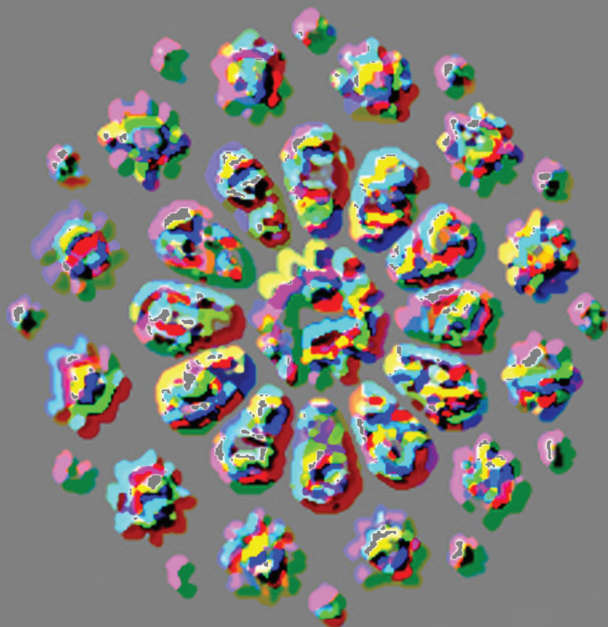
CHARTRES

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)
Waking into dream (novel, 1998)
didgeridoo (stories, 1999)
Janus (travel pieces, 2001)
The Centre & other essays (essays, 2002)
Love in the Age of Wings & other operas (librettos, 2003)
Melba: an Australian city (essays, 2004)
The Wainwright Operas (librettos, 2005)
Oztralia (essays, 2005)
Cloud of knowing (novel, 2006)
Benedictus (essays, 2006)
Central Station Sydney & other operas (librettos, 2006)
The Sun King & other operas (librettos, 2007)
The Well in the Shadow (literary essays, 2008)
All the Way to Z (memoir/essay, 2009)
This Enchanted World & other operas (librettos, 2009)
Running The Race (novel, 2010)
A Mob of Galahs (librettos, 2011)

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

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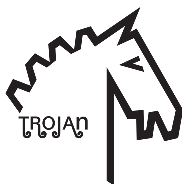

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Mini-mags

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)
Chartres (memoir, 2011)
The Plains (memoir, 2011

I was nervous about Europe, yet keen to arrive. Europe meant a long flight, fast trains, and an almost bottomless history. It meant Shakespeare, Mozart, and the infallible Pope. It meant war, with men sucked in from subordinate countries like mine, responding like dogs to a whistle when the great powers wanted to fight. Two of my uncles had fought in France and my father had been spared only because his parents said two sons at war was enough. Europe had legends, stretching north into lands where ice and snow abounded. It possessed the Mediterranean sea which, as the name told you, was the middle of the earth. Australia was at the periphery. Everything central came from the nations of war, revolution, discovery and sublime music, which I'd loved for years. It spoke with knowledge of the human heart. Other places had their customs but Europeans knew the constituents of humanity and could show them to you, set out like notes on a stave. Europeans were cruel, but they made the world do what they wanted. They had empires, and my own land had been part of one; we celebrated it still, in ways that underlay our apparent independence. The British flag was in the corner of our flag, and we performed our politics in the British way. We spoke their tongue, adapting it a little to suit our style. Our financial system wasn't ours at all, it was theirs, and we were puny, for all our wool and wheat, beside their accumulations of wealth. When my plane landed at Singapore – an island the British hadn't been able to stop the Japanese capturing – and we boarded a bus to the terminal, I looked back on the jumbo as our last connection with

home. Australians were good at getting around the world, because we didn't think much of ourselves by comparison with those of greater experience.

We had a certain innocence, an ignorance, really, which I hoped might be replaced by dipping into European experience and de-freshening ourselves with all the centre knew. It was dark when we landed in Rome. When our driver set off he drove on the wrong side of the road, but so did everybody else; we in Australia followed the British way, as the continent did not. Civilisation had more than one way of functioning. Entering the city, I recognised the Colosseum in the half-light of a European dawn. The sunlight was so much brighter back home. Rome's buildings enclosed me in a way I'd never felt in Sydney or Melbourne. Office workers, dressed ever so smartly, were crowded into bars, sipping coffee to start the day. What rhythms could they feel as they trod their narrow, crowded footpaths between, already, a noisy stream of cars? If anyone stopped, horns tooted behind. No one had any patience. Despite the press of civilisation's confidence, it seemed to me that hysteria was close. The genial humanity of my own land didn't exist.

We got out at Central Station, pushing our way past the men who'd gathered to keep the driver company, despite signs forbidding this. I pulled out a map and we headed for the Via Nazionale, sheltering from traffic under a tree that had somehow got itself into central Rome. The earth around it smelt of piss. Piss. I thought of the wheatfields of my childhood, the vast plains

between our farm and the orange groves of father's birthplace. Piss! In the heart of a famous city. We got to our lodgings to find a heavy door. There was a speaking device, so I pushed the button and spoke. A mechanical voice, far out of sight, told us to press another button to get in. We slept, after our flight, our sheets smelling of some fume-laden drying process, not of the open air.

It occurred to me that there was no open air, as we understood it, in this city. Exhausts belched night and day. Jet planes drew lines of white in the sky. We travelled to Florence and I saw that there was no bush, either. There were patches, thin enough, of trees, then farmland again. One no sooner left the ambit of one city than signs of the next appeared. Everybody lived within sight of each other. Everything told you how small you were. The piazza in front of Saint Peter's empowered the Pope and his cardinals, not the faithful who gathered every day. Crowds, I felt, were regarded cynically by those who sold them flags or ice creams. They fed on each other, these Europeans, without much independence at all. They shuttered their doors and windows as if riot or civil disturbance was never far away. I thought of the dictators whose rageing had readied these people for war. We went to Barcelona and I saw a workers' demonstration in the streets near the cathedral; it was orderly enough but the latent violence caused me to think of the spiky, dangerous-looking ornamentation I'd noticed in the cathedral. The people surrounding me were used to murder of one sort or another, and I wasn't. They made me feel foolish, naïve, impotent and yet I was resistant

too. A well-mannered people, living inside a generous social agreement, as we had, most of the time, at home … that was surely something to be proud of?

It was their pride, more than anything else, that made Europeans supreme. Castles, cathedrals and palaces told you how mighty the high-born could be. Parliaments were impressive, but they purported to represent the people, and it was evident that for most of Europe's history the people, bless them, had been in the grasp of power. Lesser ranks of society did their best to mimic those more fortunate. Nobody had much space. It wasn't there to be had, unless you subjugated someone else, as kings and rulers had done when building their palaces. Even the most expensive homes in my country made lesser claims on those who passed them by. Servants had largely died out in nineteenth century Australia because people wanted lives of their own. Servitude was acceptable only when temporary. It wasn't a state of being that Australians could accept. Homes as individual statements were scarce, in Europe. Larger buildings seethed with rank, and servitude. Identity was a matter of place: *your* place! Manners were important too, as an expression of society's workings. On the other hand, Europeans found a freedom on the roads that my people had given up. The roads were more dangerous, because more individualistic, than ours. Ambulances hee-hawed night and day, their drivers enjoying the lack of restraint that their jobs allowed. People who'd suffered under the Nazis said they found the sirens frightening because they reminded them of not-so-distant horrors.

The Nazis: Europe had torn itself apart because Germany had not accepted its defeat in World War 1, and started the fight again, rather more hysterically the second time. The British had wondered how a nation so civilised had become so brutal. I found the same thought pressing in my mind in Spain, where I found the people most civil; how could they be so accommodating when, only a generation before, they'd been at war with themselves, dragging in idealists from surrounding countries too. I studied Picasso's 'Guernica' with its thick wooden frame and bullet-proof glass and decided I couldn't reach it. This was not the Europe I had come to find.

It doesn't take long for the traveller to wonder why he's travelling. The languages being used make one aware of the differences Europeans accommodate every day. I noticed two Portuguese businessmen picking up a newspaper in French and talking about it to each other; on the same train I noticed that announcements to passengers were broadcast in French, Spanish, German and English, and that when the train crossed the Franco-Spanish border, the order of presentation changed so that Spanish displaced French in the sequence. The educated, and most of all the wealthy, moved easily across these borders. Powerful families had until quite recently ruled what I had always thought of as nations, and they'd made war on each other, or married each other to secure times of freedom from war, in ways that meant that when war was near the loyalties of these inter-married families were very much open to question.

In the years immediately preceding World War 2, I remembered, a feeling had existed that members of Europe's ruling families ought to be able to call a halt to the approaching disaster … but no, the time of the aristocracies had almost ended and there was little they could do, however much they were inter-married and not wanting to fight each other.

My country had no past, beyond dispossessing the blacks and establishing a settlement. The past was everywhere in Europe. I studied a castle in Angers, having no idea what it would be like to live in such a place, as people evidently did; I could see a few curtains here and there. Then I studied how it had been built. Huge quantities of earth had been moved to separate one part of a hill from the rest. Teams of ant-like humans must have done this, while the would-be residents waited for the work to be done. A moat of sorts had been created in the excavations, and, near the moat, modern gardeners had planted grasses so they formed green lines, edging the water like a piece of embroidery. Back home, I was part of the native plant movement. I liked the pattern of these French people, but it was foreign to me as I was to it; I could only look on it with no prospect of taking it home because it was so foreign. My country had an identity too; it must be stamped on every part of my custom and thought, yet it was only as I looked at Europe, that I found myself becoming aware of what I was.

I was a Euro-Australian, and I had never really known this. Years before, I had read a piece by Hal Porter

in which he described himself as ‘Anglo-Australian, of course’, and I had felt sorry for him. The Eagles weren’t Anglo, we were Australian to the core! Yet in Europe, despite the Italians’ way of making you pay to sit down in a café, not to speak of their unwillingness to queue, I could see that I was more European than I’d realised. My manners, my civility, were as much French or Spanish as they were Australian, and my spirituality was wide open to the gothic alignment. I entered Notre Dame, and marvelled; marvelled again in La Sainte Chapelle, that miracle of stone and glass. I entered the cathedrals of Amiens and Rheims (its doorway damaged by World War 1 shelling). I visited Rouen and Beauvais to see their cathedrals too, and I visited Chartres.

Chartres. With my son and daughter, I travelled on a train from Paris. Approaching the town, I could see the cathedral on its hill, a dark shape visible from far away, standing over the town it had been built to represent, and to shelter, it was that big. We walked around the town, we lunched, and then we went to the great doors, admiring and in my case at least, a little apprehensive. I thought this was because beggars liked to accost you in these doorways, when, they thought, you might be vulnerable, or even generous. But no, my vulnerability was inside me, and I didn’t know.

It was a winter day and the sunlight was weak. There were no beggars and we pushed through the doors. The space was vast and it stretched into darkness, but on the floor ahead of us was a pool of light. It had come through the rose window above us and behind, which we

had seen, grey and stony, from the outside. Now we were within. The light lay before us. We advanced, entering this light which came …

… from another world? I'd grasped the gothic ideal on visits to Notre Dame and I knew that the cathedrals shaped themselves in the form of a cross, they pointed to the sky (heaven), and they were gloomy because that caused worshippers to look at the windows, which not only told stories in an abstract sort of way, but reminded the viewer that the light they revealed came from another world. I knew nothing more marvellous than these windows, let into mighty stone structures to bring viewers' minds into contact with that other world, in which humans lost their importance. Monarchs, cardinals, nobles, lords and peasants were all humbled by this light coming down. To the amazement of my son and daughter, I began to cry. My children were displeased. They pummelled me. They needed me to pull myself together. They were hardly safe in a land that wasn't their own if their father couldn't control himself. He did. He put his arms around them and we moved out of the light-pool that had undone me. I said, 'Let's find our way around,' hardly knowing what I meant. Find our way around? Find a way out? There was none, in the Christian world, except the gradually increasing secularism replacing the spiritual revelation that had taken over men's minds in the twelfth century, and lasted, some of it, to the twentieth. An absolute statement made when the world was younger was reverberating still. Enormous effort had gone into

building Chartres. Stones had been cut, hauled to the site, lifted into place … Teams of workers had done what their master-builders had told them to do, then they'd all gone away, their intentions achieved. I was to read books about the builders' processes, later, when I'd had time to become curious. Building teams had moved across Europe, something that went on for hundreds of years in some places, shorter periods in others, as towns vied to achieve what every city and township wanted – a place where heaven and earth coincided, a place where the heaven that surrounded earthly beings could be felt, even seen, in the light that came into the great cathedrals, places of such miraculous construction that they seemed to prove any crazy concept that the priesthood preached to their congregations.

Europe was never the same after I'd visited Chartres. I felt I had its key. Europe's greatest creation, its most imaginative by far, was the idea that God and his holiness had visited this earth and were still in touch. Of all creatures, man was closest to god, and resembled him, however pitiful the likeness at times when warring, greedy or lustful behaviour controlled his soul. Man was a creature of soul, its outline had been defined by the church, man's uncontrollability was restrained to some extent by the judgements made in that other world which touched, infiltrated, this one. If this was no more than belief it had been solidified, shown to be proven, by the churches, places of intense worship, which lay all over the nations that had spread their form of civilisation around the world.

I may have been a visitor but I had learned, in my days at school, listening to readings from the Bible, and prayers, what this central civilisation was. It was a means to redemption, a way whereby mankind could perform above its crippling limitations, and be pleasing, even acceptable, to its god.

I didn't believe a word of this, but I'd been shaped in a country which was European enough to have had the great, the hopeful, messages embodied in its ways so that I'd picked them up without realising their full intensity because I'd never seen it, or felt it, until I experienced – that's to say *entered* – the formulation of the world which had been made in Europe centuries before. What the church, older than the nation state by far, offered was timeless, was absolute. There were words around the dome in Saint Peter's, Rome, to say so. I remembered – and how foolish was this? – a film we'd been shown when I did military training at Puckapunyal, an army base in my home state of Victoria. It was a film about finding one's way across country, and it had been made in England for the British army. Whenever the troupe of soldiers in the film were lost, they were instructed to take their bearings, that is, take a compass reading off something prominent. The camera would look around and find, always, a spire. Being young Australian men, we laughed. Church spires weren't as common in Australia as they were in England. You could march all day, as we well knew, without seeing one. (Besides, who wanted them? They didn't offer food, drink, sex, or the latest in good jokes!) In Europe, apparently, church

spires, or steeples, were endlessly available pointers. They not only pointed you to god, they told you where you were. This was all very useful, no doubt, but Europe was a different place, where other people did other things for other reasons.

I was an Australian in this place that had sent convicts, soldiers and settlers to our land, and found it strange. They'd adapted, because they had to, and now I and my family were adapting in reverse. Europeans had forced the world to take on their likeness, and now we, in our turn, had to face them in the ways they used when they were at home. They didn't let you into their homes, unless you paid to see where the famous had lived, and I didn't find such places interesting. They'd garnered enormous collections of art, and trophies from the lands they'd conquered. They had a wealthy bourgeoisie who shaped the way they lived and thought in a way that didn't happen in my country, where department stores and advertising agencies ruled. They kept things from you. On our second visit to Rome we stayed in a pensione where, for the life of me, I couldn't tell where the 'hotel' ended and other businesses began. Mice and rats were said not to exist, except that you saw them, so that you knew they were not to be mentioned. Silence dealt with them instead of traps or poisons? As we approached a tiny restaurant we had found to be good, in Rome, we knew it was open if we saw on the footpath a table, a bottle and a menu; this was their statement, and it delighted me. Their trains ran on time. Europeans were smoother than Australians, and they didn't have to

cope with our heat, so they dressed with a greater range of fabrics, and they displayed them well; I remembered, long after I was home again, the beautiful young women of Paris, causing the fur on their overcoats to twirl as they moved, and the stylish scarves circling their necks and clinging to their coats until released by the movement of their knees. Pigeons, too, were everywhere in European cities, while the birds of nature that we had back home were nowhere to be seen.

That was because there was no nature, or not as we knew it; man had conquered everything. Even in the Swiss alps there were chalets and special cog-wheeled trains to take you to, and look after your comforts on, the iciest peaks. I looked from a train in Switzerland and saw, far above, on a rock-side covered in snow, the outline of a vineyard. When the season came, and the snow melted, someone would be picking grapes up there and sending them down to be made into wine. The wine wouldn't be as good as ours, except for those few places that had rare quality, but then, ordinary people never got to drink the fine wines, only the stuff, mostly awful, that they could afford. Money, however it was made, was the divider between those who had and those who hadn't, a divide the Europeans found inevitable. It seemed to me that their democracy was only a form, and didn't penetrate very far. To succeed, you had to be quick, clever, and smart, to which we might add, merciless. Europeans had manners but little kindness, it seemed to me, unless they were dealing with someone formidable

enough to command the best from those who served them in some way.

If you went into a shop, they expected you to buy. Browsing was an impudence of foreigners. They sensed it when you didn't know how to behave. They upbraided you scornfully, or they were rude. Their rudeness, when it came, showed you that you had no way of getting back at them, something Australians find hard to accept. They had times for everything – times when churches opened, and closed, times when booking offices were supposed to open, but often didn't. If you didn't fit in, you got left behind. Their railway stations showed diagrams of the various trains, their times, and the points on the platform where the various carriages would be. Passengers were expected to be in position, because the train wasn't going to wait. At Angers, one afternoon, waiting to return to Tours, I found myself approached by an Englishman who hadn't got onto the trick of displaying where the carriages would stop. I'd gone to one end of the platform because I hadn't bothered to reserve seats for myself and my children. The Englishman took off to find the diagram I'd told him about, the train arrived, and we found seats in a cabin filled with French women who, I saw, accepted me because they saw me as a parent. I chatted with them for a few minutes, then the Englishman reappeared. I was sitting in *his* seat, he'd booked it, and he wanted it. I stood. The French women made room for me, and patted the seats beside them for my son and daughter. Resenting the Englishman for insisting on his rights, when, they knew, there were seats

in nearby cabins, they adopted me, saying not a word to the intruder from across La Manche. He'd had his win in claiming his seat, but I'd done better, I felt, and thanked the French women as we left the train at Tours.

Back in this city, sitting beside the Loire, I studied windows until I found an antique shop; their antiques drew on a deeper and more varied past than the shops of Melbourne, which descended fairly quickly from antique, to period, to junk. I saw a set of soldiers that I knew would delight a friend of mine to whom I felt indebted. I would buy them for him. The man in the shop gave me a price, considerably more than I had expected. It was not a shop where one bargained. I explained to the dealer that I had only a limited number of francs (no euros in those days) with me, but if he gave me a card, I would send him the money when I got home, and I would leave him with my postal address so he knew where to send them.

No. Pay now, or no deal.

I explained again, taking care. I wanted him to hold the goods, he would get his cheque in the mail – I even gave him a date – and he would send the gift to me so I could pass it on to my friend.

He didn't even answer. The French bourgeoisie, it seemed, did things on their terms. I left the shop, angrier, certainly, and perhaps a little wiser for the rebuff. If they were as proud as that, they must teeter endlessly on the brink of humiliation. This was the downside of a life of pride, such as they lived in Europe.

I saw the upside at La Scala, in a Giorgio Strehler production of *Simon Boccanegra*. I simply walked in and asked for a seat. There were none for that evening, I was told, but if I came to the same room the following evening at six, there would be seats. I came back as I had been told, and for less than five Australian dollars, was given a seat, high in the house, directly in front of the stage; La Scala was a horse-shoe theatre and I felt I had the best possible place. The curtain rose, and I didn't know what I was going to see.

I saw the finest performance I've ever seen of anything. Boccanegra had been a sailor, and when the production referred to his past, the stage was dominated by a ship and the light that allowed us to see this ship of his earlier manhood was as filtered, tinged, as the light on that morning when we entered Rome. The producer had made a virtue of something I'd thought a defect. I was also so fixed in my Australianness that it took time for me to appreciate the discipline the singers were exercising. They sang almost without gesture. Nobody moved. Only when a number ended did the actors rearrange themselves for what was to follow. Stage positioning was eloquent of the action, and the audience, too, kept themselves in control. When a number ended, its last harmonics were allowed to die away before the people in the stalls reacted. They were listening more closely than I'd ever heard an audience listen. Their clapping, though intense, was quick, because the action mustn't be delayed. It was all so perfect, so intense, so *demanding*, that I knew I mustn't leave my seat when

interval came. If I went outside, I wouldn't be strong enough to come back. There'd be an empty seat instead of a humbled, close to humiliated, young man to listen and learn.

The characters in the story had done terrible things to each other, yet by the end they were reconciled. Europeans, it seemed, were not afraid of the divisions in their culture, of which the distinction between good and evil was principal. Those whom the audience deemed to be good could be reconciled with those who'd done harm. Man was both good and bad and most of us wavered between the two. Good and evil were more than words, they were forces loose in the world and only saints contented themselves with good. There were saints enough, and they were still being created, but the workaday world had to balance its best and worst aspects; there was no other way to live in the world.

So Europe had understood itself better than I had given it credit for. Even the ghastliest crimes of the Nazis had been understood, then covered over so rebuilding could begin. Dresden, destroyed by incendiary bombing, was being rebuilt, sometimes in modern style, sometimes according to ancient plans. Europe had always been at war with itself and its boundaries had been endlessly redrawn. Europe was in a constant state of remaking and it was beyond a visitor's mind to know what they would do next. If dictators happened to be out of political fashion they were still conducting orchestras, demanding that peak of performance that we, in our country, were too afraid to ask for.

We were limp where the Europeans were hardest on themselves. After Milan, we travelled to Geneva, and it was nice enough, but this was a country where the relaxed rules provided a safe haven for those in trouble with their own authorities. It seemed like a country town, to this Australian, lacking the drama, the intensity I'd come to appreciate. We went to an art gallery and it seemed like a collection that someone might put together in my country – representative but unable to challenge. Indicative, but no more than that. Lacking necessity, or – just as necessary – ego. The great collections I'd seen in Florence, Madrid, Paris and London had been put together, then housed, by people used to working with the full intensity of a civilisation that knew perfectly well that nothing great could be created without human suffering and loss …

… which had to be accepted, and was, because the suffering was inflicted on its victims by people determined to work at no level but the highest they were capable of. The devil had a use. He could take the hindmost when great things were being put together. Simon Boccanegra's ship returned when the once-captain was reconciled with his adversaries. He collapsed, he died, and the curtains came down as the sails of his ship. The way things were staged was the essence of life, everyone knew that. The purpose of the arts was to tell people what they'd have to pay for any achievement, and there was always and without exception, a price. For the visitor, the young Australian travelling with his family, the question was in the relative values of what was

gained and what had to be paid to achieve it. If Simon Boccanegra had remained the simple sailor – semi-pirate – that he'd been when young, then he mightn't have had to pay the price that laid him full length on the stage, singing as he died.

Going home, getting out of this dilemma, was easy: one had only to catch a plane. There was reasonable security, safety, on the other side of the world. There was a kinder locale, a sloppier, warmer, more forgiving society back home. But was it worth living there after what we'd seen in Europe? I thought of all the declarations, ultimata and theses of Europe's dramatic history, in which humans were forever forcing humans to back down, surrender, or submit, a brutal place, ever so harsh, but also worthwhile because out of the horrible behaviour came a splendour that might have been created by a speech of Prospero or the magic of his Ariel. Was it, this almost unimaginable fabric, to be rejected, or accepted by a clutching, greedy hand, ennobling itself as it draped what it had grabbed over its shoulder and looked with contempt on those who'd not been so lucky?

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