David, George & Vane

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 & other operas (librettos, 2011)
The Pilgrims (novel, 2012)
Swinging Doors (novel, 2013)
the roar of existence (novel, 2015)
Grassy Hill (novel, 2017)

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

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Front cover: Baldhead Doric by David Armfield, 1963

Back cover: David Armfield (left) and Vane Lindesay (right) at the Prince Regent Theatre, Bairnsdale, recently acquired by the Exclusive Brethren Church, 1965

Inside back cover: The Master in the Fields of Genoa: George (Geo.W.) Bell, Gippsland, 1965

Mini-mags

Escape (story, 2004)
Hallucination before departure (memoir, 2006)
Mozart (memoir, 2007)
Travers (memoir, 2007)
The Saints In Glory (story, 1991/2009)
So Bitter Was My Heart (memoir, 2008)
Keep Going! (memoir, 2008)
Who? (memoir, 2008)
At Baldy's Feet (memoir, 2008)
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Four Last Songs (memoir, 2011)
The Camera Sees … (memoir, 2011)
Freedom (a reflection, 2011)
Men In White (a reflection, 2011)
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Gippsland's first great book (essay, 2015)
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Mother's question (memoir, 2016)
An answer (memoir, 2016)
Of his Place and Time (memoir, 2016)
There's His Majesty! (memoir, 2016)
The Laughter of Her Heart (reflection, 2017)
Illawarra Flame Trees (reflection, 2018)
The Armour (essay, 2018)
David, George & Vane (memoir, 2018)

Gippslanders were fond of saying, with certainty and perhaps an expansive movement of the arm, 'You've got everything here.' They took agreement for granted. The lakes for sailing, rivers to swim in, fishing, the Ninety Mile Beach, the ocean, mysterious hills full of old diggings, well-tended gardens, pubs a-plenty … what more could you want? They irritated me, and it was frustrating because after a year or two I saw that the region had a unity I found fascinating; the coast turned a corner, rivers ran down to the lowland, human settlement was shaded by one of the grander forests on earth, it was an interesting place to be, but something was lacking …

Music for one. I'd spent much of my last year at university listening to music; it was, I felt, civilisation's highest form. I'd been reading JWN Sullivan on Beethoven's string quartets. My father (see mini-mag *Of His Place and Time*, 2016) had brought back a complete recording from New York and I'd spent hours finding my way into the composer's most inward music. He'd taken Europe, and by extension the world, into territory not open before. This was all new to me. I knew about the land, because my family had worked it for generations, but music - thought, really – was new and exciting. University had done for me what it was supposed to do. I was ready for more, but I'd been sent to Gippsland, in the state's far east. What was there? Nothing much except pubs, illiteracy, garages, things long out of fashion and modern rubbish ready to be sold …

My school had no English syllabus. Nobody knew what I was supposed to be doing beyond keeping kids in order and I wasn't any good at that. Meaning fell away from my life. I'd imagined I'd stroll between desks dispensing advice on writing style. Style? I couldn't see any sign of it in the town I'd been sent to. It was one of many dimensions that were missing. Style, music, night life, people who read books and talked about them, anything that lifted minds above the everyday, or helped to explain it, anything that helped you understand, or made you see …

I went into my adult life thinking I would be working to finish off civilisation's basic processes and I discovered that the young people seated before me - if they *were* sitting down, that is – had barely begun the processes I'd expected to complete.

The town was no better, but I had a companion in misery, Mary Barling, a first year teacher like myself. I had a room in the Riverview Guest House, and she the front bedroom of a place around the corner owned by a widow who told her she was not to let men into the house. We talked and listened to music in my room, there being no cafés in the town except Greek joints dishing up chops or steak. Teachers were outsiders and there was no place to relax. I bought an old car and Mary drove to Melbourne with me every third weekend, letting her hair down as we left the town that imprisoned us; having her do it beside me released something in me as well. We were getting away. We were heading for the city.

Yet Gippsland found a way in. Someone took me to the Mount Taylor fire tower and I saw mountains stretching out of sight to the north. There were tiny pockets of habitation out there, or there had been, and I was curious. I'd come from the flat plains of the Riverina where there were no barriers to settlement; how was it that civilisation – that word! That idea! – had been pulled up short by trees? There were tiny townships dotted across the map and boys and girls from these places attended schools in Bairnsdale, including the Technical School where I pretended to teach. There were people even remoter than I was! On one of our Gippsland weekends Mary and I drove into the forest to find a once-mining town I'd heard of, called Deptford. My car was a clumsy old Dodge and I got it bogged at a river crossing. We set out to walk. A few broken old chimneys were visible in the bush. We'd found Deptford and there was nothing left of it. Hell! We were stuck! We walked on, and found a hut. We kept walking but realised we were only getting further from help. Darkness fell. We walked back to the hut, lit a fire, talked for hours, then lay on the floor and slept.

In the morning we walked back to the car in the mud, and further. After a couple of miles we spotted a farm house, and the man who came out was affable. He'd get his truck and pull us out. He told us to jump on the back, his kids joined us, happy to have an outing, and we drove to the Dodge. It was out of the mud in no time and we were on our way, full of thanks. That evening I was telling some teacher friends about this adventure, as I thought of it, and they warned me to keep what had happened to myself.

Why?

Because, they said, local gossip would make much of a man and a woman sleeping together, unobserved, unchaperoned, for a night. We were both teachers, we had reputations to preserve. Don't say anything more!

I wasn't ready for this. I had a girlfriend in Melbourne, Mary had *two* boyfriends in Melbourne, how stupid, how uninformed, could gossip be? I began to take notice of the talk I heard around me. I thought it vicious. Destructive. Intrusive. Anyone could say anything and it would be believed, or at least passed on as if it were true. There were stories floating around all the time, endlessly, about the widest range of people. Things they were supposed to have done. Said. Who they'd slept with, or wanted to. The reputation of a man might in some sleazy way be enhanced by such talk but women suffered. Were condemned. There was a most attractive young nurse at Riverview and I noticed how adroitly, and carefully, she managed her movements and her conversations so that no possibility occurred of tarnishing the way people thought of her. Human sexuality was endlessly present in people's minds, but rarely brought into discussion. This was awful. The prison was more restrictive than I'd thought.

Yet, and paradoxically, the stories were liberating too. There was no intellectual level to regional life but stories were endless. Gippsland understood itself via the tales it told.

I heard thousands but two found a way deep into my mind. I've shared these stories - of Giles Wainwright at Mount Baldhead and deCourcey O'Donovan's wish to fly – with readers of earlier books[1]. Both affected me profoundly. I had spent a lot of time in the Mount Baldhead area and heard much about the Wainwrights from a Bairnsdale family that had known them well. The Wainwrights had lived in the space between two huge trees felled side by side but most … what shall I say? … thought-provoking, symbolic, for me was that Giles had settled beside a bare-topped mountain that gave views of a river that started at one's feet and ended, first in the lakes and then the ocean, far away but visible from where he stood. From the other end, as I already knew, down by the lakes, and even further, on the narrow strip separating lakes and ocean, one could look back and see Baldhead on the horizon. Something about this doubleness of vision, this reciprocation of understanding, suggested to me that one day, almost certainly when I was no longer young, I might achieve a unity of vision. The composers I'd learned to love most certainly had it: I had only to think of those quartets I'd read about, the works of Bach, the Passions of Heinrich Schutz or the Jupiter Symphony of Mozart to know, to glimpse, however inadequately, the thing I was aspiring to.

But how far was I from achieving it!

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[1] *Hail & Farewell! An Evocation of Gippsland,* Heinemann, Melbourne, 1971 and *Wainwrights' Mountain,* Trojan Press, Melbourne, 1994.

I didn't know where to begin.

Besides, I was busy at the Technical School, trying to find things to interest and develop my students who, I could see, took very little on the authority of humanities teachers. Trade teachers were certain of their reception because the community thought the things they taught were important – woodwork, metal work, machine shop practice, automotive engineering … I attended a class on the workings of a motor car and could see the value of such knowledge, particularly when you were as isolated as I was. But the English language? Who cared about that? What did it matter? It dawned on me after a time that the boys – only boys – I was teaching at the Technical School weren't so much resistant to language as to what they felt as a higher class imposition if you tried to make them 'appreciate' Keats, Byron, Wordsworth or any other writing that came from England. They didn't want it. It said nothing to them. So I began reading Henry Lawson stories to my classes, and anything that followed in the spirit or the aftermath of the Bulletin school – Dal Stivens, Alan Marshall … anything with a direct Australian tone. We moved quickly to bush poetry, which was appearing in reprint volumes at the time. I got a tape recorder and practised my classes in reading ballads aloud, with emphases here and there, onto the machine; they became proud of being able to do it well. Then I discovered that an endless source of stories of similar character could be found in a column in *The Australasian Post* hosted by Bill Wannan and illustrated by Vane Lindesay. I read my students some of these stories then asked them to write some of their own, whether actual or fantasies, I didn't care. The boys took to this like ducks to water and I felt that my teaching had found some common ground with their lives. I sent a collection of the boys' work to Bill Wannan, having no idea that his father had once been an English teacher at Bairnsdale's High School, and had taught the town's current librarian, one Hal Porter, perhaps the most extraordinary stylist this country has produced. Off went these juvenile writings to Melbourne, the boys forgot all about them and I waited, wondering what reaction, if any, they might give rise to.

A couple of weeks later, picking up a copy of *The Age* at the newsagency, I stole a glance at *The Post* and was amazed to see that Bill Wannan had printed all the boys' stories and Vane had illustrated one by a lad called Ray Heathcote about a giant sheep. I was delighted. I wrote to Vane, and asked if I could buy the original of his cartoon. He sent it to me, gratis. I pinned the pages from the magazine, and Vane's cartoon, on a board above the fireplace in room 18. The boys were proud, but not as proud as I was: it was my first great teaching success.

Weeks passed and I felt I should take the matter further. I wrote to Vane asking if I could meet him. He named a time and place – the Legend coffee shop in Collins Street. I'd gone through many copies of *The Post* by then and was curious about this man who illustrated stories submitted by readers. Vane invited me to his house that night to let me see his drawings. What a collection of Australiana was there!

Vane, in his turn, was surprised that I was able to recall so many stories illustrated by what he was showing me. I had been thinking about the Wannan column and studying what Vane was doing with it. The material Wannan was printing might have been old-fashioned, even historic, to urban readers but I was by then aware that it lived on where I was teaching: Vane's illustrations added something new. I invited the cartoonist to visit Gippsland so I could show him some of the places I'd come to know.

He came, and was so enthusiastic that I asked him to come again. I took him to meet my friend Sandy McDonnell, who lived on a ridge overlooking the Snowy, a grand position however rough and ready the life he lived: Sandy's drinking eventually ran out of control but I am forever grateful to him for taking me to mountain places that few people, and certainly not city-dwelling artists or writers, ever got to see. Even the drinking, much as it troubled me, was part of this nineteenth century overhang that I was privileged to see and at least partially understand. Vane shared it with me. It became a second, hidden, away-from-home life that we experienced together. I organised his visits willingly because I needed to share if I was to understand. He, with his professional life in Melbourne, had so much to give in return. He'd been brought up in poverty in South Melbourne, had had a miserable education at the local tech., but by skill and talent had made a career for himself, not only cartooning but designing books. He was on a retainer from Cheshire's, a leading publisher and bookseller, and he laid out the pages of *Overland*, a once-Communist now left-leaning literary magazine edited by Stephen Murray-Smith, a highly social man who, with his wife Nita, organised gatherings, meetings, dinners and parties at their home in Mount Eliza. Vane took me there and I invited Stephen, Nita and their children to stay with me if they visited Gippsland. They did this shortly after, as did Stephen, with Ian Turner, his doctoral supervisor, a few months after that, on their way back from New South Wales. I began to feel connected.

One of Vane's many associates, and one he loved to visit, was David Armfield, who lived in Eltham but had a job, working mostly at night, with the *Sun-Herald* organisation. David and Joan, both on their second marriages, were impecunious but had created a warm and gracious, if confined, home in a suburb known for its mud brick buildings. Theirs began with a large dining/sitting room and it was at the end of this space, next to the kitchen and a doorway to the bedrooms, that David placed his easel when he wanted to paint. In later years he greatly extended the house, giving himself a studio and a much larger bedroom for himself and Joan; Vane and I visited them during these extensions but got little conversation from the naturally quiet artist mixing mud and straw with a shovel. In earlier years David had been a farmer in the South Gippsland hills and was still highly practical; the home he created took on a personal quality from having been made by his hands. The studio was roofed so as to let in light from the south;

David explained why it had to be southern light if it was not to interfere with the work on his easel, a rather ponderous device which, he told us, had once belonged to Tom Roberts. There was always something on the easel when I visited in later years, and earlier paintings, together with any amount of things picked up and placed on benches to remind him of scenes he might one day add to the finished paintings, large and small, already on the walls. I bought one of some yellow box trees which he'd done a little earlier, took it proudly back to Bairnsdale and hung it above my fireplace; I liked the quietness, and the observation, that transferred from the artist to his paintings.

It was in this early stage when I was still … I should say acclimatising myself to, rather than getting to know the Lindesays and the Armfields, that I met George Bell. As with David, the painter, his reputation had preceded him. He was a documentary photographer and had exhibited his work at a small number of showings before I met him, which was, appropriately, at the Armfields' in Eltham, where George also lived; he, like David, was a press artist, which meant dealing with photographs to be printed in one of Melbourne's newspapers. Vane, David and George laughed about any number of newsroom incidents, personalities, mistakes and stuff-ups down the years, yet they were serious about their own work, George in particular. He had a way of holding a photo as if it was unworthy of his hand until he gave it approval, if he did. He told me on our second meeting that I must get a camera and record things I saw in my distant region: ‘You get to places no one in Melbourne’s ever heard of, and you see things city people don’t even dream about. You must record them.’ He showed me work by Walker Evans and other Farm Administration photographers who’d recorded life and poverty in the Deep South during the 1930s depression. ‘They created their country’s memory. You should be doing the same sort of thing here!’

That was a challenge. He was telling me to record my region. Mine? Well, that was where I was living, and showing my city friends when they visited me. I knew it ever so well by now. I had maps of its mountain tracks and samples of eucalyptus leaves, buds and fruit on large white cards in my living room as I taught myself to recognise the species constituting the forests to my north. My friend Sid Merlo told me about a supervisor for one of the local mills who had only to glance at the colour of sunlit leaves on a distant range to tell you what species of trees would be growing there, and whether they were likely to be millable. That was the sort of knowledge that I aspired to, and envied, but would never, as an observing outsider, attain.

Then something happened. David Armfield came to visit and I took him to Mount Sugarloaf so he could climb the fire tower and share its vision of the Nicholson River valley hemmed in by ranges spreading like giant arms from Mount Baldhead. It was a sight that had impressed itself on me because I sensed in what I saw some meaning, some interpretation that I couldn’t yet express but felt was fundamental in some way. David observed me as I leaned on the map table at the top of the tower, staring at the fascinating mountain to our north. On his next visit we drove out the Bullumwaal-Mount Baldhead road until David called a halt. He stood by the car, looking at the forest on a nearby slope, then set up his easel, sketching a scene of silvertop ash trees (Eucalyptus Sieberi) pushing back to the top of a rise. After a few minutes he had enough detail on canvas and said he'd finish the painting when he got home.

He did, and sent it down, ever so carefully wrapped, on the train to me. It was his gift. I was overjoyed, overwhelmed. Nobody had ever given me anything like this. He'd called it Baldhead Doric, and he'd signed it with his brush, humbly, in one corner. Baldhead Doric, what did that mean to me? David was a recognised artist and he'd put himself behind, beside, me in what I was doing in trying to get to know, to understand, to attach myself to a place very different from others that I'd known. I was, though I couldn't have said it at the time, on a quest to locate the spirituality of place, of many places, of this region that called me like a siren yet gave me next to no way of understanding itself. David had come in from outside and picked a subject – trees peopling a slope – that had fascinated me for some time. Species placed themselves. You could know a stretch of country by what grew on it, either dominantly or in mixtures. I had begun to perceive, however dimly, that the land, the hills, were eloquent if you could only pick up their signals. David's gift was perhaps the greatest compliment I'd ever received. He thought I had attuned myself to the land, and what it was doing. What it was.

I felt I was being over-estimated in being given this painting, but it made clear to me, as it had to David, my intention, the wish I nurtured secretly in my heart. I was by now in love with Gippsland, which I'd despised when I first saw it, so empty of everything I'd come to value in those packed years at university when I was finding my way into, and gaining a sense of belonging to, the European tradition of music. Something else had me in its grip this time, and I had no alternative but to explore.

I began to write a column for the local newspaper about various local history items, and thought about taking this further and writing a history of the region. I was well-placed to do it. I had wide ranging contacts and numerous people who'd speak well of me to others. I could have settled in and connected my life with everything around me … but I didn't. I bought a good camera and sought out the things that George would have taken, had he been there. I looked at places with eyes trained by David's eyes, the observations of a painter. I travelled with Vane, showing him what I knew. He talked about how artists simplified and emphasized in order to make clear to untrained eyes what they'd seen. He gave me drawings he'd done and I had them mounted. He gave me a painting by S. T. Gill in return for some favour, and that too went on my walls. I wrote to him often, telling him things that were happening around me, these letters becoming a release for things I couldn't say to people living near me, for fear of offending or making them uncomfortable. I was developing a detachment I needed to protect, even as my intimacy with Gippsland was increasing. Letters to Vane, and conversations with him and my other Melbourne friends, were an outlet I needed, though I could hardly have said why. I began to realise, as I moved through Gippsland, with the same type of camera George used in my hand, that I was teaching myself, and being taught by my friends: my long transition from scorning what I didn't want to see was ending with my arrival in a new life-position: my artist friends were teaching me. George said that if you wanted to photograph something you should walk all around it, watching for the angle from which it was most clearly itself. This, if you think about it, allows for a building, an object, a person or a scene to be itself in front of a photographer humble enough not to interpose himself as well or instead of. This was an humility I'd always needed and I'd learned it from George, and from David and Vane, each of whom had submitted, years before, to the disciplines of their art. They were mature artists, and they'd come into my life at a formative time when I was surrounded by things, people and places I didn't know how to deal with, and each of them, together with their contacts and friends, had opened up to me and in doing so had caused me to open up in ways that went much further than my earlier notions of friendship. I had, to my considerable surprise, and in ways that I'd only partially understood, been re-made by my years in Gippsland. I was ready to leave, I left. I returned to

Melbourne a very different person from the youngster who'd set out twelve years earlier. I'd travelled east without any idea of what I'd encounter. I returned with the pride, the privilege and the burden of being an artist like my friends. I was a writer. Writers had to carry what they saw, and the more intensely, more widely and more honestly they looked, the greater was the load they carried. To see, and to say, was to be the thing you described, and this, proud as one might be at having expressed something well, was a conscience-load, a consciousness-load, that most preferred not to share. I wrote a book about Gippsland and some of the reactions it gave rise to hurt me deeply. People thought I had said things, or intended things, that had never been in my mind. People don't like having their lives described, although they say they do. They want praise whether they deserve it or not. They want judgement, but only if it favours them. They'll hate you or, almost as bad, ignore you, if you don't say what they want you to say. They have expectations and so do writers, and the two can only rarely be expected to agree.

I saw this, I accepted, and I wrote on. That was years ago. Today, I rarely think of the painful adaptation I experienced at that time. It's behind me now. The lives of George and David have ended; I spoke at George's funeral. I'd looked on helplessly as he declined into the numbness, the forgetting, of Alzheimer's disease. His wife, Nell, looked after him faithfully. The rest of us could do little. His paintings were on the walls of his home, and of his friends; his photographs were treasured by those who had them, and for my part I don't think I failed very often to think of him when I was leaning forward to look into my Yashica, as he did: I had seen him do it hundreds of times in all the far-flung places I'd visited with him. Once, on a trip to Mallacoota at the eastern end of the state, I'd posed him in a field with a wooden cottage somewhere far behind, George in corduroy, hands in pockets with an air of lordly detachment. This was deceptive. George saw better than most people because he kept his mind open to whatever was before him, and because he'd developed on an aesthetic plane unfamiliar to most. He thought about the act of seeing. He judged people, and the things they used and created, by how they presented visually. Things could be understood by the way they presented themselves. Years later, he put aside the camera and returned to painting, and his aesthetic changed, yet he still strove for the monumental simplicity he sensed at the heart of things. There was a time, not long after he returned to painting, when he went looking for a studio in some remote village, advertising himself in the Tanunda Times (South Australia) as a 'venerable artist', a claim which made his friends laugh and yet, and strangely, simultaneously accept. Like many photographers, he found it hard not to pose when observed by a camera, but my 1963 picture shows his simple dignity. I named it 'The master in the fields of Genoa' because it embodied the reverence I felt for him. When he died, I spoke about the many days when it had been my pleasure and my privilege to walk with him, photographing whatever we found interesting and I knew, when I had spoken long enough, that I was farewelling one of the richest personalities I'd known. I finished with 'Bless you George. We all loved you. Go in peace.'

That was years ago. Baldhead Doric, David's painting, still sits above my fireplace. I've been along the same road in recent years and the forest has been disfigured by logging. Most of the finest trees have gone. Regrowth is happening but will take decades that I don't have. I'll never see the forest as I saw it in my days of exploration … except that those days are forever with me through the painting. The light in a stand of silvertop ash is different from other lights because the lower parts of these trees are clad in heavy, corrugated bark while the upper, outer branches are clean – gum bark, we say – and over-full of reflection: this combination of light and dark is the quality these trees add to their sector of a forest, and David's painting brings this back to me, along with other realisations from those days of exploration. I sometimes took binoculars so that I could peer into distant clearings, looking for earlier human traces if I could find them. I was curious to know why, south of Buchan, there was a stand – one stand only – of Eucalyptus Maculata, spotted gum, huge, beautiful trees, with a larger area of Eucalyptus Maculosa with powdery white bark growing nearby. Maculosa grew on the Dargo road as well so why didn't Maculata grow there? I didn't know but I liked to talk about such things with David because he was interested in anything visual. He liked the feel of things that had character; the aesthetics of footballers' clothing could always draw him into discussion, especially if it concerned the Collingwood Football Club, of which he was a member. On Friday nights, if I was down from Gippsland, he sometimes took me there and I met some of the people who'd made the club famous. Others I heard about after they'd visited David's studio to be painted – the Coventry brothers, or Phonse Kyne. I remembered Phonse from games I'd seen at the MCG but David had stood near him, had been surprised to find he was as tall as him – how had the ex-captain ever got up to hold his marks? – and had actually spoken to him. David had spoken to Phonse Kyne. Above him was only god and he wasn't available for selection. The club walls were lined with photos, even in the changing rooms, the holy of men's holies, where David took me before a game. Premiership teams looked down on their successors, clad in the vertical black and white stripes and black shorts of a team playing at home, which meant in front of fanatical supporters. Collingwood was a working class club and David was a Labor voter, a supporter of union power and an aspirant to whatever the working class wanted to achieve …

… and he was an artist. Technique mattered. He knew about the oils used in earlier centuries and by the manufacturers of today. Brushes, canvas, stretching and tightening it: frames. The ways of dealers and those who wrote about art, creating fashions and lifting prices. He exhibited for years at the Australian Galleries in Collingwood and when his sales weren't making enough money for them, he exhibited at home. Joan made ceramics in a pottery he built her. They exhibited together and friends flocked to 71 John Street. They sold enough to live with a simplicity that suited their devotion to each other. They were artists through and through, and they supported me when I began to write. The first book I published was, unsurprisingly, about Gippsland and Heinemann's editor commissioned an illustration from David. He gave us an etching of tall trees, and the gap where others had been felled. This went on the cover. A few years earlier, when my wife and I were still in Bairnsdale, David had come down with Joan and, at my suggestion, we had driven together, with David at the wheel, into the once-red gum country south-west of the town. He drove slowly, on and on, peering over the wheel. 'What are you looking for David?' Joan asked and he replied, without taking his eyes off what surrounded him, 'I'm looking for a landscape with nothing in it.'

This set me thinking. I'd seen quite a few of his paintings, done on the northern Victoria plains, in places near Whyalla in South Australia, and looking down on country north of the Grampians, and it became clear to me that his subject was not only the features of a place but the spaces they occupied. This was the heart of the matter and I'd never realised it. He went to Cairns, did a painting or two but didn't capture the atmosphere of the tropics. Southern Australia suited him better; he responded to the exuberance of football crowds with their streamers and banners but best of all, for my taste, were his paintings of football grounds after the crowds had gone home. These were sombre reminders of darkening and absence, but full of character. Like George, he dealt with the world around him. His art was a form of consideration and re-presentation, altering yet making things acceptable; he was doing what I hadn't been able to do when I was first sent away from Melbourne.

He was rendering things in his own terms. What were mine? Just how, and in what way, could I show my love of what I'd found in the east of the state, and my reservations too? A balance had to be found, a method, and, perhaps most important, a commitment also. But I couldn't feel committed, as I needed to, unless I knew enough to share. My friend Vane – he was my closest friend by now – was my guide in this process. He trusted me deeply and I trusted him. I drew him in because he offered me an outside ear, a mind looking in from the outside that I needed because I didn't trust locals to have much sympathy for the thoughts building up inside me. I was learning, though I didn't know it then, to trust what I felt over what I heard others say. 'You've got everything here. What more do you want?' I wanted, I needed, to make everything acceptable by reconstructing it in my mind, on paper before me, so I could re-present it to the world. I was teaching myself to write, sitting for hours in a spare bedroom at a heavy wooden desk I'd bought as my place of final honesty where I sat alone for hours and hours. At nights I went for walks, brooding. On brightly lit mornings, or afternoons, I walked through paddocks near the town's aerodrome, notebook in hand, waiting for elusive ideas to come to mind. The mind was where reality took its final form, followed by the obedient hand, holding a pen, a biro, tapping a typewriter's keys. Remember them?

Vane had taught himself the pen, moving it with skill. He knew about nibs, inks and paper. He was sparing in his use of colour. He himself normally wore clothes within cooee of khaki; it seemed to provide him with a base on which to add colour and texture. He was fastidious about everything, just as he was nervous of cars. He and his wife had been in an accident before I met him, he feared a repeat of the experience, and showed me his sweating palms as we travelled from Bairnsdale to nearby Paynesville at forty-five miles an hour. He told me early on about his experience of seeing Japanese bombers flying low over Darwin, but not until years later, when I read his memoirs2 did I realise how deeply this had affected him. His recovery had been brought about when he was taken on by the army magazine *Salt*, where his skills as a cartoonist and designer were first put in front of the world. In the post-war years he worked for the now defunct Melbourne *Argus*, travelled to Europe, married Marcia, then returned, more Australian than ever.

Vane had grown up in the depths of the 1930s depression, and had joined the army to secure himself a job. Yet despite *Salt* and travel, he'd clung to the home-grown tradition that developed with the Bulletin school of writing

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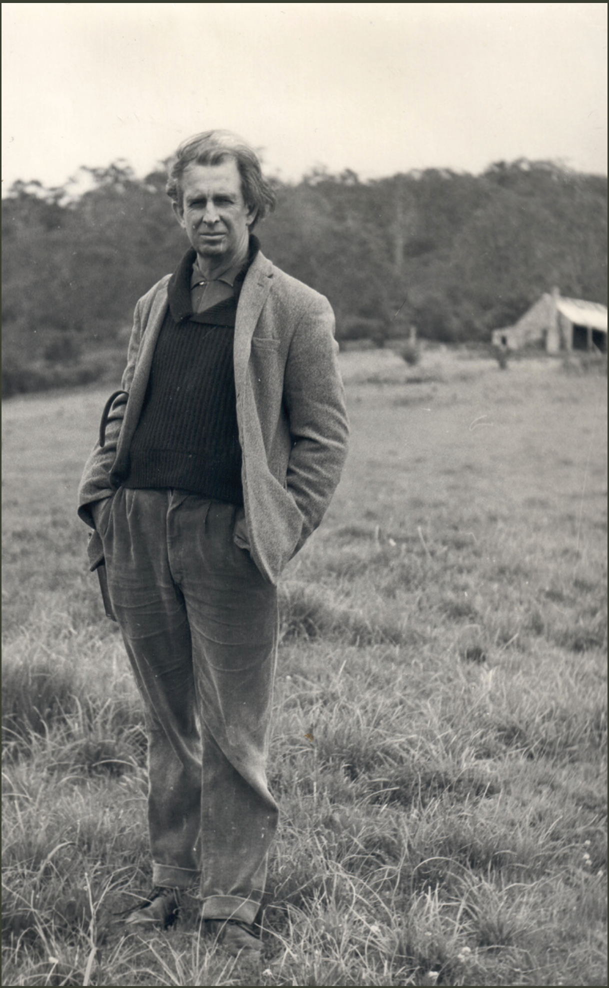
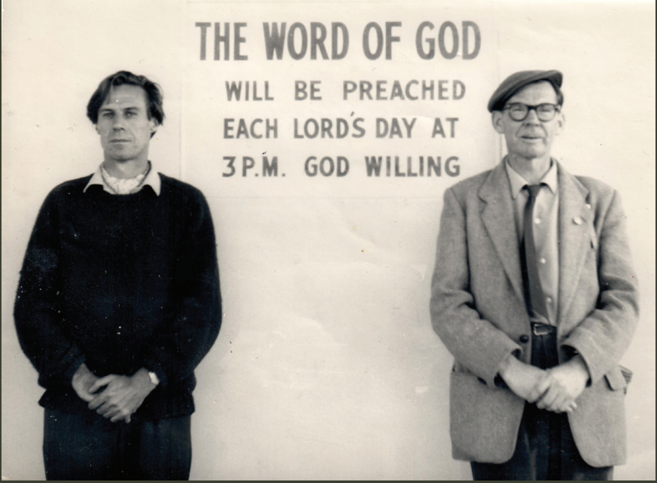
2 *Some Fragments Recalled: A Life So Far*, Vane Lindesay, Trojan Press, Melbourne, 2005

and the Heidelberg school of painting. He was a black and white artist and it was the exponents of this form, of caricaturing mostly, that he studied, gathering to his home a huge collection of these artists' drawings. Some of them had been known to him, others by repute, their habits and their methods, what they thought they were doing and what they said about it. He was an artists' artist, skilled himself and appreciative of the varied skills of others. Whenever I visited him I noticed how many phone calls he received from people wanting to know things that only he could tell them. Like David and like George he lived by and within an aesthetic he applied to the world. In 1977 he won the Transfield Prize for the best designed Australian book, receiving it humbly. He'd long felt it might come to him one day, such was the quality of his work. His friendships with the Old Left were maintained, through Noel Counihan, Alan Marshall, Stephen Murray-Smith, Frank Hardy and any number of others, one of the last and latest being publisher Lloyd O'Neill, who had accompanied us on a turbulent journey through the New South Wales mountain country with Sandy McDonnell in the days when that wild stockman was still alive. Vane was rarely comfortable in any physical sense during the trips we made together, but he was absorbing the places, and the way of life, which had given rise to the tradition to which he'd belonged, and was slowly absenting himself from, however hard he clung to it. There was a modern world and much of it, feminism in particular, contradicted the way he'd shaped himself, forcing an adaptation, just as I was forcing myself to become what I had it in myself to be.

I left Gippsland, I wrote a book about it, Heinemann Australia brought it out in 1971, largely on the recommendation, though I didn't realise this until later, of Stephen Murray-Smith, whom they employed as an advisor. Bridgett Everett was a most enthusiastic editor, John Sayers its designer, and a David Armfield etching appeared on the cover. My first book was in the world. My Gippsland experience was complete. The first review, by Alan Marshall, brief but favourable, appeared in the Melbourne *Herald*, and I felt that I was a writer at last. The world had acknowledged this. It has taken me somewhat longer, as the writing of this memoir attests, to realise that I could never have written the book, or even reached the point of attempting it, without the influences of the friends I've been talking about. It's normal to think of friends as separate from oneself, however close, but recalling what happened to me in those early years I can see now, and offer this insight, accepted, to the world, that friends go beyond being friends, as commonly understood, or influences, and are accepted into the mind, becoming part of it, until the friend has in fact merged into oneself. Friends reveal to us what we are, and what we are not. Friends give us directions and open up possibilities. Their merits make us aware of our shortcomings. To accept a friendship is to accept the possibility, perhaps the need, for a change in oneself. Friends can improve us, or perhaps destroy. We should be careful in choosing them. They can offer so much – I was lucky! - but they are a means to self-damage too. Choose carefully! Friends are the outer limits of what we're prepared to accept of ourselves as part of our common humanity. The rest is external to us, and we paint it, draw it, sculpt or sing about it, take photos of it or, in my case we write about it. *A Life So Far*, as my friend Vane Lindesay sub-titled his book when we published it not so many years ago.




THE WORD OF GOD
WILL BE PREACHED
EACH LORD'S DAY AT
3 P.M. GOD WILLING

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