least a rudimentary sort, and discipline. Education is a means to hold the mind steady so it can see what's affecting it, and what, if anything, can be done by way of improvement.

If I may draw attention to that sentence again, would you please note the words 'hold the mind steady' and 'improvement'. This development in me as a teacher was a legacy of whatever it was that had driven me to Castle Hill. I still needed to look far, look out, and look down. I have no wish to persuade the reader that s/he should think in a similar way. We are all driven by inner components, and this

was one of mine. I taught for more years at Preston than I taught in Bairnsdale, and when the chance came, I retired, a different man, though built on foundations defined many years before. Personalities are in a continuous flux but their basic ingredients are allocated at or shortly after birth, and can't be changed: barely controlled, or managed, at best, but hardly more than that.

I retired. I had my ageing parents to look after, and the last stages of overseeing my children. I was the generation occupying the middle ground, exercising such wisdom as I could claim to have mustered. I had the rest of my life to use. Enjoy. Make something of, and I needed to consider what I would do and how I would do it.

I looked around.

I saw a world that I didn't specially care for, although, as ever, fascination was as frequent as disgust. I was still ambivalent about the world. It seemed to me that humanity had made considerable progress in dragging itself out of its mire, yet the steps forward were as near-as-dammit to backsliding. Golden ages - the taste, the refinement of Versailles, for instance - had only to be seen from a different angle to justify the bloodiest of revolutions! The Russian upheaval of 1919 had been seen as offering hope to the oppressed, and what had it become under Stalin, while optimists in other countries put their heads in the sand? The League of Nations hadn't been able to avert a second conflict of the European powers, and its successor in New York hadn't been able to stop the Cold War that continued the war that 'ended' with terrible bombs destroying Japanese cities. Slowly, as the Russo-American seething died down, the world came to prefer commerce over militarism as a means of expressing its rivalries, and yet it could not be ignored that for years on end the Americans had had

nuclear-armed aeroplanes in the air, flying towards Russian targets and flying home again, their bombs undelivered. One whole slice of a century had teetered on the brink without the world's peoples being able to do much about it. Humanity, it seemed to me, had been able to do many fine things, but could never bring itself under control for long enough to make fundamental improvement in its condition.

And yet it had. Knowledge was increasing. Ghastly diseases were being eradicated and even the greed of financiers had been brought under some, admittedly weak, measures of control. Not every mistake was repeated. Mankind did aspirational things, like getting itself to the moon, and sending soil-scratching devices and cameras to Mars. The seven days of God's creation were replaced by a big bang theory that explained nothing but made people feel that an older consciousness had been replaced by a newer. This turning over in the field of ideas, it seemed to me, was in general a good thing because it allowed nobody to trumpet himself from a high ground that wasn't very high.

There was no Castle Hill from which one could look down with advantage.

The flatness of Preston was nearer to the truth than the place I had yearned for until I stood on it. I never went back because I'd been there and found that, exhilarating as it was to be on top, its only real advantage was distance and a height it had no right to claim.

Being above was not to be superior at all.

I felt poorer, and richer, at one and the same time.

I was on the flat, I belonged there, there were no escapes.

And yet the need to make peace with everything surrounding me was as strong as ever. Slowly it dawned

on me that this was impossible too. Things too dark for my liking kept on happening. They renewed themselves as commonly, and as often, as genius took us a stride or two forward. Serenity was the one thing I'd brought back from the Castle's top, and it was the thing I prized most. I came down from Gippsland's peak thinking I could carry it through the world, and so I could – I did, I have – but the price was that I had to admit that serenity was a garment I chose to wear, which others might not want, or even recognise. Serenity was the quirk in which I clothed myself, it wasn't everybody's garb, but it was mine, and I had my rights as everybody else had theirs.

I took myself, then, not to the edge of the Moroka plateau, on which the moon had shone on those nights when I looked out from, and slept on, the peak, but into the space behind my eyes, looking at the world with horror and amazement. The world was no other than what I saw, nor had it been any different, ever.

Worse - or is it better? – the world and the mind observing it are one. Virtue, so prized by human beings, inhabits only the tissue between the thing observing and the thing observed. Conscience is a layer, almost irreducibly thin, between what is and what's thought about it. It's a layer we might do better without, but, as a product of our civilisation, I can't. So I will pretend that I am the moon, not the mind controlling the feet that have been planted on it, and I'll tell you what I see.

I see an immense drama, with neither end nor interval to give it relief. I see a globe peopled with creatures that have found out how to destroy it, having only barely learned, yet, how to keep it alive. This is normally done through legal means, religion, perhaps, and philosophy. There is also the endless current of custom. All depend on

language, something springing out of the mind. The mind, I underline, the mind. This means, I force myself to realise, that the problem is supposed to be the source of its own solution. Commonsense – common? – suggests that this is unlikely. Problems, like human lives, ask for their own continuation. Which of us thinks the world would be better if we were ended? Can the world do better than it's done in the past? Not Pygmalion likely! Must we go on, then, as we've done before? Yes, unless you know an alternative I haven't seen.

Can we expect humans to improve?

Can we expect cats to stop chasing their tails? Of course we can, because they don't do it all the time, but they start again, don't they?

We've had a few wars since the one that was going to end them, have we not?

But I was going to speak from the moon; I wonder how things look, from way out there?

I consider, once again, having given myself a further vantage point. I don't know who to thank for getting me where I am today. Bill Gillio, Alan Waller and the others who told me how to get to the Castle, or helped me find the way, are behind me now, leaving me, paradoxically, alone in that vast crowd which is the earth's population. This is not so much a place as a state of mind which can be shared as willingly, or regretfully, as any other. There's nothing special in what I want to say. If it's obvious to me it's clear to others. There are far too many people on earth. The things that made us dominant have brought us down. Our eminence, our superiority, is foolishness. When we wipe out species we wipe out alternatives. If we get rid of other creatures, and leave the world inhabited by nothing except

the species we've tamed, we've created a world in our own likeness: a horrible sight!

Man is proud and most certainly dominant, but with this extra paradox that it's our dominance that allows our weaknesses to face less challenge than they should. European civilisation has encouraged the belief in a god responsible for the universe, and the co-belief, an unfortunate one, that it's man who's closest to this god, and so long as man is obedient to his mental look-alike then what man does is fine by whoever's in heaven. One has only to put it so simply to see how silly it is. We have to take full responsibility for our actions without having anything or anybody to tell us what to do. This involves anxiety and a thorough searching of our doubts, when what we want to do, what we do most naturally and easily, is to act in our immediate and passionately perceived interests. To manage the world without having a divinity to appeal to may be beyond us; we haven't really tried yet, in any conscious way. Ceding power to some world body is the most obvious of solutions but most of us are scornful of the United Nations, knowing how little control it can exercise over the jurisdictions of 'nations' as corrupt as they are stupid. Even the mature democracies are often indecisive, causing people to think that benevolent dictatorship might be the best form of government. The problem, of course, is to keep the dictator benevolent. It's a new form of turning humans into the god who, in not existing, is beyond our ability to create. We really have to give up on the idea of god, perhaps humanity's longest-lasting failure, and therefore the hardest to admit and the one most difficult to wean ourselves away from. We have to admit restraint as a saving grace of which we are constantly in need.

Endless growth, that underlying item of faith in our financial system, is one of the first ideas we'll have to give away. Stasis, permanence, is the thing we have to plan to achieve. It's what we're living with anyway, so admitting our situation shouldn't be absolutely beyond us?

Or is it?

Many years ago, playwright Thornton Wilder wrote *The Skin Of Our Teeth*, suggesting that humans had escaped crises by the narrowest shaves at numerous times in the past and were still managing to do so. How we got away with it was more than he could say, but we did have, he thought, some genius for survival when we ought to be making the final mistake that wiped ourselves out. Will we do it yet? Possibly not; we haven't done it so far, in a long history of disasters. We're still in there, struggling. In many things, in many ways, we're getting better. We've got a lot going for us, if only...

If only what?

If only we could control ourselves, managing our energies so that the survival and then the improvement of the world's species was our primary purpose, rather than the illusory benefits for themselves which individuals seek.

What did I want, as a young man, when I went in search of Castle Hill? I wanted to be out of my daily life, looking down, able to see more than I saw when I was embroiled in the events, duties, satisfactions and problems of community life. I wanted to be increased in soul by seeing everything at once. I wanted to be as like a god as was possible for a mortal. I wanted to know what it was like out there, up there, looking down, and now I know. It began with getting to Castle Hill, somewhere about 1963, and getting there again. After that, it took years of absorbing what it meant to have that high-handed way of

seeing the world, and trying to turn it into a benefit for myself and others. In fair measure, I've succeeded. I'm a responsible citizen with no debts and no great stains hidden by a carpet. The world has no need to be ashamed of me. I'm a fair contributor, I think, as I was taught to be, by my parents and my school, by the poor but reasonably proud community I grew up in. I'd like to be leaving the world better than I found it but can't feel certain about that. The risk will still be there that we – humanity – will manage to wreck things for ourselves as well as for everything else. The only peace I can make with this is that, as Thornton Wilder – a great writer; have you read *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* lately? – pointed out, humanity's way has always been risky. We think compulsive gambling's a scandal but it's one of our main ways of proceeding. We're always putting ourselves forward for a throw of the dice. Remember those American pilots who ferried nuclear bombs day and night, never knowing when their secret orders would say go on, and drop? They've been expunged from our consciousness now, but they were America's, and therefore the world's, way of keeping the peace (!!!) for years. Madness, you may say, and madness I say too, madness all the way, but that's the way we operate, isn't it, and it was done under the blessing of a representative democratic system, supposedly the best safeguard humanity's invented to prevent the abuse of power.

It gives rise to caution, does it not?

A final thought that comes to me is that my problem, however satisfactorily solved by me – or otherwise – has to be solved all over again by everybody that comes after, individual, nation, or generation. The problem is permanent, and nothing makes it go away. I've traced it through the decades of my life and whatever I've said makes

the problem no less pressing for anyone else. However busy we make ourselves, however much we occupy ourselves with good works that may improve the chances of survival, the problem will present itself in new forms, demanding that every new generation, period, or person, will have to deal with it in ways they can manage. Over-population, nuclear power, weapons, wars ...

... all the things, anything, that may wipe us out. I'm glad I went to Castle Hill. I didn't know what the world was like until I looked down. Like Louis Armstrong, I can see it's a beautiful world, it gives me great joy to be part of it, but ...

... but ...

I won't say it all again. I've had to fight it out inside myself and so must you, dear reader, so must we all.

1. *Hail and Farewell! An Evocation of Gippsland*, Chester Eagle, Heinemann Melbourne 1971

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