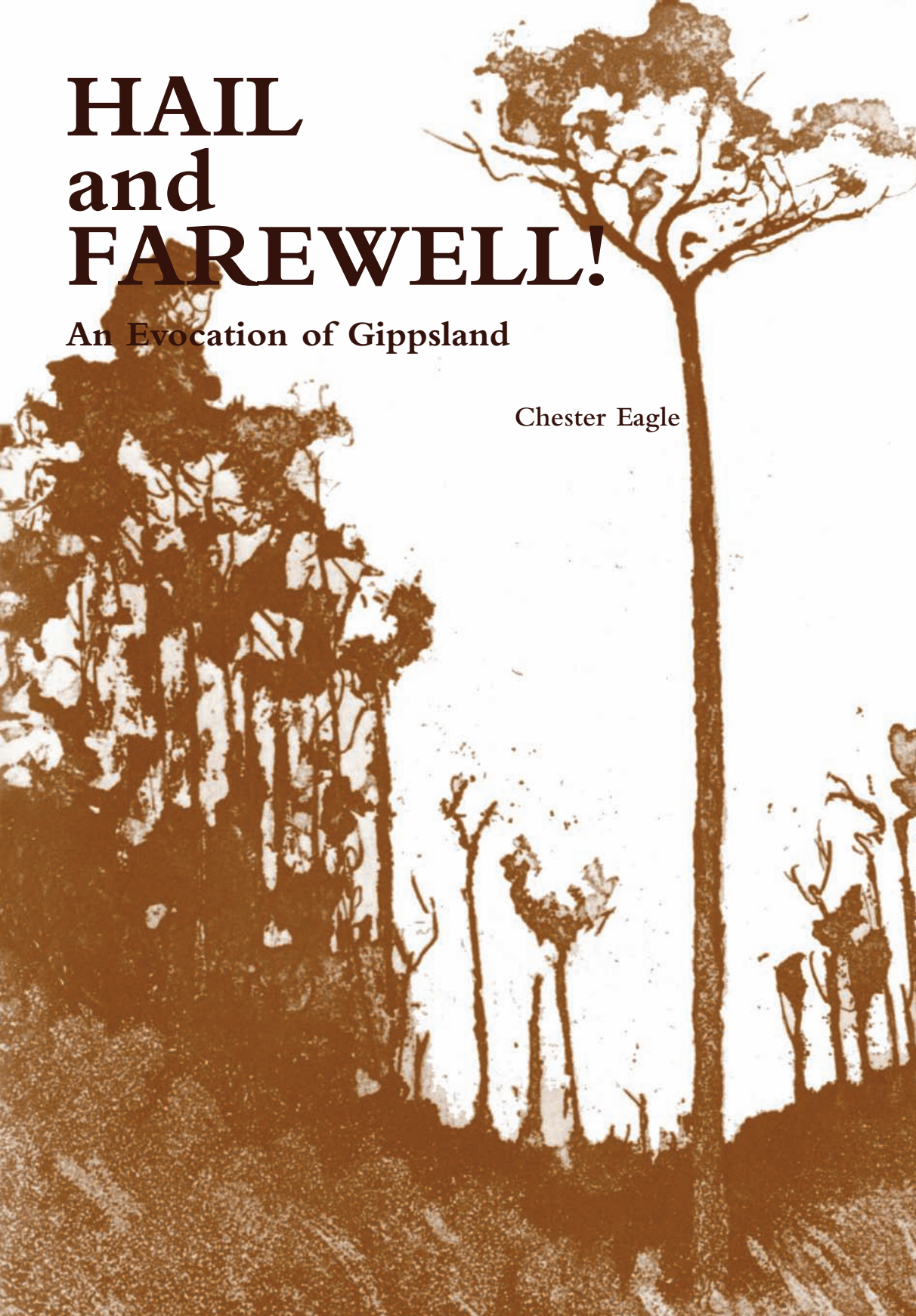
HAIL and FAREWELL!

An Evocation of Gippsland

Chester Eagle



HAIL and FAREWELL!

An Evocation of Gippsland

Other books by Chester Eagle

Hail & Farewell! An evocation of Gippsland (1971)
Who could love the nightingale? (1974)
Four faces, wobbly mirror (1976)
At the window (1984)
The garden gate (1984)
Mapping the paddocks (1985)
Play together, dark blue twenty (1986)
House of trees (reissue of *Hail & Farewell!* 1987)
Victoria Challis (1991)
House of music (1996)
Wainwrights' mountain (1997)
Waking into dream (1998)
didgeridoo (1999)
Janus (2001)
The Centre & other essays (2002)
Love in the Age of Wings & other operas (2003)
Melba: an Australian city (2004)
The Wainwright Operas (2005)
Oztralia (2005)
Cloud of Knowing (2006)
Benedictus (2006)

Mini mags

Escape (2004)
Hallucination before departure (2006)

HAIL and FAREWELL!

An Evocation of Gippsland

Chester Eagle

First published 1971 by William Heinemann Australia, Melbourne. The poem 'Bairnsdale' by Marie E. J. Pitt, from Selected Poems (1944), by kind permission of Lothian Publishing Company Pty Ltd, Melbourne. Cover etching, 'Gippsland', by David Armfield, 1971. This electronic edition published 2006 by Chester Eagle, 23 Langs Road Ivanhoe 3079 Australia, operating as Trojan Press. Phone is (03) 9497 1018 (within Australia) and email address is cae@netspace.net.au

To Tim and Rosa

'Poor young feller, he never knew what life was.'

Just so, Tim; just so.

Contents

Introduction 1

The Men from Snowy River 3

Landscape and People 73

Introduction

At the end of the 1955 academic year all we bright young Dipedders were given our teaching appointments at a final assembly. We chiacked each other in the corridor afterwards.

'Where'd you get?'

'Dimboola.'

'Never heard of it.'

'Neither have I. Where is it?'

Victoria's towns of secondary-school size were so unpromising. Wodonga, Warracknabeal, Ararat (some connection with Noah's Ark?), Stawell (ah, yes, the Gift!), Numurkah, Warragul, Horsham, Warrnambool ... My two friends and I had applied for Drouin. It wasn't so far from Melbourne to stop us driving down of a week-night for a concert or a party; we'd all be together, we'd make a world of our own and see our real friends—Drouin!!!—every weekend. The peabrains and pinheads who made up a little country town would have a hard time cutting us down to size.

One got Mildura; the other was sent to Portland. Someone else we knew got Omeo Central Classes. The announcement drew a great shout from the male students. Omeo, buried in The Alps! The place was unthinkable! Much earlier in the year I had even pulled out an atlas to find this town; I was staggered at its remoteness.

My appointment sent me to the atlas again. I had no idea where to find Bairnsdale. I found it eighty-one miles from the dreaded Omeo, which, presumably, crouched under Matterhorn-like peaks. They were both in the section marked Gippsland.

This word meant nothing to me, apart from the ABC's midday ritual of the river-heights which I heard every day when I was at home on my parents' farm in New South Wales. As far as I knew, Australia was

flat. It grew red gums, sheep, bulokes, native pines and wheat. There were cities, of which I knew two, and the Dead Heart. The hinterland was dreary. Everything to do with culture was imported and could only live in the capitals. But not to worry, I would take my own with me; it would need only a couple of kindred spirits to start a self-generating fire, fueled by our reading and our contact with the city.

Full of these bright resolves, I arrived at the Country Train Terminal at Spencer Street with two minutes to spare. I had done it many times before, on my vacation trips back to New South Wales, but this was my first indication that Gippsland was different. A porter put me wise, a taxi-driver did his best, and I arrived at Flinders Street Station just in time to pay the driver the double fare I'd promised him, grab my cases and run on to the platform to see the Gippslander pulling out, heading for I knew not what.

The Men from Snowy River

I first heard the famous poem read at primary school in New South Wales. Mr French, the teacher, was a man's man; that is to say, he was well accepted by farmers and cricketers and he looked on knowledgeably at the local football games, showing the same extreme-male reactions as the keen supporters around him. His wife was appreciated locally as a soprano; she sang brackets of numbers at afternoon functions and at concerts. During the Second World War, a large number of men, nationals of countries of doubtful allegiance in the great struggle, were interned at Tocumwal, a nearby town, 'for the duration'. By special dispensation of the camp commandant one of these men, a Latvian tenor whose stage name was Mario Dane, was allowed to visit Australian homes for rehearsals. His musical task was to partner the teacher's wife in a number of duets in a concert 'in aid of the war effort'.

I recall very clearly the tumult of sound produced by Mario Dane and Mrs French when they first rehearsed together. As a child, I heard no music in their noises. What did assault the ear was the thick, impure, sexual-adult shouting in competition with each other; there remains also a strong memory of the teacher's wife swooping up from her lower register to match the stagey passion of the continental, his voice wobbling with erotic vibrato. Being a child, I preferred to go outside, but the voices of the two oddly-matched people came thrilling through the white-frosted windows of the School of Arts, came out to little ears that knew nothing of old Vienna, Lehar, or The Land of Smiles. Mr French, though, read us The Man From Snowy River. I had not then seen a mountain, let alone a pine-clad battlement raised on high, as Paterson puts it. The country of this poem was not the wheatland where my parents had their farm. Yet Mr French—old Ivan—showed a powerful assumption that these verses would produce in us an automatic reac-

tion. Here, his voice told us, is our unofficial anthem. The tale of the stockman's heroic ride would stir the inarticulate pride of any Australian boy or girl. Well, maybe. As a child, I wanted enemies. The Japanese and Germans, with their unspeakable atrocities, were fine; one could bomb and torture them in the secret places of one's mind and in the schoolyard with the greatest of pleasure. Alongside these playground satisfactions, the famous feat of horsemanship seemed very flat beer. I wanted life, and that included death, love and cruelty: so he caught his horse; so what?

It seemed a puny sort of heroism to me, after the war news I was hearing. I thought Ivan was up the pole, but like his wife, I couldn't help responding to the Latvian singer with the half-Italian name; he had an exotic lushness about the way he displayed his emotions, alongside which the Australian teacher, for all his forcefulness, seemed dry and plain.

Over the next few years, this feeling intensified in me. Going home to New South Wales after a term at the university used to be a severe test. The countryside, once the memory of Melbourne's green gardens had faded, was able to recast its spell on me; but the life it offered! Bowls, cricket, ploughing; when will it rain? Bags to the acre, lamb-marking, sheepskins, and snakes in the dam. Get the plumber out to look at the windmill, sound the tanks to see how many rungs of water are left. The homes? Sun-blasted, with pepper trees, or new brick, with rubbishy trappings from the local gift-shop. Auctioneers, canal-diggers, drovers, water-bailiffs, the local sergeant, the newsagent with the hearing-aid who turned the other ear and said 'Hubby?' for 'I beg your pardon?' Yes, good people, but ... but what about Bruckner's majestic piety? You couldn't tell me the arid nuns in the blinds-drawn house partook of that tradition! People thereabouts had their breakdowns, but that couldn't be what Mahler was talking about in his music? True, the town had its characters, but they weren't Don Quixote, Falstaff, Hassan or Peer Gynt. Petty crime in our village had none of the fearful temptation offered to Faustus by the devil; a downfall might be represented by getting kicked off the council, or going broke and selling out. How flat was this after Hamlet and Lear! We seemed to live in a moral landscape that was flat and uneventful. The imaginative richness of the European civilisation

that we read about in Melbourne seemed to mock me as I walked up and down our little town. Where were the Mozarts here? We had a sign-writer, but scarcely an El Greco; we had an amateur brass-band, but no musicians; little brick or wooden churches with lead-light windows ... but where were the soaring Gothic spires, or the blazing stained-glass of Belgium and France? If our best singer was Mrs French, how could a Schubert ever come to maturity in our country? Brahms could sing to catch your heart and Donne's poems made you quiver, and Keats ... who did we have to speak for us? The bloody man from Snowy Bloody River? If that was Australia, they could stick it. I'd stick to Brahms and Bach, thanks. Yet the men from Snowy River, when I began to move among them, provided me with a wonderful sense of liberation, an expansive freedom that I had not felt before.

I may say that I didn't go into the Snowy River country chasing the vanishing male frontier. On the contrary; Gail McLellan and June Burns were going to a dance at Gelantipy and I offered to take them up. Two things stand out about that trip: the endless writhing of the road and Lochie's accidents. We drove for miles in the dust of a truck just ahead. 'Where's there a place we can pass him, Gail?' 'Oh, there's a straight stretch up by John Inchley's.' A little later she told me, 'That was it.' We seemed to be forever crawling around rolling hillsides in second gear, or catching the tips of trees in our headlights. 'How steep is it there?' I would ask, and Gail, in the way of the Buchan people, would say, 'Oh, a bit of a drop.' Every mile or so, it seemed, Gail would refer to her brother's prangs. 'Lochie went off the road there, but a tree stopped him going right down,' or 'You went around there alright; better than Lochie,' or 'Lochie went over there; saw a gravel truck coming and decided not to argue,' or 'Lochie went to sleep about here; I suppose it would be here, because he went off at the next corner.'

There was one classic. Lochie was driving from Buchan to Bairnsdale one wet day after a session at the Buchan pub. He dropped his tobacco on the floor while he was rolling himself a smoke. 'You know,' said Gail, 'he went off the road, between two trees, missed 'em by about half an inch and ran back on the road again, and he just looked up and he never knew.' A year or two later, I asked Lochie about this

and he told me, 'I knew alright, but I didn't tell Gail.' There were constant references to 'the hut' where Lochie lived, five miles off the main road; five miles and five gates. Two of these had heavy dents in them. Eventually we came to the hut and while the women were changing, I asked Lochie about these accidents. 'You've had a few prangs?' 'Oh, four or five,' he told me. Gail's voice came through the thin wall like a conscience, 'You've had thirteen!' 'Oh, well,' said Lochie, 'if you count the little knocks, I suppose . . .' I warmed to Lochie straight away. He had no hurry about him and he was very responsive to talk to. He seemed of no particular age (though he was, in fact, thirty-one) and didn't seem limited to a bushman's thinking. He was looking forward to the dance, but that'd go on for hours yet, so there was no rush. In good time, we went to the dance. I was by now so keyed up with excitement that I drove the little car full tilt through all the bends of those five miles. 'Jeezus!' I heard Lochie say in the back-seat, and not knowing how steep the country was, I wondered why this famous wrecker should be so anxious. But not to worry for we were soon at the hall.

So this was Gelantipy. It was the Springtime Ball and most of the men had their coats off. It was very bright inside, for the hall had electric lights, and very dark outside under the trees. There were scores of cars parked in irregular lines above and below the hall, on its little rise near the tennis-courts. Inside, the pattern was more regular—the orchestra at one end, people seated around the perimeter of the dance-floor, the inevitable group of men and boys at the door. There were just enough parking-lights and tail-lights left on to make out groups, mostly male, some mixed, drinking beer or whisky. When dances ended, more came out to smoke or drink; then the music of the little band would swell over the hum of conversation and there would be a steady drift back inside for the Highland Schottische, the Pride of Erin, or Progressive Barn Dance. The orchestra delighted me. The woman on the piano had her head down among the keys, with her hands raised a la virtuoso somewhere near her ears. The drummer, to my joy, was another woman; well past sixty, straggly grey hair and wrinkled hands on the sticks and brushes. She walloped steadily, four-four, or three in a bar, from when-

ever they started until two in the morning, without a single flourish or snatch of improvisation; boom, boom, boom, boom ...

Somewhere near midnight there was supper; around went the plates of cakes, sausage-rolls, oyster patties, cocktail sausages, cream-cake and sandwiches (always the first trays emptied). Out came the urns and the huge white- or blue-enamelled teapots, or else you took a cup of milky coffee off a tray. The people were wonderful; it was a balmy night to be alive. Miranda's words came unbidden to my mind, 'Oh brave new world, that has so many goodly people in it.' Everyone talked and showed a willingness that I have marvelled at a number of times since, to court a friendly stranger. This man had painted the gum-tree backdrop. 'You did a good job of it, then.' It turned out that he had been a commercial artist in Sydney but had preferred the land. Well! Here was someone to get to know. And here was the man in the big Mercedes we'd passed on the way up. 'What took you to Bairnsdale? Where's your place? Where were you turning when we saw you . . .?' 'And what about you?' 'Oh, I'm stopping with Lochie.'

There was more dancing then, on a fast floor. Lochie turned quite an elegant heel, but this wasn't essential. Someone who slipped over got a good-natured ribbing and got up by himself. The band thumped on. We went outside for drinks and the night began to steady down. I expected the party to adjourn to the hut when the music stopped, but the drinking and talking went on unabated. Empty bottles were flung down anywhere in the grass, the Dodges, Holdens and Land-Rovers began to roar away into the dark, but the talking and drinking went on. The lights went out in the hall, but Lochie and Lumper Byrne kept on talking about dawgs and ponies. Lumper got interested in June and the dingo-trapper reached his big shapeless hands out to embrace her. She flitted among the trees and he hulked along in pursuit, looking like one of Thurber's comic drawings chasing the eternal female. Long after I was quite exhausted, the party began to talk about going up to the hut for breakfast. At last! But no, some more bottles had still to be emptied and flung by the nearest tree before we climbed aboard the VW and the two Land-Rovers. Nothing in my past had prepared me for this. These people had all the time in the world; and why shouldn't they chuck bottles

around? It was their country to do what they liked with. All references to 'the Forestry' or 'that bastard the Lands Department had up here last week' were highly scornful. Lochie and company had no time for the copper in Buchan, either. There seemed to be no authority respected, except the need for honest dealing between them all.

Back to the hut, racing each other. Lumper Byrne spun his Land-Rover to a halt in loose dirt, facing the wrong way. But this was nothing; in fact it was good. This was added to the evening's set of stories to be repeated and built on. Lumper would laugh in his warm voice and say, 'By shit, didn't I get a puzzled look on my face. All of a sudden I seen you in the mirror. Christ, how'd he git there? Then along comes bloody John. I'm facing the wrong way! Hoh, Christ, how'd that happen?' June served up bacon and eggs—what a reviver!—and we made some coffee from the huge iron kettle on the fire. The conversation sagged and the excitement began to die with the night, then Gail led me outside.

We walked through knee-high grass for a hundred yards or more. We were wet through when we stopped on a little point and looked at the sunrise. Here, here was a scene of prehistoric splendour. Grey clouds capped the whole sky but for a thin band at the horizon. In this strip was the burning red ball against an orange sky; spread out before this masterful sun were row upon row of mountain ridges, deeper and deeper in blue-black as they came toward us. The nearest ridge followed a jagged curve downwards, like the spine of some ancient creature in repose. Deep in the mighty gorge was a faint fleck of yellow-grey—a sandbar; beside it was the silvery gleam of water. This was the Snowy River. While we stood there in the presence of these endless mountains, a white mist filled the gorge as if called out by some solemn incantation of the sun. Oh, what a country of the spirit was this! Gail said, 'I thought you'd appreciate that. Now you know why I like this country.' Yes, oh yes!

Back to the hut, quaint little hut on a hill, oiled weatherboard and fibro-cement, with a bent iron chimney. 'It smokes,' said Gail, 'but Percy leaves it to Lochie to get someone to put up a new chimney, and Lochie leaves it to Perce.' There was talk of everyone leaving, but Lochie bet Lumper he couldn't ride the little blue horse and this took an hour or

more until honour was saved by the horse-riders accidentally letting the horse out the gate they accidentally left open. One last bottle, then the Land-Rovers drove away in the common morning light. Lochie wasn't going to let the party die, though. 'Come and I'll show you how we ride a horse up here. You gotta show it who's boss.' He did this by taking the horse up to the dam above the hut and riding it backwards and forwards through the muddy yellow water. He wheeled it, cursed at it, waved his arms about, lost his hat, made a lunge to grab it, but was foiled by the horse splashing out of the dam. Lochie took it back again, grabbed for the hat, caused his horse to pig-root and finished up with his horse and his hat in the icy cold water. 'You get on,' he shouted at me, 'he's quiet; just a pony.' I wasn't having any of that, so we sat on the dam bank, with my trousers wet and Lochie absolutely soaking, looking at that wonderful view. 'By gawd, that's good country!' he said, over and over again. 'By gawd, that's good country.'

It was indeed. Not that Lochie knew it so very well, but it meant something very real to him. For all his posing and acting-up—how he delighted to play the wild colonial boy!—he never really believed himself to be the genuine article. His personality was far too complex and he saw too many ramifications in things to ever be the simple hardy bushman that he admired. The personification of this type was old Charlie Owen. 'You see that bit of a mail-box down at the road there?' Yes, I had seen it; a wooden road-side delivery structure almost big enough to hold, say, a forty-four-gallon drum on its side. 'It was pissin' down one night, and cold, Holy Christ! I thought to meself, it'll snow as soon as this lets up. I off to Buchan. There's bloody old Charlie Owen curled up in the box in an oilskin. I was goin' to drive him down to Buchan; I offered to bring him back. Nuh. He had a mob of cattle. He was going to stay with 'em.'

'And was he still there when you came back?'

'Oh, I didn't come back for a couple of days. Charlie used to run cattle in all that country over there.'

'How did he get them across? There aren't any bridges.'

'Oh, he didn't need no bridges. Oh, there's one way up the river there, that was too far away. He just used to push 'em over at a spot he had.'

'What, on his own? How did he get them together again?'

'Get 'em? Christ, there wasn't a place he didn't know. He used to have food planted everywhere. I was over there with him once and it come on dark. We didn't have any tucker. Charlie says, "You stay there and don't try and see where I'm going." A coupla minutes later he comes back with a few tins of meat under his arm.'

'Where did he have it?'

'I dunno; in a log. Tough! Powers of piss, he was tough.'

Lochie admired toughness, and the ability to hold grog. 'You know Ray Goodger?'—a man I had met at the dance—'I've seen him prop himself against a wall and drink all night. He'd be full as a fart, but you couldn't tell. He wouldn't move, he'd just pour it in.'

I thought this sounded ghastly, but I obviously had a lot to learn, and Lochie was a mine of information and insight. He knew an enormous amount about the people in his area and he sensed a great deal without having to be told. It became a common thing, after parties, to listen to him giving a rundown as to who was on with who, who was chasing after so and so, and what her old lady thought. Then Percival Duncan, Lochie's stepfather, would chime in with the characters of these people's parents, uncles, grandparents and great-aunts. Percy's years as a sheep-breeder seemed to have influenced his outlook. In trying to explain people's actions, he would often go back to their pedigree. 'He's a bastard of a fella, that young Farrer there at the mill,' Lochie might say, and Percy would expound in his singularly piercing voice, 'Well, Lochie, what can you expect? His mother was an Earnshaw, and there was always a touch of—oh, shall we say, instability, on that side of the family; and his father was the biggest no-hoping poor bastard ever in Gippsland. And there was a touch of the same thing there, too. His father, well, I won't say he was mental, but he was as close as a man could come and not be put away.' This sort of analysis, with its predestinarian tone, used to infuriate Lochie. On this particular subject he was inarticulate and could never manage better than, 'Oh, you old bastard, what do you mean?' But

I gained the impression that Lochie felt hemmed in by the old man's wisdom, and the inescapable logic of one's background.

But all that lay in the future. This day was made an extension of the night before. We all drove off to the north and stood up in the back of the Rovers while we wound down into Suggan Buggan. Here was more wonderful mountain country, here were the pines Paterson had spoken of, whole hillsides of them, and here were brumbies. The road was carved into almost sheer sides. We met a truck near a minor landslide and, of course, all vehicles stopped, everyone got out, everyone greeted everyone, with the newcomers from Bairnsdale being introduced, and then we settled down for a steady session of talk. Last night's ball was gone over in detail, Lumper's spin-out was exaggerated a little more, various dogs, ponies and people were discussed, and then we began to scan the nearby hillsides for brumbies. Sure enough, there were four or five horses away over there, about fifteen hundred feet below us. My field-glasses were thought to be unnecessary but were handed politely from person to person until everybody had made a token use of them. 'Would you like to see us catch a buck?' Lochie asked me. Oh yes, would I! I didn't know whether the ground had hidden wombat holes, but these people had a flair, a sort of prowess about them that I longed to know about. How could they do it? You couldn't ride here. You couldn't catch those little specks. There wasn't time to drop all that one had to do and go charging off in the bush for as many days as you had tucker for!

And grog. Always grog. 'Last time Lenny Marr and Harry Blair went out in the bush after brumbies, they had four dozen cans. That's all one horse was carrying. Oh, and a few bottles of Scotch.'

'How many fellows was all that between?'

'Just the two of 'em,'

'How long were they out there?'

'Coupla days, three or four; just a weekend, wasn't it, Lumper?'

Lumper's answer was then gone over, and all the stories and titbits of gossip from the Blair and Marr brumby hunt were told once again. Everyone there had heard them several times before, except Gail, June and I, but they weren't brought out for our benefit, although I at least

was fascinated. In the years I went around with Lochie, I can recall hardly a single occasion when anyone was directly criticised in public. No, what they actually thought about the way someone rode, or managed his farm, or brought up his family, could only be gauged by the timing and response to these endless stories about each other. Their stories seemed to create quite a legendary aura about themselves, but in fact it was their way of knowing all about each other and letting out what they thought.

The rest of the day was pure leisure. We sat on the hard dirt by the Suggan Buggan River (these men never looked for logs, or shade) and talked some more. A few more bottles went down, with Lochie biting the crown-seal tops off with his teeth. June borrowed a shirt from one of us as a bathing-costume and went for a swim just around the bend. We looked at the old Suggan Buggan school, 'the first one ever in Gippsland'. The wooden-slab building was scarcely bigger than its own fireplace and reeked of all the sheep-skins and cattle-hides that had been stored there over the years. Dry grass and box-tree leaves had blown in through all the cracks. Everyone seemed to think it was important, but nobody wanted to do anything about it. My mention of the National Trust brought a snorting reference to 'the Councillor'. This was Edward Boucher, Bon's father, and it seemed that official activity of any sort was rather ridiculous and that the Councillor was the only man in the area with pretension enough to affect that sort of thing. The day ended with the long drive back to the hut, punctuated by more stops for conversation. Back at the hut, Lochie pumped some petrol out of a forty-four-gallon drum into my VW and wouldn't look at any money. I tried to tell him how much I had enjoyed it all. 'Aw, shit,' he said, 'if that's how you feel, come back.'

Come back! I longed to; and I did, scores of times. Now those days have been swept out of reach by time, the death of Lochie and the changes in me. It would seem to me to be an admission of defeat in life to cry out 'Come back!' to the six years that followed that day; sometimes, in yarning with my friend Vance, who shared many of them with me, they seem not gone at all, but like the dreamtime of the Aborigine, alive and ever-present around us. Then Vance will ask, 'And how's old

Danny now?' and we know that Danny, like us, is without Lochie; that for him, as for us, those days are buried; and then there is a sense of terrible loss.

Danny was Lochie's closest friend, and his perfect foil. He was smaller and less flamboyant, but just as shrewd and observant. To hear him speak of horses and bush-work you would never guess that his boyhood had been spent in Collingwood. On the flat behind the weatherboard house where he and his family lived, he had a horse-breaking yard, expertly constructed from heavy timber. Danny had a good reputation locally for this sort of thing, and he was also a handy man with explosives and trucks. He was short, but he moved well; Danny mounting a horse was a lovely sight. If Lochie had been riding it, Danny would take up the stirrups a few holes, swing the reins up to the mane and slide a boot in the stirrup. Horses felt his confidence and would be into their stride before Danny had finished his fluent swing into the saddle. With his black-and-green lumber-jacket on and his hat brim pulled down, Danny could have ridden out with the villains in a western, but this was far from his real self. Danny didn't mind getting right-royally full when the night seemed made for it, and if there was a fight and Lochie needed him, he would rush in.

In this, like many of the Buchan men, he seemed, when with the men, as if not married at all. In Buchan and Gelantipy it appeared unacceptable for a man to slip into the role of Dad, the family man. Conversation was rarely on the home and family, nearly always out in the areas of male rivalries and self-proving. Danny was very much part of this, but there were limits. One year, at the time of the wool-sales, Lochie and Danny made a trip to Melbourne in Lochie's big green Dodge. When questioned about the trip, Lochie indicated that it had been a pretty memorable affair. On further prodding from his audience, he launched into a zestful account of their night in Melbourne. It appeared that by the time Danny had finished his business and shopping, Lochie had one of the packers from the wool-store in tow. After a couple of hours' drinking, Lochie and the packer decided that they wanted to go to a brothel. According to Lochie's tale, Danny went as far as the door, then stopped; 'You fellas go in, I'll sit and wait for you.' Lochie men-

tioned, in justification of this, that Pat was pregnant at the time, though it is hard to imagine Danny joining them in any circumstances. They then went in while Danny sat outside. About three hours later, they decided to see how he was. The Dodge was there but Danny was gone. They at once left the brothel ('without payin'') and set out in search. The tale was rather confused from then on, but it seemed that Danny had been picked up by the cops as being full, but it was a couple of hours before Lochie and his companion discovered this. Lochie did admit to a certain confusion about presenting himself at the city watch-house in the early hours of the morning, but covered this at once with his boast, 'Fuckin' copper wasn't going to let him out till we told him who we were.'

The ending seemed improbable and, on checking with Danny it emerged that the tale was largely a fantasy, the yarn-spinning Lochie's idea of what his audience would expect from him on a trip to Melbourne, and this, too, fitted his character.

And yet, despite his occasional tangles with coppers and the frequent brothel stories that laced his conversation, Lochie maintained, 'I'm a highly moral man.' In a way he was, but that he should put it in those words tells much about him. Let us say at once that Lochie was no prude. He loved an audience, and if the company at the hut was receptive, he used to deliver his stories at full voice, obscenities and all. 'I picked up these niggers one night and give 'em a ride. There was two of 'em and then a few more got up out of the grass. You'll be right, boys, I said, git in there with the dogs. We got out to the station [Lake Tyers] and this fella reckons, I'll get you a woman, mister. I said, Fuckya, I don't want your woman. Wouldn't be as good as old Nelly in Orbost.' 'Who was she, Lochie?' 'She was alright, aw haw, by Jeezus, ah heh, ah heh. She used to say, "Keep that old left ball swinging, boy." By Jeezus, I useta, too.' Or he might tell us, 'Jeezus. Might have to sleep out in the Rover. The old fella's gettin' a bit toey.' 'How's that, Lochie?' 'Oh, I hear him in there the other night, he goes off to bed and I hear him moanin' and goin' on. Reckons the next morning he must've been havin' nightmares. Must get a bit hard up when they get that old, eh?' How much of these stories was true, or what reality lay behind them, was anybody's guess.

There were also his sayings—Lochie had a most prolific imagination for this sort of thing—such as 'Weak! He couldn't knock a sick moll off a pisspot!' or 'trembling like a dog shitting razor-blades.' Most of these also existed in slightly more polite versions. Thus, if the company had any touch of respectability, Lochie would give us 'from sneezer to breezer' instead of 'from arsehole to breakfast'.

For a man who was shatteringly free with obscenities, Lochie had a surprisingly good vocabulary and understanding of the various jargon terms of politics, economics and law. He used to pretend total ignorance, constantly saying, 'I'm just a poor fuckin' ning-nong bastard, but what I know, I know meself.' In fact, he knew a great deal, but he wasn't letting this out, except when there were 'bloody schoolteachers and all them highly eddicated persons' around. Then he would delight in weaving polysyllables into his speech. One morning he said, 'What's this fuckin' intransigent mean?' I suspected he knew, but came out with a definition. He put down his week-old copy of The Sun and forced his rough voice into an absurd imitation of a drawing-room tone, 'Oh, I say, pussy, you are being quite intransigent. How's that?' 'No,' I told him, that wasn't right. 'Them fuckin' big words'—picking up The Sun again—'got me tossed.' Later in the day we went down to his yards to drench some cattle. The beasts were forced into a narrow crush and roped, then Lochie would force a Richmond Beer bottle and about half his forearm down the beast's neck and make it swallow the drench. They resisted bitterly and Lochie turned almost every drenching into a contest of man versus beast. If they wouldn't go into the crush, he would savage them around the yards in wildest rodeo style. If they escaped when he had them in, he would let go his truly frightening temper. One unmarked bull calf showed a flash of temper too, and Lochie crouched down, flexing his muscles like a wrestler looking for a death-throw. With every ounce of his strength, and with the air fairly bruised with obscenities, Lochie forced the bull calf into the crush. In the moment of relaxation while he was reaching down for the bottle (you never head-roped a good fighter), the calf got out. I expected mayhem, but Lochie said, 'Ferdinand,'—thus christening the beast— 'you are being most intransigent. How's that!!!???' 'Dead right, Lochie,' I said, and he rushed the beast back into the crush,

roaring curses and laughing his head off. In went the bottle and half the forearm. 'Oh, fuckin' dear oh, poor little feller doesn't want a drink. What a pity.'

In RSPCA terms this might sound appalling, but when Lochie was in action he included his audience and there was no holding back from loving him. The expression 'highly moral', then, was Lochie making fun out of that side of him that knew very well what the big words meant. The feeling was there, though. He had in him a strain that might have developed into a very romantic lover, because for some women he was very attractive, but this side of him was often inhibited by the need to show off in front of the men. He recognised and approved of love in others, even if it might only be expressed in the smile that went with a few more of his obscenities about marriage; 'Bloody Tommy Jordan, he's on the cunt, the bastard. Good luck to him.' And brothels and Old Nelly were alright, in his stories at least, but there was a big area in between that Lochie could not have at any price. He came back from one trip away saying, 'By Jeezus, there's a few of them bastards hangin' round that pub there, sniffin' round young Mrs Mac. A fella oughta pull a few of 'em into gear.' He suggested castration as the best remedy when a certain party was caught in bed with another man's wife, and I heard him discuss broken homes on a number of occasions, with a strong sense of moral outrage directed at the erring partner. Illegitimates were nothing, if the young fellow did the right thing and married the girl, but the mention of a young boy in Buchan whose looks clearly revealed that his mother had had a visitor between the sheets angered something very deep in Lochie. Once some extra harrows were delivered to Lochie's place by the wife of another farmer, the very personable Mrs Roma Condie. 'I tell you what,' said Lochie, 'I seen her looking in the bedroom, I woke up to what she was after. By Jeezus, I reckon she'd be a pretty good root, too. By Jeezus, I tell you what, I'da been in it too, if bloody young Gould hadn't kept hangin' around.' Nigel Gould, barely sixteen, smiled weakly as the blame was piled on to him, but this was only a story version of events. In fact, Lochie would have been very glad to have his youthful employee there to prevent anything embarrassing coming up.

Lochie could hardly be called a good farmer, though he knew more than enough about it to do very well if he had wanted to. He just didn't have the make-up of a successful man on the land. At the Bairnsdale Show one day, drinking with his brother-in-law, Alwyn Stanley, the contrast came out strongly. Alwyn was having a few small beers to be social. He was dressed in a new dark suit, and his fine hair was lightly oiled and combed across his head. His quiet, unassuming voice and the lines in his hands marked him as a man who worked hard in the bush, but the clothes and the manner contained the expectation of better things. Lochie was drunk, fightable and suspicious of everyone looking at a kite-flying demonstration when he wanted an argument. With his high-heeled boots, wide-brim hat, open-neck shirt and unsteady sway, he would have been more in place at an outback Queensland race-meeting than in staid Bairnsdale. This was part of the pose, of course, because Queensland and 'the Territory' were, for Lochie, places that had to exist, places where he could go if the pressure got too great. Going away from the Show that day, he lurched up to a Greek-looking side-show operator, threatening to 'do you' for staring at him. The Greek leaned towards Lochie, whispered, 'Mind out, there's a cop,' and whipped away. By the time Lochie had turned around again, the Greek was well back. Clumsy and frustrated, Lochie lurched out the gate, went to his mother's place a few blocks away, had another bottle of beer and went to bed. For anyone else, that would have finished the day, but about three hours later he was out of bed and thundering up the road in the Rover to the disreputable Sarsfield pub.

This never-lie-down energy ensured him a healthy respect, even from those who feared or disliked him, but Lochie was also capable of flashes of poetry and feeling that would surprise you. Alwyn Stanley had been bulldozing down some dead trees on his place; Lochie had hurt his back lifting the logs into heaps to burn. 'Only pickin' up sticks,' he said, with a touch of the Irish peasant, 'that's all I was doing.' Or he would look fondly out from the doorway of the hut and survey the paddock he'd just spread with super, 'Oh, it'll do up,' he would say. 'It's just country, but it'll do up.' Or there was the day when he heard how a faller from Buchan had been killed out at Nunnett Plain. A limb had fallen and hit

him on the back of the head. Lochie sat disconsolately on the steps of the hut talking about the young man's family. "They'll be sleepin' in a house of sorrow tonight.' Or he would point to a peak across the Snowy, far away in the east. 'They call that The Stirrup Iron." 'Why, Lochie?' 'Oh, it's so steep that if you ride around there, yer inside stirrup iron's bangin' on the ground.' 'Have you been there, Lochie?' 'Oh well, very close up to it,' he would say, 'very close up to it.' Or someone he knew would come into a bar and pass in front of Lochie. With an eardrum-threatening roar Lochie would shout 'Goodday!!!' Then he would explain very loudly to the whole bar, 'Terrible deaf, that fella.' The victim would smile and keep shuffling up to the bar.

Lochie needed pubs, and they needed him. Not that he was, strictly speaking, an alcoholic, though he ran pretty close to it, but he embodied the whole ethos of the bush pub and its ways. He would throw down a fiver or cash a cheque, then leave the change on the bar. This was important. It meant that he was staying, he was open for a yarn, buying drinks wasn't a matter for accounting—the barman could take what he thought right—and it was a sign of being at home with everyone there. Other men did it, but Lochie's way of waving an open hand at the pile, or turning his back on the transaction, had an extra flamboyance and largesse.

It was no mean feat to stand out in the company Lochie moved in. The Buchan bar often seemed over-crowded with personality. There would be Whoa-go Sleith, Froggy Delage, Bill Barton, Don and Worm Dingley, a couple of Maxwells, young Hubert Imrie, Sammy Rodwell, Dessy Connell and Pam, old Taylor Morris and perhaps Archie Neal. In the days of six o'clock closing, the double doors of the bar would be shut about twenty-past-six. In summer, the sun would beat against the window of the almost air-tight bar, while the roar of voices rose higher and higher. Hats and no-hats would shout to be heard, while jungle-green shirts and blue-flannel singlets darkened with sweat. Paddy Dimmack behind the bar would join in the drinking and his charging become erratic; there would be delays while Paddy or his wife went out to get yet another dozen, and then the bulky carton would have to be squeezed in among the feet or piled on the bar. Bill Barton would sway into a

group, disagreeing and claiming that they 'didn't know the bush'. You heard voices asking, 'Where they loggin' now?' or 'How many pups did that bitch of Lindsay Maxwell's have?' Then a message would be brought into Paddy and it would be, 'Righto, gentlemen, all out. That's the finish. No, I can't get 'em now, I'll fix you up in a while.' Over a period of ten to fifteen minutes the groups would break up and drift out the front door of the pub, past the Buchan policeman standing impassively, head up but not catching any eyes, patient but mildly insistent. Then, in the gathering dark, there would be car doors closing, beer-cans being dumped on the tools in the boot, headlights going on, engines starting, and voices still going on with their stories. One or two cars would roar away with wheels spinning, swirl down the hill and across the main road and be almost ready for top gear when their drivers screeched them to a halt at the cafe straight opposite the pub. The policeman would talk to some of the women who had come out of the ladies' lounge, a few men would head down to Bob Nolan's store to pick up their groceries, and one or two who were waiting for their ride would light up smokes and sit on the bar steps.

No one seemed to mind being tipped out at the height of the session, and perhaps it was for the best. You could always go back a couple of hours later when Paddy and his wife had had their tea, and the liberally interpreted deadline did bring a sense of rising excitement into the last hour's drinking, an excitement in which the endless yarning and gossip was brought into focus, given a heightened reality. Then, standing out the front as the crowd broke up, there was a time for tying of ends and making final arrangements. One would hear, 'Don't worry about it, I'll get the old feller to drop it in to you in the morning,' or 'You got them bags, didn't you?' There was a time for drunken intimacies that could not breathe in the dense atmosphere of the bar; 'How you gettin' on with that guitar, Laurie?' 'Good, I'm still just starting, I tell you, there'll be thousands cheer one of these days.' 'Good on you, boy.' There was a time to look at each other; 'Bloody old Jack's just pissin' himself up against a wall since his missus died.' And there was a moment to take stock before the darkness in the valley climbed up into the light-blue sky and the night began.

These people seemed unquenchable. Not long before, I had been to the Australia Day sports-meeting at Wulgulmerang. Held at the height of summer, this too should have been an endless, leisurely day, but early in the afternoon the clouds came over and a steady soaking drizzle set in. There was another dance at Gelantipy that night, and I expected that everyone would go home and kill time until it started, but no, not a bit of it. Two or three more jumping events were held before the sports were called off. The horses were skidding badly, but there was no sense of urgency, just the feeling, 'Oh well, looks like we'd better give it away.' Even then, most people stood around outside their cars and talked on. Lochie and a few of the stockmen-types leaned against the stock-truck that had been used to bring some horses to the meeting and out came the inevitable bottle of beer. It was soon thrown down and another one opened. When the rain became too much and most of the people clustered in cars for another session of talking, these men got up into the truck. There was a water-proof tarpaulin in the back, animal-scented and dirty. Six or seven men got under this and went on with their drinking. Every now and again a hand would reach out from under the tarpaulin and grab a fresh bottle from the sodden carton. Lochie could then be heard biting off the crown seal, and the empty bottle would be dropped out the back of the truck. The slithery tarpaulin kept changing shape like some low-grade organism, taking in beer at one end and dropping empties out the other. I expected some raucous singing, or perhaps a dirty-joke session to break out in the darkness under the cover, but this was a jaundiced and erroneous idea. These men were not the type to shuck off their individuality like that. Instead, the yarning, skiting and bull-shitting went on unabated. 'How's old Lumper in the woodchop? He thought he had it.' 'How was he; singin' out, "I got him, I got him." Jeezus.' 'Never in the race.' 'Tell you what, if I'd brought that little pony of mine, I'da give bloody whatsisname a go in that hurdle.' 'By Jeez, good horse he's got, all the same.' This was a male brotherhood, not a reversion to a lower type; they were drawing a terrific excitement from each other that left me amazed. They weren't going to let the day lie down on them. Neither, it seemed, was anyone else. Some cars contained squads of noisy children, with their mothers crowded together two or three cars away.

Two women were putting towels and picnic rugs over the food and cups for afternoon-tea. Someone else was keeping the copper going, while an old man whittled slices off a still-green log with a racing-sharp axe. A few in plastic raincoats and hats stood by the copper, their tails turned to the wind like sheep, watching the water in the copper sizzle at the edges and speckle across the surface from the rain. Horses were pushed into floats with a minimum of swearing and girls in jodhpurs tried to do a little grooming. Then there was a period of about twenty minutes when everyone took cover and it was possible to look at the 'sports-ground' devoid of people.

Coming by this spot a month ago, someone said, 'That's where the sports are held.' I had seen nothing but wide undulating plain country rimmed by a belt of bush. Thinking that I must be missing some pavilion or stand obvious to everyone else, I asked, 'Where?' 'There, in the wire paddock.' Well, there was a paddock fenced by wire, so that must be it. As at Suggan Buggan, a doubting came into my mind; you couldn't have a sports-meeting there! There were no buildings! I put these doubts out of my mind by imagining huge marquees, temporary huts and, no doubt, innumerable beach-umbrellas. Not so. Lochie, Ellery Wise and I were among the first to arrive that morning. The only differences apparent to me were that the gate was open and that a hole in the ground had been enclosed by a three-and-a-half-sided hessian structure. Where women were supposed to go, I had no idea. The wood-chop stands, hurdles and afternoon-tea awning went up during the morning, and that was all. For the rest, it was people. 'Have you seen Percy?' 'He was jist leavin' when I come past.' 'Did Bren get that float?' 'Musta. He's just back there a bit.' 'What didya do with the kids?' 'Oh, they're coming up with Norma.' 'How is she?' 'Oh, not all that bad, I don't think. Bloody doctor in Bairnsdale reckons she's got to go down and see a specialist, but I don't know . . .'

The nearest medical aid to be found in this area was the Bush Nurse at Buchan; after that, there was nothing until Bairnsdale. No doubt many cupboards in this region had their quota of Watkins' and Rawleigh's patent medicines, but I never detected much sympathy for the hypochondriac. One still heard tales of how sick people had died

days before the doctor arrived, or had barely survived the journey down to Bairnsdale in the days before the automobile. Even now, with the remotest homes within three hours' drive of Bairnsdale, things had to be bad before medical attention was sought, and Lochie, knowing this, had to flamboyantly prove his point. It arose from the steer-ride. The rain eventually cleared up and it was decided that this event at least could go on. Lochie stood watching the efforts of the early riders. He was wearing Percy's new overcoat ('Cost him forty quid. What's the old bugger want a coat like that for?') and he was expounding the art of steer-riding in a loud and beery voice. For once he was openly very critical of what he saw, but this was rendered inoffensive by his absurd declaration that a very fine ride by Eric Floyd, an experienced rodeo rider, was 'Weak! Weak as piss! He never hooked him. You got to get into 'em right from the start.'

Then it came Lochie's turn. He climbed into the crush, squeezing his legs between the beast and the mud- and dung-splattered rails. He was still wearing Percy's coat and had a home-made cigarette on his lips. Right from the start he was gouging the beast with his heels and roaring at it. He almost forced it to its knees. Then the gate opened and out they came. He kicked it furiously, waved his hat, survived two or three bounds, then got thrown. A ripple of laughter came from the lines of people. After all that skiting! Then, before he could get on to his feet, the beast kicked up its heels and dealt him a horrible crump on the head. There was a split second's awful silence while the beast made off down the arena and Lochie lay still, then he got up. He staggered to his feet. With the beast away down the paddock by now, Lochie was the focus of all attention. His head moved groggily while he made a gesture of looking down, then he said, 'Where's me bloody cigarette?' It was perfect, right down to the bloody. Neither a stronger nor a weaker word would have done. It was a moment when the real Lochie and the self-created legend were one. There was general relief and the ignominious ride was transcended by his perfect embodiment of the hardy-bushman type.

This was all very well when he was on centre-stage at the sports, but it was plain cantankerousness when he continued it back at the hut. Ellery Wise and I pulled the straggled hair aside and reported on the

wound to Lochie. It was a nasty gash, quite deep, with two puffy lips on either side of a red welt about two inches long. I thought of all the muck on the beast's hooves and talked infection at Lochie. He scoffed at the idea. We told him he'd have to get it stitched up.

'Who's going to do it?'

'Down in Bairnsdale.'

'Fuck that. You do it.'

Ellery and I cried off, but Lochie rummaged through the dusty drawers until he found darning-needle and cotton.

'You do it.'

'No, I'll drive you down, it's got to be done properly.'

'You do it!!'

We wouldn't, so he took the needle in his powerful fingers, felt around the raw wound with his filthy left hand and thrust the needle into the puffy lip of flesh as if giving himself an injection. He grasped the point, tugged it hard and brought the needle through. 'Now, the fuckin' thing's through. You tie the knot.' With nervous fingers I cleared the hair away again. Straight away it was obvious that he had gone in and out on the same side of the wound. I told him so, 'Well, pull it out then!' Ellery steadied the skin on his scalp and I tugged.

'Hurry up, what's holdin' you up?'

'Have to cut off the knot on the end of the cotton.'

'Aw, pull that through too.'

'Wait a minute.'

It took a minute. Lochie grunted and gave us 'Jeezus' once or twice. He refused to go to Buchan, let alone Bairnsdale, but offered to let Tilly Watkinson look at it because 'She's done a bit of nursing.' When we got to Watkinson's, Lochie was in great spirits. My timorousness and Ellery's nervous dithering were already part of the story. Tilly Watkinson listened to the tale, inspected the wound, rejected my idea of going for treatment and suggested that all would be well if Lochie went to bed early. So this was the ex-nurse! Lochie had chosen her, I realised, because he thought she was likely to spread the story he was putting into circulation. He gave her a version of what he said and what he did. I noted ruefully how two comic figures in the tale bore mine and Ellery's names. He

accepted her advice with lots of sensible nods for an hour or so, then announced, 'Aw, I might go to the dance for a couple of minutes.' And he did, though when it was over he compromised by turning up the Tulach Ard road to the hut instead of following the all-night stayers up to Michael Swensen's place.

We went up there the following morning, of course. The Land-Rover was flung in and out of all the bends on the twenty-mile drive. When it slackened on the hills, Lochie trod the accelerator like a pump and beat the outside of the door with the flat of his hand while he gave out a sheep-yard torrent of 'Hoo! Hah! Hoy! Hoy! Hoy!' He was well on the scent by now, but the drinkers at Michael's were hours ahead. They were sprawling all over Michael's sparsely-furnished living-room, watching someone wrestle with Clarry McCormack. While all this was going on, Enid Swensen was quietly doing housework in the kitchen. Clarry was underneath in the wrestle and a knee on the ribs caused a horrible crack. It was painful, when cold sober, to watch drunken men doing this. Once again, the Bush Nurse at Buchan was mentioned. Someone even used the term X-ray. Clarry groaned and hauled himself on to a sofa to rest. The rate of beer consumption steadied a little and, after half an hour or so, coffee was brought in by Enid.

Once again, I marvelled at the timing. Badly needed though it was, it could have come no sooner without declaring itself as a sobering-up measure, and that would never have done. Again, I noticed that every few minutes Clarry was asked how he was. Each time he said, 'Oh, alright.' The responses to this varied from 'Yeah, you'll be alright, but you better not move for a bit,' to 'Might have to go down to Bairnsdale.' These were the extremes. Clarry had only to grunt and they would have taken him. But he stayed where he was on the sofa, hair red and face flushed, and decided not to bother. He indicated this by not varying from 'Oh, alright.' At the time, I found this maddening. The subtle diplomacy of this approach was only apparent to me later when I had fathomed Lochie's way of canvassing opinion. He would sit in the hut on a Saturday afternoon and say, over the course of an hour or two, 'Better go down to Bairnsdale and meet all the old lady's bloody visitors.' 'Bugger it, too cold up here, I'm off to Buchan. How's that tyre, Perce?'

'Shit, it wouldn't take me an hour to finish that paddock;' 'Might go and see if we can git a roo in a minute;' 'How're we for meat, Perce?'—opening the kero fridge—'Shit! I'll kill a beast in a minute, eh?' Lochie used to get annoyed if each of these contradictory plans was not commented on. He threw out these feelers to gauge the reaction of the others in the hut, to see if Perce would lend him the Holden, to see if anybody else wanted a session at the Buchan pub, to see if anyone minded having bacon and eggs for the second time that day, and so on.

So Clarry McCormack was being offered all the alternatives. I began to see that a delicate and rigid code governed the behaviour from South Buchan to Suggan Buggan. It turned out, some weeks later, that one of Clarry's ribs had been cracked, but this was almost beside the point. Even if he had known this at the time, and he might have guessed, it is doubtful if he would have gone. On medical logic, this was wilful carelessness even worse than Lochie's with the head wound. Yet neither of them would be likely to visit a doctor unless their 'real' reason for being in Bairnsdale was to go to a sale or to see about some machinery parts. In that case, it would be permissible, if one 'had a minute', to 'slip in and see the quack'. If this were done, the patient would let it be known that he had seen a doctor, for if he were not first to break the news, it would be assumed that 'bloody old Clarry musta had the shits up' and no man could have that said about him. Anyone reporting such a visit to the doctor would have to begin, 'Oh, he reckoned . . .' and end with something like '. . . oh, he give me some pills; lotta bloody rot,' even if the pills were being taken. Toughness of this type was part of the code. So Clarry could have had himself taken to Bairnsdale easily enough. No one would have dared refuse, if only from fear of public opinion. ('Dja hear about old Clarry? There's a few of 'em on the piss up at Michael Swensen's wrasslin' a bit, and Clarry bust a rib. Singin' out, "take me to Bairnsdale", ooh shit, they reckon he was crook; bastards wouldn't touch him!') But, by the same token, he couldn't ask for such consideration if there was even a faint chance that he might be alright once they'd found a suitable vehicle and got him halfway down the road. And at the Bairnsdale end, he could hardly have faced his friends unless the doc-

tor instantly ordered him into an ambulance and whipped him to the hospital.

What was this ever-present public whose opinion mattered so much? To begin with, although the area was large, the number of people in it was small. The whole of Buchan, Gelantipy, Butcher's Ridge and Wulgulmerang would have numbered at most a few hundred. These people had connections in Bairnsdale, Nowa Nowa and Orbost to the south, and in Bonang, Delegate and Jindabyne in the Monaro country to the north, but, even so, their main contacts would have been within a circle of three to four thousand. The jobs, holdings and movements of these people were mere background knowledge, and every change was reported in the endless yarning and gossip. Their personal habits and idiosyncrasies were also well known; one would hear a raconteur slip into a gasping falsetto voice and everyone would know whose tale he was retelling. Many houses in the district had the telephone, but this was scarcely necessary for the movement of news. The gossiping grapevine reached into the remotest homes and camps. There was always someone going to or from Buchan, and the pub, the tea-rooms, the tennis-courts, the afternoon functions in the hall, all served as exchange-houses for news far more vital than anything printed by the local papers.

Many of the people in the area were inter-related. An outsider had to be very wary of retailing titbits and anecdotes; one might be speaking to the sister-in-law, or second cousin, of the person in question. The sister-in-law, of course, might heartily dislike the person mentioned, but would never dare show it for fear that this too would be reported back and become general knowledge outside the family circle. Much of the gossip was inaccurate and rarely imputed any idealistic motives. Some people, under this pressure, became acutely suspicious. I remember arriving at the polocrosse one day and asking a woman, the first person I met, if she had seen a certain man. She gave me a bitchy leer, pointed out on to the field where she had been looking and told me in a bitter voice, 'He's out there. Why don't you go and see him for yourself?' I gathered from hints dropped later that recent gossip had imagined an affair between the two of them and that my innocent question had been taken for a deliberate prod at a very touchy spot. To exist in this

area, then, one had to consider not who would hear of one's actions, for everyone would, but how they might be reported and mis-reported. Add to this the fact that people in the north-east of the State had only a mild interest in the doings of League footballers, the international jet-set or teenage idols, and an insatiable interest in each other. Then it is clear to see how the kicking of a dog, the stealing of a kiss, or the baking of a batch of inferior scones was, in effect, an action performed in full public view. I used to think of a dingo-trapper's life as an isolated existence, yet it was common knowledge in Buchan how many dogs Lumper and Bill Barton had, along with their tactics, the type of bait laid, even the number of shots fired. Well then, if everyone knew most things about everyone else, why was there the tightness, the all-too-frequent suspicion?

Perhaps the answer lies in the origins of settlement in this region. The early settlers brought to the district a tone of Scottish righteousness that has never been completely dispelled. The map shows this clearly enough; in among the wonderful Aboriginal names with their guttural music—Mellick Mungie, Timbarra, Tingi Ringi—and the simple observations so full of the nineteenth century—Mount Mistake, Pack Bullock Creek, The W Tree—are a host of Scottish words. There is McKillop's famous bridge, at McKellar's first crossing-point of the Snowy, there is the Murrindal River and Station, Mount McLeod, and the township names of Buchan and Orbost. It was Macalister who sent MacMillan through this country to find a way to Port Albert, and the area is still full of family names like Barnard, Langskaill, Henham, Hodge, Cameron and Gillies. Historically, the area settled by these families may be regarded as a narrow pipe from the Monaro country to the coastal plains of Gippsland. This pipe was never completely sealed off, though until the tourist highway through Suggan Buggan and Willis to Jindabyne was completed, there was only a thin trickle of stock movement through from New South Wales. Drovers set off from Jindabyne, brought their stock down Jacob's Ladder, threaded them through the 'petrified forest' to the Pinch River, took them upstream a little to the Seven Mile Spur up on to MacFarlane's Flat, down the Tear-Arse (so steep and rough you

take the arse out of your strides coming down it) and then to Suggan Buggan.

A visitor to Suggan Buggan in the pre-highway days saw only two wheeltracks heading straight up a dry-grass slope that implied four-wheel drive only. Of all the thousand and one beckoning tracks of Gippsland, this one had the most enticement, not only for the extreme remoteness of the country it entered, but also because it offered one the chance to retrace the historic steps of the early settlers. This way led to the Monaro and for the people of the north-east the Monaro, with its old stone cottages, drawling habit of speech and its celebrated Jindabyne rodeo, was a place to be respected; one sometimes heard a Victorian affect the slow speech of the stockmen from across the border. Here again was the code; one must not be hurried or 'run around like a fart in a bottle'. The code was austere, too, putting endurance far ahead of comfort. The stockmen's huts were considered good if they kept out the rain. Old ones were made of sawn boards, new ones of corrugated-iron. The Snowy River men lit smallish fires in the huge fireplaces and squatted down on their haunches in front of them, or sat on a box. Hats were commonly worn inside and boots were never taken off, even at the end of the day, unless it was at the last moment before rolling into a few disposal-type blankets.

Vance and I, when we used to go on trips with Lochie, used to look forward to coming across these huts. We never quite gave up hope of finding them furnished with kangaroo-skin rugs, quaint old lanterns, or bottles of a pattern no longer made. We hoped to find them littered with unusual stirrups, hand-patterned horse-rugs, or harness put together with a vanished mastery. We were looking for the indigenous, the home-grown craft.

When we found it, it did not convince. At Stanton Station we stayed one night in the workmen's hut and found Phillip Sanders in possession of a book published in South Australia, explaining how one decorated a bridle, plaited a whip, etc. He was struggling through it and it was touching to realise that he would never really do any of these things. That he should turn to a book seemed to put him outside the tradition in a way that Lochie and the rest were not. Lochie had, in fact,

read quite widely, but books had little standing among these men, as a group. They would read pulp-westerns and an occasional lurid murder story, then hand the soft-covered volumes on to someone else. Or we would stop at a hut for the night and Lochie would scour around till he found all the rubbishy publications in it, riffle through them for ones he hadn't read and throw them in the Land-Rover. Every now and again he would off-load the ones he'd finished in some other hut. It was a quaint sort of circulating library, yet it was going on ceaselessly in this wide region.

On the other hand, any book that treated the outback tradition as Australiana was anathema to Lochie. Sometimes, after an especially fine trip, Vance or Lawrence Young, the publisher, would send Lochie a parcel of books. Or, after some lengthy discussion in Lochie's hut about the habits of certain birds, I might send him Leach's Australian Birds. Next time we'd go up Buchan way, we would see Leach, Bill Wannan and the rest of them in Danny Lambert's book-shelf. Lochie had given them to Danny's kids. Lochie and most of his circle hated the naturalist's approach to the bush and hated any suggestion that the tradition to which they felt they belonged needed to be exhumed by the anthologists.

But it was another matter when a book enshrined the living legend; Danny Lambert handed me *The Spurs Are Rusty Now* with almost religious devotion. 'Bloody mighty book, bloody mighty!' True, this book suggested that its protagonist was the last of the great Queensland buck-jumpers, but Danny knew that he had died only for his type to rise again. And Lochie enjoyed a touch of the last-of-his-line type of feeling. I remember his delight when Vance presented him with one of his wonderful comic drawings inscribed 'To Lochie, the last of the great buck-runners.' It was alright, then, for the outback tradition to die in the care of men who embodied it, but there was no patience for outsiders to come peeping in. Vance, Lawrence and I were regarded as exceptions—we admired Lochie and his friends, we were a good audience, we preferred to watch and listen rather than to intrude, and we were willing to rough it in a modest sort of way. But tourists were beneath contempt, and Ken Campbell, the radio broadcaster, playing hooky in the Buchan

pub and fraternising with 'the locals' was dealt with by Lochie's, 'Oooh, shit! Look at that.' It was no use playing at being a good bloke. You had to conform to the type. Up in the workmen's hut at Stanton Station, Clarry McCormack told us, 'I was out with the fuckin' old Councillor gettin' in a few strays. We were out round the Stradbroke there and he sees this gully. "Oooh, I think there might be a few head down here," he reckons, so down we go. "Oooh," he says, "I've never seen that before," and he gets off his horse and looks at some bloody little thing. He gets up after a bit and he says, "Oooh, I think I can smell them." So we keep goin'. There's no bloody beasts there at all, he's just lookin' for all the flowers. "Oooh, that's a most uncommon one," he reckons. Shit!!!' The five or six other men in the hut commented with, 'Shit!' 'Jeezus!' or 'Fuck!'

Later in the same evening there was a knock—a knock!—at the door before it was opened by Councillor Edward Boucher himself. He must have been standing on the bottom step, for the greying, poorly-shaven face he poked around the door was about four feet above the floor. It was a routine inquiry delivered in a weak voice; hard to believe that this was one of the biggest landholders in the area. We were introduced to him but hardly dared raise a conversation that would keep him where he was obviously ill at ease; then again, it seemed a betrayal to be as brief with him as these men, booted and mostly still wearing their coats despite the fire.

A few days later Vance and I managed to have afternoon-tea with Edward and his wife and it was a treat to be taken for a walk along Black Mountain Creek by the Councillor. His knowledge of the local flora was literally encyclopaedic, covering everything from the tiniest orchids to the habits of the grandest eucalypts. He confessed that it was his dearest wish to discover a new species. Once he felt the distinction had come. Down in the gorge of the Snowy he found a stunted tree quite new to him, only to have his hopes dashed by J. H. Willis's verdict that this was a dwarf form of Forest Red Gum, the seeds of which must have been washed downstream from New South Wales. At other times he had more success. He discovered colonies of the rock wallaby, long believed extinct, and in the company of the noted naturalist, Norman Wakefield,

had made some rare finds. Nor was Edward the only naturalist in the area. Len Fletcher had a famous garden at Butcher's Ridge where he cultivated many rare natives, producing hybrids and new strains with ease; he was said to be writing a book on his garden work. These men, and one or two others like them, were highly regarded in Gippsland and Naturalist Club members would travel long distances to enjoy their knowledgeable leadership of field excursions. Yet, as Vance and I walked with the Councillor to look at the botanical characteristics of *Eucalyptus camphora*, it seemed that we were overshadowed by the men who would shortly be riding and driving back to the workmen's hut. In a few minutes, all three of us knew, the overpowering code of the stockmen would be reimposed. Then hard living, hard doing, hard drinking, and no overt display of sensitivity or talent would be the guide-lines and values of the conversation for hour after hour.

Yet Lochie knew the beauty of his country. One January, at the full height of summer, he drove his sister Gail and I out from Black Mountain on the track across to Benambra. We came to a sloping high plain fairly covered with wildflowers; I wanted to stay, but Lochie hurried his lunch and got us moving again. We approached a creek running through sodden black soil. Lochie plunged the Rover in, revved the engine wildly and buried the wheels deep in the mud. Oh my God! How would we ever get out of this? 'Easy,' said Lochie, 'we'll build a corduroy.' A what? 'Oh, shit,' he said, 'look!' In no time he had pulled out an axe and was whaling into arm-thick saplings. One after the other he laid them down under the wheels and across the track for a few feet, then he hopped into the driving-seat again. He deliberately flooded the carburettor so that there was a ten-minute period of anxiety, then he set the Rover engine roaring and the wheels skidding wildly. Inch by inch we crept towards dry ground, then we leapt forward again. 'Nothin' at all,' he said. But all this was only making his point that the 'real' matters, when they arose, could be dealt with by him. A few miles later we stopped at one of -Bon Boucher's huts. 'You like a bit of country,' he said. 'Walk through there a bit.' 'Where, Lochie?' 'I'll meet you up at the track.' 'Where's that?' 'Oh, coupla miles; two or three miles.'

My heart sank. The little high plain in front of me was so inviting, but I dreaded being lost. In the back of my mind was the map I had been examining the night before. The spot where I must now be standing would be heaven knew how many miles from human habitation. The only landmarks were peaks of fearful loneliness like The Pilot, Wombargo and The Ram's Head. I dared not leave the Rover. 'There's a few poles,' Lochie said, 'just follow them. You'll see where stock's been through. Bit of shit here and there. You'll be right.' With a sinking heart I got out of the vehicle and closed the door. Was this one of Lochie's jokes? Was I being set up to prove just how bloody silly a non-bushman could be, even with a compass in his belt? Was I about to create another tale of the outsider's ineptitude when put to a real test in the bush? 'Fuckin' compasses,' Lochie would say, 'you just know country and you jist go.' I moved away from the Rover full of doubts, fears, and resentment at what Lochie had sprung on me, and I headed off down the plain for what came as close to walking through a paradisal garden as this earth affords.

Beauty in Australia is so often a matter of heat, distance and light. Heat and light; in the inland plains of New South Wales, where I as a child first heard of the Snowy River, the sun beat the air into a quivering heat haze till the box trees at the horizon floated on a shimmering, trunkless blur. Yet if one walked to them, over paddocks grazed to the ground, the black bark and grey-blue leaves flourished with life. Our country: dry, inhospitable, yes; beautiful—a thousand times yes.

That was inland; here, a mile or so from the Great Divide itself, the sun also made his presence felt. The grass, even here, was drying off, the light was reflecting up on to the branches of the snow gums and the black sallee trees. With leaves flickering in the faintest of breezes and branches lit up from underneath as well as all sides, the trees seemed overfull of light. One's eyes lifted for relief to the horizon. The blue line of mountains was in New South Wales; one saw where Kosciusko hid himself in cloud; the lesser ranges to the right had long white bands of snow on their eastern sides. I had done nothing all my life but learn, study, read about others. These early days in Gippsland were my first awakening to life and I was in love with it, and with Gippsland, which

sheltered, like the snow in the distance, on the seaboard side of the ranges. What a country this was that Lochie had brought me into! Finding the way was easy. One followed the marks into the next belt of trees, over a tiny rise and then into another heaven of wildflowers. Plain after plain, one leading into another, each one a populous forest of tiny stems, rising four, six inches high, each stem holding out one leafy flag or two, each slender mast capped by a button, roundel or star. White flowers, red ones, blue ... hundreds in every yard; purple, yellow everlastings. How brutal were my feet among these flowers, how light they were to take me through the miles! How nice to see Lochie smiling when I came at last to the Rover!

'Aw, shit,' he said, 'don't thank me. The engine was gettin' a bit hot.' Well, no wonder, the way he drove it, over fallen branches and rotting logs. If the track was blocked we squirmed through the scrub, flattening the sucker growth and detouring for yards rather than do any axe-work. It was slow going and when we finally approached the easy rise which divided the inland and coastal waters, the sun was in decline. Its last light poured into the leaves above our heads while we drove up the shaded slope. Lochie stopped. We were observed, from the brow of the Divide, by a white brumby stallion. Here was perfection, of horse, setting and appreciation. We stopped that night at the Limestone Hut, an ageing wooden structure built over an old mining-hole. 'It belongs to Pony Bill,' Lochie said, 'it'll be alright to stop here.' Pony Bill Driscoll, known thus to distinguish him from all the other Bill Driscolls in Benambra, was about the only man in the area who hadn't used the walls as a visitors' book. And it was indeed alright to stop there, with a huge fire stoked up to see us through till the early hours, a hurricane-lantern to talk by, and a soft dew on the grass in the morning. Before Gail emerged from the Rover, or Lochie from the disgraceful old double-bed he'd commandeered, I was out and about. Nailed to a gate just behind the hut was a tiny sign: 'Tin Mine track. To the Cobboras, Cowambat Flat, The Pilot, Jacob's River and Jindabyne.' My heart leapt. There was just the faintest semblance of a track up the bushy gully. Here was one who would be in it; Lochie, when could we go? Twelve months later, we went; Vance, the artist, Lawrence, the publisher, Lochie and I. There was also an arrange-

ment to meet Lew Walker, Bren Douglas and Bon Boucher at Native Dog, high on the Buchan River, at nine o'clock in the morning, three days hence. I found this amusing. What a place for a rendezvous! And the nine o'clock deadline ... well, scant hope of that being kept.

We travelled out in two vehicles, 'vehicle' being Lochie's synonym for a four-wheel-drive machine. Danny Lambert towed a horse-float behind the second one, because he had to meet up with Lumper Byrne somewhere out near Nunnett Plain. Lumper was out there with Barney Cameron, doing a bit of brumby running. Lochie's mention of this had the irreverent tang that was usual when anybody referred to Lumper. He was the butt of endless scoffing, sling-offs and sly digs. Perhaps he deserved them; certainly he was the only one of all these men genial enough to bear them without a care. I fancy that Bill Barton was held in much higher repute as a dingo-trapper. Bill would stand by his Land-Rover full of traps, guns and baits, and hold forth with the most fascinating account of the dingo and his ways, whereas Lumper seemed, when talking to outsiders about his work, to be conscious of that ever-present public opinion. He wouldn't go much further than, 'Oh, shit, they're cunnin'.' But he didn't mind rolling up his trousers for the hundred-yard dash at the Australia Day sports, even if his belly did a bit of a wobble under his singlet. And it was delightful to watch him at polocrosse. He would be out of position, or lose his racquet, or charge and miss completely. Once he fell off, while scores of spectators turned away for a chuckle and a remark out the side of the mouth. When the play raced past him, he would bounce in the saddle to urge on his horse; it would sit pinned for a second, then gradually lumber forward. None of this abashed Lumper; he joined in the postmortems as earnestly as the star players, and when the talk flowed in the pub afterwards, he had a warmth that enfolded whoever he was talking to. His simplicity as a man left him without the devastating wit many of the bushmen had, but then he had no need to protect himself. He had instead an easy natural dignity. I saw him riding away one day with Lochie and Danny. The three horsemen were a fine sight, Danny nuggety and supple, Lochie keen and wiry, and Lumper weighty and relaxed in his saddle. The split tail of his sports-coat rolled from one side of the saddle to the other as the three horses paced

along. Lumper's horse lifted its tail. Lochie and Danny stopped and swung at right angles. Lumper chatted, first facing Lochie, then Danny, and gesturing with the pipe in his hand. When his horse finished, they swung in beside him again. He signalled their moving off with a gigantic puff of smoke which rose up and wreathed them for a moment as they continued across the plateau.

Late in the afternoon we came upon Lumper and Barnie squatting in the middle of the track beside the ashes of a fire. Lumper was delighted to see us. He'd expected one, and there were five! This was fine. He was a little concerned, however, because a note had been left at their camp-site by David Joyce, the Forestry officer from Nowa Nowa, reminding them that any fires lit in State forest should be carefully blacked out. There was a tiny trickle of water crossing the track at this point, so it was agreed that although David was a good bloke it would, all the same, be quite alright to light another fire that night. And how were they going with the brumbies? Well, they'd got two, or one and a half, if you liked. The mare was, oh, just a little bit of a thing, but, oh, anyhow, her foal had come looking for her, so they'd more or less got her, too. They didn't want to put her in the yard, but, oh, they thought she might wander away from her mother, so they'd put her in as well.

Nothing would satisfy us but we must have a look. Lochie and Danny had to run an eye over the catch and. we three had to see one (or one and a half) of the legendary brumbies in the flesh. Around we went, some mounted, others walking. There was a temporary yard made of saplings, just on the edge of the rather grassy plain. The brumby mare was disappointing. She looked like a forebear of the present-day horse. She was very small and thin. Her coat was mangy and without lustre. There was no quality in her at all. Her foal was much the same. My mind went back to the flamboyance of the stallion we had seen at the Divide, his mane gilded by sunlight and his movement, as he left us, quite prancing and contemptuous. Was this the difference between a good one and a bad one? Perhaps it was. I preferred to think that I had met up with the gap between reality and ideal. The brumby, after all, was no native to this land. They were all runaways and their offspring. Their stock was only improved on those rare occasions when a really good horse got

loose to join them; when caught, they were mostly sold for dogs' meat, except for a few which were used as ponies. Well, there was value there, too, but not enough to bring men out on these cherished brumby-runs. The mind went back again to that stallion at the Divide, all alive with light and his inborn muscle, and to another group we had seen on the same trip. There was a stallion, three mares, and two rangy-looking colts. They stood, motionless as toys, on the edge of a grassy plain, aware that there was something near them. Our voices carried, and they gently nudged and nuzzled one another, except for the two colts, who stood their distance, watching the stallion. At the sound of the Rover starting up, they quietly made their way into the bush and the plain was deserted, as if they had never been there. Suddenly all the plains I had seen were haunted by the spectral possibility of horses; it was not a thought for a horseman to resist. They were there to be caught, if you could find them, if you were horseman, and game enough to catch them.

Catch what? A story for the men back in Buchan? A poor beast to bail up between the railings? Or not so much to catch, but briefly the chance to be a wide-out, full-going man in pursuit, the thing one valued most beneath one, in one's mind, and well in sight before you. This was the moment to look for. I had heard a great deal from Lochie and the rest about the dangers; how you might be thrown, maybe savaged, or perhaps have your head knocked off by a snow-gum branch. I had heard, and heard again that night, how you quickly tied the first one you caught to the nearest tree with a hasty knot, then remounted to bring down another and another, if you could keep up with them, and catch them. By the fire that night, out on Nunnett Plain, there was endless talk of horses and harness, horseflesh and leather. But these were the accoutrements of the idea, like the sword and cannon to the soldier, or the boat to the mariner. When horse talk became too intense, Lumper brought out his dog and tried to make it seem better-trained than it was. He had it jumping up on top of the Rover, hopping in and out the back, and slithering across the bonnet. This was peripheral, though hugely amusing, as any clumsy showing-off by Lumper would have to be. I knew very well, though, that Vance, Lawrence and I had been allowed into a very secret place indeed. Perhaps we were necessary; some mirror

was needed, and our feeling for the types these men represented made them closer to it, made them feel more intensely what they were.

We sat around the fire, once the dog-display had settled down, and the yarning began again. Many times I looked up at the branches illuminated by the flames between us, and at the shadows flickering across our faces—the four bushmen and the three outsiders whose love and admiration earned them their place at that fireside. Out came the can of beer, it was punctured, it was passed from hand to hand, held for a while to the mouth, held in hand again, passed on. This was the bushman's chalice. The shadows flickered, the night went on. It was Lumper who brought the night into focus. 'You know,' he said, 'I wish we could have a picture of this.' I thought he was hinting in Vance's direction, and I knew how touchy Vance was about being asked to produce work to order. But I had under-estimated the poetry in Lumper. He alone was game to quote snatches of the Paterson and Lawson I had once despised. Others looked to him to do it. They sensed the gap between what was written and what was, so they left it to Lumper, who bridged the gap in his warm-hearted person, to give voice to the words. But this time it was not the famous balladists, but a feeling of his own that brought the occasion to a many-dimensioned sense of being, reminiscent of Shakespeare's eve-of-battle scenes. 'I wish someone would draw us,' he said, 'just as we are.' The next morning Lochie told me, 'You know, if that had been a shearers' camp, or up in the Territory, there'd have been a fight last night, two or three.' The tough attitude confirmed my thought that Lumper had spoken a truth too delicate to be left unveiled.

We woke in the morning to the jingling of the horses' hobble-chains and the clonkle-tonk of bells on their necks. There was dew on the chaff-bags we had used for pillows and the morning fire was hard to get going. While the camp was coming to life I went for a walk around the edge of the plain. To my surprise, I saw something white moving through the needle-pointed hakea bushes. It seemed to be a dog—a dingo? I went back and got the others. We stood under the black sallees and waited until it reappeared. When it did, Lochie said, 'Jeez, must be

that dog of Ray Duhig's. It got away there, that time. Or might be one of his pups.' The huge white dog walked out into the open. 'You never brought your three-oh, did you, Lumper?' Lochie asked, knowing that he hadn't. Someone clapped and the dog stopped. The sound echoed back from the trees two hundred yards away and the dog faced in that direction. We walked towards it, getting within sixty yards before the dog turned. I expected it to scramble away, but it kept staring in our direction. Lochie came out with, 'They haven't got very good sight. He'll see you if you move.' I made a move of my arm and the dog lolloped away at a slow bound, scarcely hurrying when we shouted. We watched him disappear into the timber, then Vance raised the question of whether it might have been an albino dingo. I said it had a brown mark near the head and that settled it for Lochie. 'Yeah, that'd be Ray Duhig's dog.' Lumper didn't offer any professional opinion, and albino and melanic forms were set aside as a conversation topic in favour of the coming brumby-run. Lochie wanted to ride, but, of course, didn't have a horse. Barnie had the better horse of the two, but wasn't hearing Lochie's hints about letting him have the ride. So Lochie, like the rest of us, had to squat on the damp ground while Barnie, mounted, waited for the brumbies to appear.

They were a thrilling sight, eight or nine of them, moving at a fast walk. Lumper was shepherding them quite expertly, not getting close enough to alarm them. Then Lumper appeared at the edge of the timber and the moment was at hand. Barnie gripped his rope, kicked his horse, jutted his big jaw and charged out into the open. Off went his hat and his red hair was exposed to view. He shouted and hallooed in the approved manner, his deadly seriousness making the three non-bushmen smile. Lochie, on the other hand, was disgusted. Barnie was making no headway on the brumbies at all. Now that the hunt was up, Lumper began to spur his horse and cry out loudly. But his weight was more than the horse could carry at any real speed and he crossed the plain a good thirty yards in the rear of the brumbies, moving just fast enough to hurry them into a gallop. 'Oh, Jeezus!! Go! Go! Go, Lumper! Go, Cameron!' Lochie shouted, and swung his fist in the air as he watched the horses disappear on the other side of the plain. Danny gave a rueful

sort of 'Jeezus' and then, 'Not enough go. Won't get 'em now.' But after the usual post-mortems, lasting half an hour or so, Lumper went off to round up the mob again. This time Lochie was much more demanding, but Barnie wasn't going to be done out of his ride. To our surprise, Lumper did bring them out on to the plain again, and once more Barnie charged out like a fervent Quixote while the heavyweight Lumper rumbled along in the rear. Lochie and Danny were shouting their heads off and Barnie drew near to the rear horse. We were thrilled; we were going to see a capture. But Barnie's horse slipped in a wet patch and the chance was gone. Lochie was furious and even Danny found it hard to keep up his end in the post-mortem session.

This was a fine start to the trip, anyway. Then we left Lumper, Barnie and Danny and went on. We drove slowly, had a good walk around Nunniong Plain, ground our way up the rocky track on to the peak of Big Nunniong and looked into some wonderful gorges of the Buchan River. We drove across grassy flats and sighted twenty-odd brumbies throughout the day, some of them almost as exciting as that stallion at the Divide a year before. One big palomino horse had Lochie very interested, but having no horse, all he could do was turn the conversation back to Barnie's ignominious slip. We saw parrots, sphagnum moss, a stand of huge woollybutts, and late in the afternoon were thrilled at the sight of the cleared country around Benambra suddenly opening out in front of us. This time it was Vance who quoted Paterson—'He saw the vision splendid of the sunlit plains extended'—and the words were received with approval. We had a fine session at the Benambra pub and camped the night in the Limestone Hut again.

In the morning Lochie ignored the track out of the Limestone Creek. 'If we go up this spur, we oughta strike it, shouldn't we?' he said to his three passengers, who had no idea. We did strike it, and we did get to Native Dog at a quarter-to-nine. I examined the flowers, the camp-fires and the many beer-cans, impatient for the wonderful walks on Cobboras and The Pilot which the day surely held for us. Then there came a faint sound—a vehicle in the distance. Surely not the trio keeping the arrangement? But it was. They bumped along the track in a small, early-model Land-Rover. Bon Boucher was at the wheel and he

came into view just as he passed a bottle of Johnny Walker over to Bren Douglas in the middle. In the fifty yards before they pulled up all three had a generous swig of the bottle. It was intended as an upbeat arrival, but my spirits sank. All three were noisy; Bren was giggly. I committed the indiscretion of saying, 'Is that the sort of trip it's going to be?'

That was the sort of trip we had. We had met up with the bushmen on the tear. Their plan was to race up the Divide into New South, have a good session at Jindabyne, then thunder down Jacob's Ladder, through Suggan Buggan and back to Gelantipy. All in one day. We set off at a fair pace, with occasional stops. Bon Boucher had brought an altimeter because he wanted to know the height of a certain peak. But he hadn't bothered to set it at a point of known altitude, so it was useless. After lengthy discussions, in which the outsiders theorised while the bushmen guessed, the altimeter was thrown into the utility tray of the small Rover. Why did they do things this way? Why so careless? And why so scornful of any knowledge based on scientific procedure? I disgusted Lochie by bringing out some maps of the area, orientating them by the compass and starting to ask questions. This sounds churlish; one might ask why we couldn't talk their language. They knew their country; Lochie pointed out to me that 'Bon Boucher has been all over the Cobboras, ridin'. And he chased a mob of brumbies right along The Pilot one day, till they got away on him.'

This was marvellous—to ride, to want to ride all over the rocky Cobboras and the flat-topped Pilot! Was this the Bon who got confused and surly in the presence of maps? Lochie said, 'He'd jist take a blanket and a couple of saddle-bags and he might go out for a week, lookin' for his stock and chasin' a buck if he seen one. I tell you what: wherever he was at the end of the day, he'd jist sleep there.' I thought of the big fire we had had at the hut last night, and the cold of these altitudes. Here were we three cultivating an appreciation of the country and all it held, and there was Bon riding out alone, enduring perhaps more hardship than need be, anxious to show that the country couldn't beat him. This proving of oneself; they were always at it. They worked each other up. After a few stops and a few swigs, Lochie demoted Bren Douglas to drive the non-drinkers while he crowded into the little grey Rover with Lew

and Bon. The speed increased. The altimeter bounced out of the tray of their vehicle and we stopped to pick it up. When we caught them at the next mutual stop, it was tossed in the back again. The talk this time was all of fires—how they did the country good, how they brought on the grass, how the Forestry didn't care about the men with cattle-leases, and, anyhow, this timber wasn't any good at all, bloody snow-gum shit, fuckin' useless, a good burn'd be the best thing that could happen. This was horrifying. It was a hot January day and deep gullies ran away from the track, wind-tunnels if a fire started up. The only escape was a difficult track ... and who could willingly let a fire loose in all this beauty? How far would it run if it got loose—fifty miles?

Vance and I voiced these ideas to the evident scorn of the whisky-men. We went on. The square-sided bottle came flying out of the grey Rover and bounced off the track. A mile or so later they stopped to relieve themselves and have a smoke. They headed off a minute before us and while we were getting ready, I noticed a little flame curling up a strand of grass, then the tiny tussock was all alight. In seconds the fire covered a square foot, then a yard. I stamped it out and we all looked at it for a time. That was careless, good Lord, fancy tossing a match away like that! We felt we had to tell them, but this was too serious a matter to approach except through joking. At the next stop we mentioned the little blaze-up, amid a good deal of banter and ribbing. Lew and Bon looked tight and unfriendly, but Lochie's expression was foolish, like a little boy being shown up. So he did it, and they hadn't known. Why? They weren't really drunk, though they'd been gulping down raw spirit in fair quantity. What had been going on in that little cabin? A good deal of jeering and boasting, I imagined.

I was getting used, by now, to their way of promoting the code of an in-group. Outsiders were held up to ridicule, their notions made to look puerile against the toughness of the bushmen, who feared nothing and cared about nothing. It was essentially irresponsible, an attitude handed down from men of little or no property, men who had no hope of ever having money or leisure and wouldn't have known what to do with them if they had. These four men each had land and the chance to do well with it, yet daring and tough talk would have been the conver-

sational diet in their crowded cabin; 'A man oughta drop a match in it.' 'Best thing that could happen.' 'Fuckin' Forestry wouldn't know what to do.' 'See 'em that time there at Campbell's Knob? Fuckin' bulldozers and tankers and all that bullshit; never put the fire out, still goin' when we had a look.' It was not obligatory to do all the things mentioned in their boasting, but then again, one mustn't be classed among those who were 'all piss and wind—only talk about it.' And yet, a forest fire at the height of summer; who could want that? Surely not Lochie? He described himself as 'a man with a conscience', and I had heard him speak harshly of 'some of them buggers down at Cann River, they jist light a fire whenever they feel like it.' And I was convinced by his confusion at the moment of exposure that he had gone further than the others expected. After all, they knew him; normally he was highly conscious of the danger of fire, and he had fought as many as most men.

And yet? He was very vulnerable to the urge to go further than anybody else. Once any boastful talk started up, he edged himself further out than the rest, even on a ruinous line of action. Stone-cold sober, he was one of the finest men in the country, yet there was this weakness in him that once grog or the urge to show off began to carry him away, he would lunge down a line to the pseudo-orgasm of fighting or the false apotheosis of drink. He knew this. He looked for ways out of it. He said, I'll get meself a woman.' Or he said, 'Bugger it, this country's buggered. They've got it all fenced, only fuckin' gossip and nigglin' now. I'm gonna sell up and head up there in the Ord River there.' Sometimes he put the blame on poor old Percy Duncan, At other times he lost hope and would flare up into a row with one of his friends, as if to abandon himself from the things that kept him stable.

He brooded terribly. It was painful to be with Lochie when he was passively drunk. A blanket of depression would settle on the living-room of the hut. There would be half-hearted conversation, long silences, and the occasional hiss of a new can started, then more silence and sipping. The neat shiny cans in their carton seemed such a poor way out for so fine a man. These depressions were dangerous for the ideas that were born in them. Lochie was shoeing his horse at Black Mountain one morning when it shied and trod on his toe. There was a

sharp frost right across the plateau that morning and our fingers and toes were half-numbed, so the pain for Lochie was intense. Even he found it hard to bear and staggered over to grip a fence-rail. Five minutes later Lochie was cursing his toe with his old vigour and I wondered why it was that Danny said very quietly to me, in a moment when there was no one around, that it had been his fault. He had tossed a horse-rug over a fence just near the horse's head, causing it to shy. I couldn't understand why he didn't apologise to Lochie in the ordinary way, until three or four years later when he mentioned another incident. The two of them had been fooling around in the horse-breaking yard at Danny's, showing off their whip-cracking. The whip got away from Danny and, quite by mistake, the end of the lash flicked Lochie in a very private place. It was painful, but there was little made of it. But a fortnight later, Lochie, a little drunk and very fightable, turned up at Danny's and called him out. The flick in the privates had been a deliberate provocation, an insult, and Lochie meant to 'have' Danny, to even up the score in a fight. It had taken Danny a long time to soothe Lochie's temper and bring him out of his foul state of mind. Hence his decision to keep Lochie in the dark about that horse-rug.

The toe wound, that day, was set aside as just 'a bit of a nuisance' because there was riding to do. This was on another trip; Lochie and Danny were riding, and leading a spare horse, while Vance and I covered the same ground in the Rover. Late in the day Vance and I left the main track at Monaro Gap and headed along a spur towards the Snowy until we came to another of Bon Boucher's corrugated-iron huts. We were tired and felt like a drink, so we opened a half-bottle of rum and were having a well-diluted nip when we heard the sound of approaching horses. We were well aware by then of the danger of letting Lochie loose on the grog. He had cleaned up a full bottle of rum the night before with only token assistance from us and had been talking appreciatively of 'the overproof rum they sell in New South; better than this piss.' If we took the bottle out to our cases in the Rover, he would see us. Here was trouble. We took a hasty look around the hut. There were no cupboards, but there was a shelf running around the wall littered with junk of all sorts, including a number of dark, partly-emptied bottles, unlabelled, of

methylated spirits and kerosene. We hastily put the rum bottle on this shelf with the label turned away, and waited.

The light was fading, but we could still make out the grey-white bark and grey-blue leaves of the box trees that covered this ridge; box trees and dry grass. There was talking in the air; impossible to make out the words, but the tone and timbre of the two men's voices were quite distinct. The horses's hooves could be heard on the track, and their snuffling and bit-mouthing as they came nearer. It was a moment of beauty and apprehension. Troopers, bushrangers, women waiting for their men ... I sensed the past in this moment, and felt also the certainty that Lochie would spot the rum and another trip be spoilt. They dismounted, and came in. If they smelt our breath, they said nothing, and Vance asked after Lochie's toe. After much persuasion from the three of us, Lochie consented to take off his boot. His sock was filthy and there was a dark line of sweaty dirt between his toes. 'Just a bit of the old toe jam,' Lochie said. He allowed Vance to wash the ugly swollen bruise and tend the broken skin. Vance did this expertly, lecturing Lochie on the need for a bit of sensible hygiene with an open wound. Lochie took all this in good part, but Danny's conscience was affected and when Vance told Lochie he ought to disinfect the wound, Danny started searching for methylated spirits. As luck would have it, he headed straight for the rum bottle. 'No, no, no, no,' we shouted, 'not that one. Here, here, this is metho—look it's got it on the label, it must be. Smell it, see it is, yeah.' Danny doused Lochie's foot with liberal sloshes from the metho bottle. This stung, but I could see Lochie sneaking a little grin to himself and I knew that he had woken up. I mentioned that there were two cans of beer in the Rover and these were cracked while Lochie sat up to the fire with his big toe bandaged.

This set him yarning. 'Feet,' he said, 'you reckon that's somethin', that's jist a bit of toe jam. Bloody old Dave Brewster, he's at a dance one night and he asks this sheila for a dance. "Oh, no, Dave," she reckons, "I couldn't dance with you, not while you've got those socks on." So he goes out and takes 'em off. Anyhow, she gives him a dance after a bit and she wrinkles up the old nose and she reckons, "You still got them socks on, Dave?" "No," he says, "look, I took 'em off," and he pulls 'em

out of his pocket and holds 'em up to her nose. Oh, shit, rough! I tell you what, back there in the war they tried to get old Dave into it. They made him go down to Bairnsdale for a medical. They got old Dave in the raw and he fronts up to the doctor and he reckons he can't go, he's got a bad heart. "Be fucked you have," the old quack reckons'—I was delighted at this improbability—' "any man been living above them feet for forty years ain't got no weak heart!" ' Lochie beamed and was quite content to leave it at two cans of beer. He was at his most genial when we protested at him putting the dirty sock back over the bandage.

This powerful earthiness made Lochie very amusing company. He noted Vance's disquiet at seeing the sugar in the bowl clotted into brown lumps. 'Don't worry about that, Vance,' he said, 'that's jist where the dawg pissed.' This remark, only superficially coarse, was his way of bringing his guest's idiosyncrasies and his own squalid habits into the open. Once brought out for laughing, they were a constant reference point for jokes, and things that might have poisoned a relationship were not allowed to rankle. Many of his habits and rules-of-house were obviously born of camp situations where men living together for weeks on end had to be very careful not to enrage each other. Lochie never moved anything put down by anyone else in the hut unless he made a good deal of noise about doing so. And he maintained firmly, 'Never touch another man's fire.' If you poked about with a fire he started, and suggested another log, he would announce, 'I dunno, you're doin' it,' and you would have to do it because he wouldn't touch it. It was not a tidy camp he kept, either. You walked in past saddles, bridles, oilskins and super-phosphate bags. Cupboards on the right held the scanty stores. Lochie slept in the room on the left, and if you looked in you would see a pile of dirty blankets, a few cigarette-butts and half a dozen westerns spread across the mattress ticking. The living-room had a sink, wood-stove, open fire and armchair at the western end. Visitors rarely failed to notice a strange constellation of holes just above the chair, at approximately head height. Lochie used to make a great joke out of the fact that he'd been cleaning the shotgun—empty, of course—and it had gone off. There was no one else in the room at the time, Lochie assured us, and so many jokes were made about it that the blast-hole didn't seem very frightening, but

it was unnerving to think of the room filled with gun noise, violent and unexpected, and to think of Lochie sitting there trying to cope with the fact that he had made a very nasty mistake.

It was a good hut to go to, especially after long bush trips. Then you could light the copper in the tiny bathroom, and skip out of the way of fallen ashes while you dipped and basined the hot water into the old tin bath. You came to love its shortcomings, even, perhaps, the smoke. That bent chimney-pipe didn't draw very well, especially when the wind was coming over the hill to the south-west. On nights like that the smoke ceiling in the room steadily lowered until you could not rise from your seat without plunging your head into a grey-blue cloud. When the level came a little lower, no matter how cold the night, Lochie would open all doors and windows for five minutes, filling the room with icy mountain air. The only comfort to be had was in bed, provided that your body fitted the dips in a hernia-ed wire mattress. None of this mattered very much, even the distinct lack of greens in the diet. Many a time the fare for the whole day was bacon and eggs and a few fatjacks. Lochie later established quite a good vegetable garden—or claimed he did; I suspect it was Percy's work—but found gardening out of keeping with his estimation of himself, and left it all to Ellery Wise, the much-abused alcoholic. Lochie threw Ellery out 'for the last time' at least six times, but always relented.

This was risky. Lochie came back from Buchan one night and tried to light the tilley lamp. The methylated spirits refused to ignite. Several matches later he had a sniff and a taste of the spirits. Water! He went to the cupboard and got his spare bottle. Water! He lit his bedside lantern and went into the other room where Ellery was sleeping. Ellery was in a stupor on top of a mattress which was charred everywhere except where his body covered it. Under the pillow was another bottle of methylated spirits, half-empty. Lochie was furious at Ellery for nearly burning the hut down and carted him down to Buchan the next day, banished for yet another last time. I could find some sympathy for Ellery taking to the bottle, all the same. It was not pleasant to be left alone at the hut. One holiday when I was up at the hut, Lochie went off to Buchan. I was doing some writing and preferred to stay where I was, and sober.

When he came back in the small hours of the morning, two days later, it was a tremendous relief. The isolation of the hut was oppressive, the mind and will seemed to go slack. It was awful to sink into depression, to know what was causing it but not to be able to do anything about it except fiddle with the fire or read The Sun. I described these feelings to Lochie later and he said, 'Now you know how I feel when I'm up here on my own.'

Sometimes he struggled desperately to avoid that situation. One time, travelling down to Bairnsdale, the Land-Rover's differential broke down. The Rover went into the garage and Percy Duncan got the job of driving us back in the Holden. Lochie had a few drinks at the Victoria and decided, as the day wore on, that he was in no hurry to go back to Butcher's Ridge with his stepfather. The prospect of a few days of drinking and meeting people in Bairnsdale was much more inviting than going back up to the hut. Percy was willing to take us, but he and Lochie's mother had various 'social obligations' to keep in the next few days and he would have to come down again the next morning. So Lochie had to go back that night or stay down for some days, and the old folks, as he called them, wanted to see him get back on duty at the farm.

Lochie was well aware of this. He often reminded them of what he'd done for the place, and talked volubly about improvements he was planning, yet their apprehension was obvious to him. They made no secret of their concern. They admitted that they had pinned their hopes on the farm as the means to straighten out the young Lochie. He had had a few jobs—herd-tester, PMG—without finding much satisfaction, an early engagement and another romance had broken up, and he was showing a fondness for drinking and fighting even then. He himself had put a lot of faith in farming; he loved the land; if only he could get on a piece of property, everything would be alright. Now things were going astray—though not yet financially. He was losing heart for farm-work, letting the fences go, not repairing things, just grazing it without developing it. Days and days went by without him doing any real work on the place. All his talk and boasting grew out of the land and its work, but he had lost heart for it. When the shearers came to the property he was

full of shearing lore, told you how it was done, and tore into the sheep, all the time acting out the part of the gun shearer. At sheep- and cattle-sales he had a lively judgement of the stock, and at the pub afterwards he had a good appraisal of what had gone on, and then he would start to boast about his country and what he was going to do with it. Horse-sales brought him to his peak, especially in the Victoria afterwards. Horses, dogs, horsemanship, saddles, droving, the life of the road—his talk was flooded with an intimate knowledge of these things; yet every year he did a little less farm-work and a little more talking. He could hardly wait to get into the pub at Buchan or Benambra to play out a larger than life-size role which he was no longer really living.

The hut on the hill was the place of reality; set seventy-five miles from Bairnsdale and nearly an hour's drive from Buchan, it was the severe and lonely test he had to face at the end of every trip away, every drinking session. If he failed this test, he failed it with the full knowledge of Mum and Perce. If they said he ought to take the ride that was offered in the Holden, then he felt the implication that he was not game to go and face that test, that he wasn't going to do any work next week, either. He had to prove himself. He was under no obligation. He could please his bloody self. When Percy had the Holden out ready, there was a row. Lochie was very worked up and already a little bit drunk. He put his head down, pulled his hat hard on, put a hand on his open shirt collar and marched unsteadily—thirty-six now—down the road to the Victoria. Mrs Duncan, Mum, stood by her gate watching him walk off in a fury, as he had many times before. The light caught her glasses, her grey hairs and her slipper buckles. Her heavy bulk seemed to sag. She called out, 'Oh son, son,' and I thought her big old rounded breasts would flow again.

There was nothing for it but that Perce and I must go down to the Victoria, too. We had nine drinks before honour was satisfied and we could leave. Lochie sat in the back sulking like an over-grown boy. About a mile before we got to Sarsfield, Lochie said, 'Jist stop up here, Perce. I'll get some smokes.' Percy reached into the glove-box and produced two packets of twenty that he had bought at the Vic without us noticing. We drove past the Sarsfield pub without stopping. Lochie's

abuse of Perce for the next eight miles earned him a stop at the top pub at Bruthen. This took an hour. For the next twenty miles Lochie was mutinous and abusive and Percy's answers were delivered with a weary patience and restraint that angered Lochie all the more. Lochie's idea of calling in on Danny Lambert at South Buchan was a relief to the three of us. In this interlude, over a few bottles of beer, Lochie was witty, affable, and a fountain of anecdotes. I had seen him change like this before, but it was no less of a surprise. When we came out of Danny's, it was dark. 'Better stop in Buchan, old fella, yer don't like night drivin', do yer?' No comment from Perce. 'I'll drive, if you like.' 'I'll be alright, Lochie.' As we came into Buchan, Lochie said, 'Better stop at Bob Nolan's. Gotta get a few things. Forgot to give him me list this mornin'.' I backed this up, since I wasn't looking forward to another week on the few supplies in the hut. Percy stopped outside the darkened store, Lochie knocked up Bob Nolan, who was surprisingly pleasant about it all, and after a quarter of an hour we had our groceries. They were going into the boot when a man came past, obviously a little under the weather. 'Paddy still servin', is he?' Lochie asked him, and in a flash had disappeared in the darkness.

It must have been well over an hour this time before he came back, carrying two dozen of beer. About a mile up the road we heard the first of the crown-seals being bitten off and the frothing sound as Lochie drank from the bottle. Somewhere in the middle of the second bottle he mentioned, 'Run into Bemie Walker in the pub. Says there's a party at Glenorchy there. I'm invited, we're all invited.' 'Oh look, Lochie,' Percy said, 'I'm too old to be drinking and driving, particularly at night-time. My vision's . . .' 'You fuckin' old bastard!' Lochie told him, 'You're as blind as a bat.'

He had a point. As we made our way up the winding slope out of Buchan, Percy was driving with headlights dipped. If they were on high beam they ht up the road too far out in front for him to focus his eyes, so we moved along this tricky road at a steady thirty or so, with a circle of light just in front of us from the poorly-set headlamps, and beyond that the darkness we were penetrating. As we came in sight of Glenorchy homestead Lochie began talking about the party and who would be there. It was a roll-call of all the gay-lifers in the district. The windows

of the big house all showed lights and there was a large number of red tail-lights nearby. Percy drove steadily on. As we passed the gate Lochie began to roar and shout and bang the outside of the door with the flat of his powerful hand. He roared and raged at Percy, but the old man drove inexorably on. Lochie swung in his seat and clenched a bottle in his hand as we moved steadily up the next rise. He hung his head out the open window and stared at all the lights dropping back in the darkness. It was heartbreaking.

We kept on, up the Murrindal mountain, still with the lights dipped. Sometimes Lochie talked, sometimes he sang. When there was a silence, he filled it by needling old Percy. Eventually he managed to sting the old man into swearing loudly and crudely at him. Lochie was hugely amused. 'Aw haw; aw haw. Poor old Percy. Very fuckin' refined he is. Aw, Christ!' This triumph only sustained him for a mile or two, then it was the bottle again. We came past the polocrosse ground and the hall where the ball had been held that first night. It was in darkness now, as was the whole world outside our dipped headlights, except for a roadside camp. A caravan and a tent, presumably occupied by some CRB workman, showed lights. A figure was thrown into silhouette on the canvas by the lantern within. Lochie was desperate. He shouted and roared even more loudly than before. 'Stop!! Stop, fuckya!!! I know that fella'—God knows if this was true, or not—'I had a drink with him the other day. Ya old bastard, stop here!!' The figure in the tent seemed to be hanging up a shirt. Lochie belted the door and made a move as if to open it and jump out, but Percy drove on. We went through the five gates and climbed up to the hut on the ridge. They lit the aladdin lamp and I went to bed.

When I opened the door to say goodnight they were in the living-room, still dressed for the day, with the fireplace cold and the outside door open. They were having a horrible scene. Lochie said, 'Well, I'll put 'er on the market. I'll sell it,' and Percy seemed to be in agreement with this idea. After I closed the door, the voices still came through the wall. Bitter though the feelings were, it seemed as if they had reached this point before. Why had Lochie not sold? Some lingering confidence held by Mum and Perce that he might yet come good? Lochie not quite admitting defeat? There was so much life in him, he had such tremen-

dous vitality, but there was no way forward. To sell the farm was to cut adrift, leaving him nothing but Queensland and 'the Territory' he was always talking about. Only there could he be the man he had made of himself. I did not believe for a minute that these places actually corresponded with his vision of them; to go north in quest of a way for a man to live that was vanishing, if it had ever really existed, seemed a sad and wandering course. I wondered whether Lochie had convinced himself or not.

If only there had been something alive at the farm, not that awful darkened cottage to go back to. Lochie might have made a boisterous but genial husband and father, but as it was he was grateful for any company at all. Dingo-trappers could call in for a feed, it was fine to have the shearers there with Mum cooking away all day on the wood-stove, parties of friends up from Bairnsdale were a highlight, and even the lowly Ellery was better than nobody. I called up to see Lochie during one of Ellery's periods of exile. After polocrosse, the pub and tea at Danny's, we headed north. There was another party at Glenorchy, and this time we went in. The celebration was for the twenty-first birthday of Sammy Rodwell. When it came midnight, Sammy went outside, taking his girlfriend, then the candles were lit on a large cake and the guest of honour was recalled. Sammy re-entered the room holding his girl with his left hand and raising a beer-bottle to his lips with his right. It was a pathetic gesture, a sad travesty of what he imagined manhood to be. Couldn't he see where this sort of foolishness led?

In the small hours we headed off for Butcher's Ridge in the VW, stopping at the polocrosse ground to collect Lochie's horse from the yards where someone had off-loaded it for him. 'This old horse o' mine,' said Lochie, in his way of starting a boast, 'I bet you it'd get me to the hut quicker than that vehicle you got there.' I jumped in and we raced for the first gate. I was pulling the gate open in the headlights, meaning to shut it after me before Lochie could get there, when he suddenly galloped into the light with a roar of laughter, whipped through the gate and into the darkness. While I was shutting the gate a few moments later, I saw the figure of a horseman rise up from the darkness and stand out in silhouette against the sky of a full-moon night. 'Christ, McLellan,

how did you get up there?' I yelled out to him. There was a robust sort of mocking laugh, and the sound of hooves high above me. I drove flat out, leaving the gates open, and lit the lantern in the hut, then went out to the woodheap to get some kindling; From half a mile away I could hear Lochie yo-hoing at his horse, shouting joyfully and urging it into a full gallopt. I was proud to be his friend, but the situation with the lantern, those deep-valleyed mountains looming in the pale light, and the exultant hooves ringing out in the night, called for a woman worthy of the man.

She did not materialize, ever. June shopped around and settled for a nicely-placed position in social life. If losing her upset him, he never showed it. It was not till long after she was married that I knew that Lochie had been attracted to her. He mentioned it as we sat by the fire that night, yarning till dawn, mentioned it with a toothy grin and no regrets or pangs apparent. 'By Jeez, I'm gettin' a bit hard up, though,' he said. 'I tellya, I went to sleep on the sofa there at Sarsfield one time and that sheila, Milkrun they call her . . .' I asked about the nickname. 'Does the rounds, what d'ya think? Anyway, she wakes me up. I was jist having a nice dream'—obscene gestures with his muscly arm and clenched fist—'when she sits on me. By Jeez, I shoulda ...'

Hard up or not, even Lochie only joked about Mavis White. She was a strident, bossy and masculine girl who worked in the office at a stock-agent's, and she had decided that Lochie was the man to save her from spinsterhood. Lochie was having none of it, but even after she went overseas she kept writing to him. Lochie made a huge joke about all his 'love' letters from Mavis, constantly announcing when he last got one and when he was expecting another. But he never read out any parts from them and he kept them, like all his personal letters, in a pigeonhole of the home-made desk in his bedroom. When she came back, Lochie kept well away. It is nice to record that she did eventually get a man, and a farmer at that.

One night, in the Commercial Hotel, Lochie let a chance go. Joanne Weaver listened eagerly to his stories about our trip through Nunnett, Limestone and along the Divide. She said very plainly that she'd like to see that country. Joanne was then estranged from her hus-

band, and would have gone with Lochie very willingly. The idea tickled his fancy. 'Be alright to curl up under a horse-rug, eh?' Joanne had been curling up under horse-rugs, her own blankets, or anything else, since her early teens. Lochie was, on the surface, her type of man, since town rumour had it that stockmen and drovers found her willing enough on sales-days, and most other times. She was not the fleshy, buxom type that might scare off a man's man, she was slender and attractive in a horse-riding-girl way. 'By Jeezus,' Lochie said many times over in a bawdy tone, 'I'll show you a bit of country, if that's what you're after.' Joanne would have gone, and moved into the hut, too, but nothing came of it. Those scruples again; he wouldn't be a party to anything that smacked of home-breaking. And then, his desires were more earthy than sensual-erotic. One could not imagine him in the role of jealous lover, and she would have given him cause for jealousy. Nor could one imagine him creating a love-nest with atmosphere erotic enough to withstand the severity of Mum's Presbyterian disapproval.

Towards the end, Lochie was attracted to Sally Warden, fifteen years younger than himself. By then his personal problems had become too great and he found it embarrassing to be a suitor in front of her family. This embarrassment went part of the way to explaining why he would turn up at the Wardens' with enough drink in to give him courage as a lover, then ruin it all by saying to Sally, 'Sober me up for Momma, honey, sober me up for Momma.' Or so she said, but she was a dreamer who let her imagination have a good deal of play, so perhaps the words were her invention.

The story Lochie told in front of Georgie Mercer shed more light. We met Georgie near Ingebyra, on the Monaro, and Lochie recalled to Georgie how they had 'picked up these two harlots' at Nowa Nowa. They agreed to take them to Buchan, but had an argument along the way. Lochie ordered them out of the vehicle, and turned back to the Nowa Nowa pub. Some time later he and Georgie set off again for Buchan. They came on the two women on the road, still walking, but went straight past. The all-male interpretation of this would be that Lochie had put the hard word on them and was refused, but it was easier to imagine him being affronted by some joking banter made at

his expense by women experienced in the ways of mill men and how to bring them down to size. Lochie, all too used to flourishing a competitive brand of masculinity in a world of men, would have turned the beginnings of humiliation into anger, and the women on to the lonely road. With a good deal of overproof rum in him, he found this very funny, but Georgie afterwards confessed to a terrible shame about the whole affair.

Things were narrowing in on Lochie. Occasionally in stories he made his youth in Orbost a golden age, but now the world was getting past him. He was turning into a spectator at dances; he was becoming trapped inside the character he had made for himself. Percy told me of how he first began to lose faith in his stepson's likelihood of making a successful farmer. Lochie was bringing sheep down to Bruthen one cold wet day. Percy passed him as he drove up to Buchan and Lochie assured him that he would be alright with the stock, that he would camp for the night and press on in the morning. But he left the stock to fend for themselves and turned up at the dance in Buchan, dressed for droving. The contrast with his own anecdote about Charlie Owen camping in the mail-box was plain. Percy was firm in his condemnation of deserting the sheep, although he no doubt saw as well as I how Lochie hankered to be able to go back and start again. Poor old Mum. She had Rowena, who was married, Gail, who wasn't, and Lochie—Alister Laughlin McLellan, the incorrigible Lochie. She used to say, 'I started out as a Protestant missionary, and I married two Catholics. What do you make of that?'

Nothing, really; Lochie was the main and greatest thing that had happened in her life and she despaired of her son, even while she admired him. One never went to 58 Kendall Street without hearing the latest doings up at the hut, and one never went to the hut without finding out what was going on at the house in Bairnsdale. It was amazing how many people in Bairnsdale, and beyond, knew Lochie. His name was the open sesame in conversation with scores of people in all walks of life where social pretences were unimportant. Everyone who knew him had their own tales of him, things he'd said, outrageous or very human things he'd done. To be with Lochie was to have a thousand doors opened for you.

Despite his wide acceptance and his intuitive understanding of people and situations, he was not a man of universal sympathy. He met Gail down the street one morning at a time when he was getting ready for a trip to Queensland with Danny and Mike Dimsey, a local timber-worker. The occasion demanded a clean shirt each day, so he asked her, 'Where can you buy a shirt in this town?' She named Fisher's and Deakin's, the two biggest stores. 'Bugger 'em,' he said, 'there's a battler jist round the corner here, isn't there?' and went forthwith to Brian Fleming's little men's-wear shop to buy seventeen white shirts. This was only clowning because he knew the shops well enough, and for that matter Brian Fleming could write as good a cheque as he could, but the attitude was there. He expressed it more vehemently up at the Tin Mine huts during the trip when we met up with the Johnny Walker drinkers. Between the two historic old log-and-slab huts was a new, pastel-painted barracks-hut put there by the Snowy Mountains Authority. It was equipped with a sink, bunks, porta-gas heaters, etc. If it had been put there by foreign invaders, Lochie could hardly have been more annoyed. His anger was almost inarticulate, but basically the SMA were intruders because they had limitless money behind them, the individuals leaned on the big organisation; they weren't battlers, they knew all about their field, or acted as if they did. Another time, after the Australia Day sports, someone mentioned that the people around Tubbut were thinking of having a sports-meeting. 'By Jeez, yeah,' Lochie said, 'the old Cabanandra sports again. Yeah. I reckon them people'd be glad to see us up there, eh?' He sat back quietly, pleased with the idea. It was another day out, of course—there was always that—but he knew those people would appreciate a few car-loads at their humble festivity. 'Good people,' he used to say to me, 'good people. You can see that, can't you?'

One would be blind to miss it. The people in this area had the usual assortment of virtues and vices, but were less governed by time-tables and impersonal restrictions than those who lived nearer the capital. Their connection with the great State network was Bairnsdale, which they visited when sales, relatives, shopping or business brought them down. At a quarter-past-five on a winter afternoon the white-coated lads from Dickins would be set scurrying out with parcels. Neighbours' vehicles, a

car and a utility, might be seen standing outside, the tray and boot rapidly filling up with purchases. An indefinite number of children would be standing on the seats to watch the shop-attendants packing things in. Then, before the long drive home in the dark, the whole company would move into the Commercial's lounge and crowd around one table, a vibrant tableau of families minus men. The children's clothes tended always towards prettiness, with never a hint of austere taste; the women's clothes and make-up came from an indefinitely outdated never-never-land of no sophistication or fashion, but as mothers they embodied a rich femininity and a most obvious ability to cope. One looked at their hands and thought of big wood-stoves, simple laundries, wood-heaps and lino-covered kitchen-tables. The children were destined to have six years in tiny schools, then they would board in Bairnsdale, or, more commonly, make the daily bus run to Orbost and back, forty-five miles of road winding through farms and forest. When children's games and pony club were left behind, they would take part in the parties, dances, debutante presentation and the Springtime Ball. There would be picnics on the Buchan River, tennis, and the endless round of minor functions. In the season, the football followers would gather every Saturday to see Buchan lose again, with most of the cars around the boundary representing a family. One looked in to see rugs, sandwiches, a thermos, children's clothes. A glance at Dessy Connell's family, spotless and faultlessly dressed, told how busy the bathroom had been that morning. Some few lads had transistors glued to their ears, tuning themselves in to the world of international adolescence, and a few of the girls, like Dessy's lovely eldest, sat poised on the brink of womanhood, but for the most part there was a clear line—children; the adult world.

The nether world in between could hardly flourish in Buchan. All ages saw each other at the dances, and nothing even faintly smacking of night-club or restaurant life existed. A few fringe-dwelling youths laired it up in the main street on motor-bikes until cautioned by the law, then went out on to the bush tracks or jeered absurdly at the police-station from the other side of the road. Even the wildest of them was well caught in the great network of families, unless he was one of the itinerant workers at the mill, in which case he hardly counted. There were few shops

in Buchan, and few jobs. There was only work at home for the girls and men's jobs for the youths. One finally crossed the line by marriage or by property. As a schoolmaster, I was amazed to see Colin Barwick, who had sat bovinely in the corner of the class-room, mis-spelling the few words he cared to write, suddenly appear in Bairnsdale sporting a hat and driving a Mercedes Benz. And it was deeply moving to stand in front of the wedding photo in Danny's living-room, hand-coloured with a curving frame, the two busts floating in a sea of pale ultramarine. Pat was behind Danny's shoulder, looking more mature than her man, whose eyes were cast down to one side. Danny saw me studying it. 'I tell you what,' he said, 'I was bloody fair dinkum when that was taken.'

No circuses came to Buchan, and nothing much in the way of travelling shows. The ill-chosen films were only an excuse for a night out. Tourists came to see the Caves, the scenery, and what else? A sign used to tell them, if they drove north out of the town, that there was no petrol to be had for the next ninety-three miles. Cave explorers found plenty to occupy them, as did canoeists and naturalists, but the works of man were few indeed. No one, from the lowliest alcoholics in their stringybark humpy south of Buchan, to the biggest land-owners at the top end, as they used to call the Black Mountain area, could avoid the sameness and lack of variety in the life. Work went on—planting turnips, dipping sheep, ploughing, bulldozing new country clear. Driving through, one saw no remarkable buildings or feats of engineering, simply farm and grazing country with most houses set well back off the road. Family life went on—building a cottage by the house for the ageing father, warning the kids about their shaky tree-house. One saw occasionally a mother's determination to let her daughter have a period of unfettered freedom of feeling, but an atmosphere of romance or the delight in exploring a newly attractive personality scarcely seemed to flourish in the brightly-lit halls or woolshed parties. To an outsider, there seemed to be a very short step from first youthful quickenings to travelling in one of those cars one saw around the boundary at the football, with a clothes-brush and a child's cardigan tossed on the back seat.

Not all was marriage. There were affairs and scandals, mentioned on the grape-vine but not commented on in public. Hence Lochie's

embarrassment at his gaffe in the cafe one evening. He was waiting to be served, standing in front of the cloth drape that separated residence from shop. Underneath the drape appeared the lower fifteen inches of a thin-legged child. Black circles surrounded his little shanks where they rose out of two huge working-boots. The little fellow scraped his way into the shop and looked at us. Lochie called out, 'Goodday, young Clare,' in his warm, hearty voice. 'Where'd you get them boots?' The boy waddled away again, chewing his icy-pole, and Lochie gave a grunted 'Oh.' He could hardly forgive himself. 'Shit, I shoulda remembered. I knew bloody well. Old Lumper moved in there a couple of weeks back. Oh, Jeezus.' So dear old Lumper had left his camp-stretcher for a warmer bed. Some time later he and his new partner, Mrs Clare, moved away. I could hardly believe the news and said to Lochie, 'Buchan won't be the same without him.' 'It is not,' he said, 'it is not,' and over his last months he was constantly with Danny, the last of his real friends.

He had become estranged from his neighbours by now. He had very little to do with Denis Watkinson, the former commercial artist, and constantly scoffed at his foolishness for leaving a job he knew for farming, at which he was a beginner. When questioned about the breach, he abused Denis for bringing sheep with foot-rot through his property on one occasion. This may have been so, but it seemed more an incompatibility of temperaments that made them cold with each other.

Another neighbour was Don Watson, with whom Lochie had a longstanding dispute over their common boundary fence. Lochie agreed that a new fence was needed and said that he'd erect his half, but Don wanted them to share the cost of getting a contractor to do the lot. The dispute dragged on. Finally Don got James, Downie and Costello, the solicitors in Bairnsdale, to write to Lochie setting out Don's demands. Lochie made a trip to Bairnsdale and got old Gus Ellingsen, another lawyer, to draft a reply. Lochie kept copies of the letters and eventually had quite a sheaf of blue papers dangling above the fireplace in the hut. Nothing pleased him more than to be asked, 'How're you getting on with Don Watson?' He would reach up and grab the bulldog-clip off the nail. The larger the audience, the better. He would give a resume of the battle, with pauses to allow me to read parts of the letters as

directed. They were worded strangely, with legal phraseology enclosing bushmen's ideas about wombat-proof fencing. The lawyers were making money and Lochie, too, made great capital out of Don's inability to make him comply. His larrikin humour was tickled by the thought of having a lawyer in there fighting for him. Sitting in the armchair under the shotgun-blast hole, he would say, 'When's it say I gotta finish?' 'The last day of June, Lochie.' 'Shit! I'm six months behind! I better get started. Old Don'll put me in jail!' To the south-east was Blackwood property but the house had been burned out and, as Lochie said, 'Old Alby's down in Bairnsdale cartin' that gut around in front of him.' The last of his neighbours was Harold Vine.

This name is painful to mention. We enter now the terrible days towards the end of Lochie's life. Poor Harold, for whom compassion may flow, as it may for Lochie, as it may for all of us, played his part in the finale of my friend's life. He always seemed a steady sort of farmer, not an outgoing type, and Lochie regarded him more highly than Don Watson, say, whom he classified as 'not a bad poor bastard, really.' But Harold's worries began to prey on him, and his obsessions centred themselves on Lochie. I was told that he had had a bad year, though what that signified to him I cannot say. But one afternoon he was involved in a minor dispute at the Gelantipy sale-yards. He took offence at something that had been said to him and Lochie sided with the other man. Late that night Harold drove up to the other man's house and knocked on the door. The man's wife opened the door to find herself looking into a pair of headlights, and confronted by Harold. He was in a raging temper, carrying a gun, and demanded to see the man who had 'insulted' him. The man, showing a good deal of courage, came out and eventually managed to pacify Harold to the point of getting him to go away. As he left, though, he threatened the man again and said, 'The same goes for your bloody mate, McLellan.' When Lochie was warned about this, he equipped himself with a revolver and maintained that he'd use it if Harold Vine turned up at the hut.

He had always had firearms in the hut—I had been somewhat offended at seeing him shoot at birds from the living-room window—and now he used to do some shooting practice with the revolver.

Hearing about this reminded me of the Kelly gang blasting into the trees around their hideaway, particularly since Lochie had a striking resemblance to the outlaw leader, both in physique and temperament. Weeks went by without the expected visit. Then one week-end Lochie and others walked down the steep spur to the Snowy, where they meant to do some fishing. They were camped out one night, and that was the night Harold came. There is no telling whether or not he knew Lochie was away, but he drove up to the gate just a few yards from the hut, and left the headlights shining on the hut. Only Ellery Wise was at home, and his state of fear can be imagined. The engine stopped, the lights kept burning on to the hut. Ellery expected shots at any minute, or a challenging voice, but there was only silence, and the baleful pair of lights. This went on for minutes, with Ellery lying very low, until finally the engine started and Harold's car bumped away to the road. This incident made Lochie fiercer in speech and more frequent in handling his guns, but inwardly it must have sickened him. He had given Harold no cause for offence. Despite the many fights he had been in, this feuding-hillbilly sort of activity was foreign to his nature. He needed support, not enemies.

Danny was a wonderful back-stop. His house was always open to Lochie to eat, sleep, yarn or sober up, and then the two of them would go off on something new. Lochie would play with Danny's kids, fooling around on the beds or having a mock fight with young Gavin, in his first year at Orbost High School. When Pat finally called the kids off, Lochie would say, 'I'll bet them kids, when they grow up, I'll bet they remember playin' round with old Lochie.' Danny did his part in sterner fights than that. Lochie got into a fight with a mill-worker called McAuliffe, a New Zealander. 'He was half Maori, oooh, shit!' Lochie said afterwards. Lochie picked this fight—Danny mentioned that it was quite definitely Lochie's fault—and found McAuliffe a handful. 'I kept borin' it into him for a while,' Lochie said, 'but, ooh, shit, he got me down.' Danny came in to say that McAuliffe was banging Lochie's head on the road. 'Bitumen, not jist dirt. He woulda killed him. Bastard went mad. I come in and give him a few dongs from behind. I didn't like doin' it, but, oh Jeezus. Bastard woulda killed Lochie.'

This was the last of Lochie's great fights, though he survived two more accidents. The twentieth of his car crashes was nearly fatal. He was driving the big green Dodge out of Buchan one night when a timber-jinker swiped him on a sharp corner. The driver couldn't extricate Lochie from the wreckage and started to run down into Buchan for help, but Lochie had his wits about him. 'Get the bloody battery out of there before you leave me. I don't want the thing to catch on fire.' The big Dodge went off to Hinkleys' panel-beating yard and Lochie got a Holden van. Before Hinkleys had started the repair job on the Dodge, the Holden was in the yard beside it.

What way out was there? Lochie was positive and highly active. There would be no vegetative period in his life while he quietly worked things out. What paths could he follow that would not lead to an early morning phone call to 58 Kendall Street, with a sombre official voice breaking news to his mother? In a land without enemies, there were few avenues left. One was to create an enemy group. In the Victoria one night Lochie and Bon Boucher amused themselves by needling some voluble Italians. The two rangy Australians soon had half a dozen shorter, darker men bailed up in a corner brandishing bar-stools when old Bob Cawley, the publican, came on the scene. In his mousey little voice he threatened to get 'the beaks'. Lochie and Bon grinned and let the stool-wielders go.

What else? Marriage was unlikely now. Gay life? Lochie went down to Melbourne one year to see his wool sold. He must have decided to treat himself to one of 'them expensive harlots' he had heard about. He sat himself down in a night-club, at a table near the floor-show, and admired the dancers. His account of the evening was unusually fragmentary, but I gathered that he had, in the end, ordered another bottle of beer. Coming on top of the wool firm's free grog, he finished up slumped on the table. When he told me about that incident, I found myself wishing that he had never gone there. It was too far from his own world to give him any hope. And in his own world, what was there? Farming, for which he had lost heart, and the legend. The legend; what did it offer?

Male company, clowning, and triumph of a sort. We had them all on the trip when Lochie dropped the match. The pity of it is that the day began so well. From Native Dog we drove back to the track following the Divide into New South Wales. We stopped a little way along this track to inspect a trap-yard. The bushmen were in their element and at their best. As we approached the entrance to this yard they examined the many tracks and piles of dung for evidence of recent use. They explained the principle of the yard lucidly and affably. The idea behind it was that you offered the wild horses a generous quantity of rock salt, and placed it right at the far end of the long yard. You left the gate tied back to give a full opening. Wild animals are attracted to salt, but are very cautious. When you come back to examine the yard, as you must do at regular intervals, you should stop your vehicle some distance away, then come up to study the tracks. For quite a while only the stallion will enter the yard. When, however, the horses lose their suspicion of the structure, the stallion will let them all enter. Once you see the tracks of a whole mob in the yard, you spring the trap. You set up a rope at ankle-height, down near the rock salt. This means that when the stallion trips the rope, all or most of the mob will be in the yard. The tug on the rope releases the heavy gate, which is hinged so as to swing shut. A wooden latch is knocked and falls, locking the gate. The yards are high and it would be a rare horse that could break or jump his way out. I was fascinated by this, as were Vance and Lawrence. The logic was simple and it had the elemental quality of real bush-craft. The four men looked the yards over expertly and unselfconsciously. They were able to surmise a good deal about the horses in the area from the tracks on the ground. This lore of dung, tracks and simple snares was most impressive.

And then the day speeded up. The whisky drinking resumed, the driving got faster, the altimeter fell out, the bottle was flung aside, and Lochie tried to set the bush on fire. There was no more whisky now, only a few cans of beer which were cracked at lunchtime. Any delays were only keeping the party back from the session at Jindabyne. When I identified a rocky peak only half a mile from the road as The Cobboras, I was assured by the bushmen in chorus that it was not so, it was only wasting time to go walking in there. Minutes later we came

to Cowambat Flat and the long flat peak could only be The Pilot. They had lied to me. We were past The Cobboras. Months must pass, or years, before the long-desired, long-promised walk could eventuate. To The Pilot, then; but first we would inspect the flat. It was huge, many acres in extent, and rose gently away from a foot-wide trickle that crossed the centre of the plain. From the air it would seem flat, and this must have been the downfall of the airmen. At one end of the flat was the wreckage of a DC-3 plane; we had seen a remnant of it in the Benambra pub and heard how three men had died in the crash. The fuselage of the plane had been dragged a hundred yards away to form a simple shelter, complete with chimney. We reconstructed the events of the plane crash, then I tried to draw out Bon on the subject of The Pilot, on which I expected to be walking in an hour or two. This idea was received in total silence. Bon did volunteer that there was a cairn 'up the head o' that gully' to mark the end of the surveyed boundary. This stream, then, was the Murray River in its infancy? Yes. Walk to the cairn? No, drive to Jindabyne, better get started. The two Rovers splashed through the stream, past the sign which said 'Victoria: New South Wales', across the plain and into bush which hid The Pilot.

The trip was becoming a bitter and hasty fiasco. When we reached the Tin Mine huts the bushmen made a point of not discussing what tin-mining had been done, ignored questions about the construction of these grand old log huts, and busied themselves in doing chin-ups on a pole across the hut. More self-proving; did they never cultivate the detachment to look at themselves and their country? Not in company, anyway. Much of the talk while the chops were cooking was about the mob of cattle standing a little way away, looking curiously at anyone who chanced to go outside. After lunch, it was mooted, they would be yarded and each of the four was going to attempt a ride. The land where we stood was part of a grazing lease and the stock would have been turned loose by Gifford Davies down where the Pinch River ran into the Snowy. They would make their way up to the snowgrass flats and not see a human being until Gifford and his boys rode up to get them before winter set in. They would be wild. Some cans of beer chased the chops down and then we went outside. The day had put me on edge, but I

was looking forward to the impromptu rodeo with which our bushmen friends had saddled themselves.

Remembering our dash past The Cobboras, it gave me some satisfaction to look at the tossing horns of the mob. Lew and Bren worked the mob towards the yards and with a good deal of trouble from beasts crashing into the guide-poles, we managed to get thirty or forty animals in. They milled around, bumping dangerously into the rails. These were very old, made of snow gum, and badly affected by the weather. The top rail was missing in two places. Quite early in the piece there was a breakaway and four animals got out. How was it all to begin? First catch your mount. A rope was produced and hurled lassoo-style at a beast slightly smaller than average. In the ensuing turmoil, three more animals escaped. Lochie made a bravado dive to grab one by the horns, and two more got out. Oh, ho! Vance, Lawrence and I stationed ourselves along the three weakest sides of the yard, leaving Lew and Bren to man the gate and the fourth side. The rope-throwing met with little success, so Lew left his post to show how to do it. Several more got out. Vance now took over the gate as another part of his beat. Somehow the rope kept hitting the beasts on top of their heads, or slipping off the horn on the rare occasions when it circled it. Inside the yards the animals were constantly milling around, but Vance, Lawrence and I made sure that none got out past us. Each of us ran along his fence hoohing and hahing at the cattle until they were past, then we went back to the beginning of our beat to meet them as they came around again. We waved and flapped our hats at them, and they got out only on the fourth side.

Despite our efforts, the mob in the yard was finally reduced to one cow and her calf. Honour demanded that the cow be pursued, but she was a fighter. She thrashed free of the rope when it got her, despite the new technique of knotting it, which Bon devised, and where possible she kept the calf on the other side of her from the men. Bren was hopping about some yards back from the fourth side, flashing toothy grins and doing very little guarding of his fence. Lew hovered between his gate and the centre of the yard. Despite these weaknesses in the perimeter, the two beasts made scores of circuits. Around and around they went, kicking up their heels and throwing their heads in the air. The

mother began to get a desperate and tearful look in her eye. She made a lunge at Bren's fence and got caught halfway over, her tail swishing, udder wobbling and legs thrashing. Then she was free, and her calf with her. Bon and Lochie, with nice timing, arrived just too late to grab the calf, Bren slipped and Lew's wild dive ended with him tearing his pants on a barbed-wire fence. He had also scratched himself high on the inside of his leg, so that rudimentary first-aid and a good many ribald remarks were used to cover the withdrawal of the last few cattle.

This horseplay released a lot of tension and we set off in a much better humour. Now and then along the way we saw some horses which moved into the bush at the sight of us. There was one young buck, though, which did not. He ran along the road in front of us for some distance before making his way into the trees. We stopped there for some time discussing horses. A few hundred yards further on we came on the same horse, on the track again. The bush beside the road was fairly dense, so Bon drove the leading Rover at a quiet fifteen miles an hour about fifty yards behind him. Bren explained, 'They're tirin' him out. They're fast for a bit, but they knock up easily.' Sure enough, after perhaps three-quarters of a mile, the horse began to sway and his hind legs wobbled. Bon's Rover pressed him more closely now. He could have gone down the bank to the left of the road, but the Rover kept pressing him and made him panic. He kept on the track, weakening with every stride. Suddenly Bon accelerated his vehicle and drew alongside the beast. Lochie reached out his powerful arm, seized the horse's tail, and picked his moment with perfect timing. Just as the brumby lifted a hoof from the ground, Lochie twisted, and the beast was down. In a split second the Rover was stopped and the three men were out and on top of the horse. Bren braked our vehicle savagely, leapt out, snatched his camera from the leading vehicle and dashed up beyond the horse. He had one moment of panic when he saw steam clouding up from the radiator-cap, but this was only the sudden stop spilling water on the hard-worked engine. Bren was in a state of high excitement by now. His hands were fairly shaking. He had no hope of working the camera, let alone holding it steady enough to take a photo of what his friends might do to their catch. The three of them were swarming all over it. The horse resisted

them with its failing strength. It rolled around on its side and belly, flung its legs about and tossed its head when they tried to handle it. Lochie got a headlock on the beast and held its nose so that it would be painful for the horse to move. Lew held its back legs and Bon rubbed its belly. The horse had given in, and was theirs to do what they liked.

There seemed very little, but Bon said, 'Have his knackers. We'll whip 'em out. Get that knife.' Bren went and got the knife, his laughter making me feel sick. I was quite aghast at this latest idea and wanted to see them stopped. But how? The triumphant huntsmen, not quite certain of what to do next, seemed likely to do the opposite of anything suggested by us. Well, there was the knife in Bon's hand, and he certainly seemed to find pleasure in feeling the horse's testicles. The horse was weak, though when it pulled away under Bon's indecent hand, Lochie swore at it and held its head more firmly. The victim was ready but, to my immense relief, was not subjected to the ultimate outrage. One more voice in favour of the idea might have carried it, but Lochie did not press for the operation. Instead, since there apparently had to be some mutilation, the knife was used elsewhere. A thin piece of his ear was slivered out by the trophy hunters, and the horse was allowed to its feet. It stumbled down the bank it should have seen before, and stood, bewildered and shocked, on a patch of grass and flowers before going off into the bush.

At the top of the next rise, Lew promised me, there was oh such a view, just about as big as the whole of Gippsland. He was friendly, it may all have been a joke to them, at least in retrospect, but I could hardly have cared less. As individuals, they made a good impression, but, thrown together, they insisted on this man's man code. Why couldn't we slow down, and look? Strength and aggression may have been virtues for man in his primal state, but to see them asserted so baldly on a trip meant for leisure was a bruising experience, for me at least.

But we swept on, driving fast. The next stop was the Jacobs River, at the bottom of a fearful descent. The track indicated extreme caution. It was narrow, had very steep grades and the surface was scarcely more than a single bulldozer scrape. To give the rain a run-off, the 'dozer blade had cut a heavy gash across the track every hundred yards or so. As soon

as we turned into the narrow Jacobs Valley, the leading Rover accelerated. Bren followed suit. He made it his challenge to stay right on the tail of the other Rover, almost swallowing it when Bon changed down before he did. We nosed them and pressed them for a mile or more, then they swung off the track, we shot past, and they were on our heels. Bren was a man possessed. His top speed between rain run-offs increased and his gear work, if it were possible, became even faster. We crossed the hummock of dirt at the run-off gutters in first gear. The bumping and shaking had no time to settle before we were in second, a harsh roar from the engine and we were in third, more high revving and we were in top. Then it was foot flat to the boards and a brief screaming sprint, then a furious change into third and a seething in the gear-box. A touch of the accelerator, a touch of the brake and another fury in the gear-box as we went into second, a ten-yard dash and a standing on the brake just in time to get us into first to cross the sharp gutter where the rain was meant to run off. Over the hummock of dirt, and into second, a revving and into third ... The grey Rover was so close that our dust went around it, mingling with the cloud it threw over the bush. At every bump in the rain-rutted track billies, saucepans and camp-oven lids smacked about in the Rover's metal tray. As luck would have it, it was my turn to travel in the rear and I spent most of my time bedding down these iron missiles and pulling some blankets under my hip-bone. For one brief second in this melee the main range near Kosciusko came into view, an awesome sharp peak with fearful rock gullies tumbling far down out of sight. A sudden swing of the Rover and this view was presented to me upside down, then our pursuers swung into view again, heads shaking, elbows and shoulders jogging across the little cabin. The race went on, up the gears, a mad sprint in top, and down the gears to first again.

At last we reached the Jacobs River and leapt out quivering with excitement, or disgust. We examined the stream. Lawrence thought there might be trout in it. I agreed and walked off to watch the water flow over rocks. Vance wandered away to look at the plants in the bush. We reassembled as the crew mounted the grey Rover again. Lochie mentioned, 'The boys're goin' on into Jindabyne,' but somehow the fish, rocks and plants regained their interest for us. The grey Rover splashed

through the fast-flowing water and away up the track in a flurry of arm-waving and poor Lochie was left like a victim of coitus interruptus.

No more was seen of the horse for three years, in which time it gained a legendary stature. The story of Lochie catching a horse out of a Land-Rover with his bare hands was told in Bairnsdale, in Melbourne, and all over the Buchan area. A number of people in Lochie's district refused to believe the tale unless one of the outsiders confirmed it for them. The horse must have gained a little in size and sheen with each telling. On the last of our trips to Lochie's, we drove through to Suggan Buggan. We came on a red stock-truck full of weedy horses. Bren Douglas, still smiling, Barnie Cameron, and Spider Curtis had been out on a brumby-run. They had eight or nine animals in their truck. Bren pointed to a small beast with a coat like a moth-eaten carpet. The horse. I refused to believe it. Bren showed us the slice out of the ear. There was no doubt about it.

The last time I saw Lochie was in Bairnsdale's Blue Dragon Chinese cafe. It was ten o'clock, all the lights were out but one and, as I drove past, I could see the manager being patient with a swaying figure. I stopped. Lochie explained the situation with a beery grin. He had been eyeing off one of the waitresses when they said it was time to close down. Now he didn't want to do the wrong thing, but that waitress ... Lochie let out a whistle and a dog leapt up on the back seat of a car parked nearby. The driver got out—a patient country man, fairly full. He reminded Lochie, without complaining, that he had to go to Omeo that night. Lochie explained, ignoring him, that this was a bush fella, so he wouldn't go off with Lochie's dog. And Lochie had told the dog to sit, so it wouldn't get out of the car till he called it out. So the fella couldn't go till Lochie let him. Aw haw; aw Jeezus.

A few weeks later the news came that Lochie's property had been sold. What now? It was a holiday time for me and I was going away. I resolved to visit Lochie as soon as I returned. In the meantime I was reassured by John Garnet, a stock-and-station agent. Lochie had been into the office and John had broached the subject of his future, had even hinted a warning to Lochie about not wasting all the money. Oh, no, Lochie was quite definite. He was going up to the Ord River Scheme

to work around while he looked for a good block of land. He would take about two thousand pounds with him and leave the rest in the bank. When he was sure he knew the area well enough, he would buy some country and make a fresh start. Hearing this eased my disquiet, though I should have known that it was only sober eleven a.m. talk. Danny told me, after the funeral, that he had made an arrangement with Lochie that he and Pat would eventually go too, if there was a good living to be had up there. This seemed the ultimate gesture of loyalty, though I fancy that Pat would have told herself, as perhaps Danny might, that they would never be called on to make the move.

The end came soon. Before my holiday was over, the long-dreaded phone call woke the household at 58 Kendall Street. Lochie was shot dead, by his own hand. Mrs Duncan, Mum, drew comfort from the fact that the bullet which blew away the back of his head had begun its path by only grazing the skin, and had ploughed itself in. Suicide was ruled out. Yet the events of the last night were characteristic. There had been a session at the Buchan pub, and then Lochie and Ellery set off for the hut, with two dozen of beer in the back of the vehicle. Lochie stopped to pay a visit along the way and, as usual, was able to pull himself together to be very good company. Then the journey through the darkness resumed. When the two men got to the hut, they lit the tilley lamp and hung it from its wire hook in the ceiling. They lit the fire and sat by it, Lochie in the armchair under the blast-hole, Ellery on one of the old tube-steel office chairs that had found their way up to the hut. Drinking started again. It would be light enough in the room, with the lamp, the glow from the kero fridge, and the fire, but above the arc of light would be the smoke-darkened ceiling and shadows would mask the armies of dead flies under the chairs at the far end of the room. Very likely the window was propped open by a six-inch board. The panes in this window were usually greasy, but if we cleaned them down we used to watch the sunlight gild the tips and peaks of the ranges across the Snowy. Lochie used to stare at the sunset's light effects, say 'Hmmm,' and produce his transistor gramophone. Then we would hear 'Bold Tommy Payne', "The Scottish Soldier', The Wild Colonial Boy', or Kathleen McCormack's infinitely affecting songs of Irish poverty. She would sing, 'Now I've got

a shillin', and I'm takin' my boots to be mended, mended, mended,' and Lochie would say, over a leisurely beer, 'By Jeezus, them Irish must have been poor. Didja read about the potato famine they had that time?'

But things were different then. Now the farm was sold and he was to hand over possession in six weeks to the day. The Ord River still beckoned, at the diagonally opposite corner of the continent, but this did not lessen the failure. His feelings about this were shown at the time of the big fires. A few weeks before the sale was made, two gigantic fires got loose in Gippsland. One swept in a great arc from Briagolong to the Tambo River, darkening the sky for days. Another one began with a lightning strike in timbered country near Nunniong Plain and swept eastwards in huge leaps and bounds. Spot fires were breaking out miles ahead of the main blaze. There was an ominous glow in the sky behind Mount Statham, then the wind got up and in an hour or two a fast-moving wall of flame sped across the Butcher's Ridge country. One man claimed to have heard Lochie sing out, as it entered his property, 'Let it go, let the whole bloody lot burn,' and I can well imagine the apocalyptic fires stirring a sort of satisfaction in his unhappy mind.

As the drinking entered the second carton, Lochie started looking for a diversion. There was always the pleasure of terrifying Ellery. He found his revolver—Harold! Harold!—and a dozen bullets. He said he was going to blow the light out, and blasted off a shot. It missed and made a hole in the ceiling. Ellery protested and was told to be quiet. The shooting went on. When the first six shots had bored holes in the hut—one thinks of the coloured pictures from The Women's Weekly which Mum had pasted on the walls—Lochie refilled the magazine, despite Ellery's protests. He kept firing, and Ellery's complaints were exactly the incitement he needed. Somehow he couldn't quite hit that light. It is not hard to imagine his gloating smile as his shaky hand brought the barrel into line with the light and his stupefied anger when he missed again. Ellery's whimpering brought out a domineering streak in Lochie. He said, 'If you don't shut up, I'll shoot you,' no doubt getting satisfaction from Ellery's fear. Ellery's reply, though hang-dog in tone, was fateful. 'Why don't you shoot your bloody self?'

Lochie said he might. 'You wouldn't be game.' It was the challenge, the absurd idea couched as a dare. Lochie said, 'Alright, I will,' and put the gun up near his own head. No doubt he did it intending to fire off a shot behind himself, after which he would collapse groaning on the floor. Ellery would run screaming outside and Lochie would race to the door to fill the night with lusty guffaws of raucous laughter, clowning and teasing always. But his arm, which could waver and wobble without spilling a drop, even at the end of a long session, had lost its steadiness. Perhaps he thought there were no more bullets? I think not. I had seen him looking into the darkness before, and I think he meant to challenge it, to prove himself to it, half in love with it. Session after session, bout after bout, he returned to this cottage on the fringe of settlement, unfulfilled, until the thing he was most aware of was the awful darkness that surrounds human life. I can see his smile, gorging himself on the easeful thought, not of surrender, but of letting himself challenge what enveloped him. In a last gesture he fired and the gun in the wobbling hand chanced to carry out fate's intention. He did fall; and Ellery did run outside. He leapt into the Holden—Ellery, who had never been known to drive before—and somehow managed to bring the van through the five gates, past the three neighbours, down to the mill. He woke the men there and the word was out.

After the funeral, his mourners drank to him at the Victoria, then went back to Kendall Street. There was a very big man there, a stranger to me, who had been one of the pallbearers. He kept saying to Gail, 'We lifted him up and I could feel him there on my shoulders. I could feel him there, and I wanted to hold him and wake him.' I think we all did that. Gail said, 'That's Merrick Teague. He and Lochie went off to Queensland when they were eighteen, shearing.' It was very poignant to hear of the young Lochie going away for that trip which every young man deserves, seeing the world for the first time through adult eyes, with life's decisions not yet made and the heart's coins not yet spent. It seemed a long and harsh journey from there to this sorrowful night.

Yet one impression refused to leave my mind. We were returning to the hut from the Buchan pub—myself, young Nigel Gould, Lochie. Here and there along the way Lochie opened a bottle of beer in his

accustomed manner and drank it as we went along. He was happy, telling stories, having lots to say about all the news we had heard in Buchan. I was usually very wary of his driving after a session, but that night he was irreproachable. Every mile or two he burst into noisy song, his favorite being, 'On Top of Old Smoky.' 'Not one boy in a hundred,' he thundered, 'a poor girl can trust.' A little farther down the road; "There lies a poor lover ... for courtin' so slow.' 'Shit!' he said, 'Pathetic, isn't it?' The difficult drive stirred him to nothing more reckless than a few jokes at his own expense about earlier accidents, and his handling of the curves of the Murrindal mountain was exemplary. All the same, young Nigel found the curves, on top of his very modest intake of beer, too much for him. He wanted to stop. So when we got to the W-Tree Bridge, Lochie obliged. Nigel made a dive for the table-drain and started being sick. 'Oh dear oh,' said Lochie. 'Poor Nigel. He is in distress.' Nigel's face looked very pale in the headlights. He was in no shape for witty rejoinders, so Lochie left him, grinning amiably, and strolled back towards the bridge and the precipitous falls. He flung his arms wide and gave us one more snatch of 'Old Smoky', with the words revealingly altered. The tail-light showed up his hands, his neck and, faintly, the white railing of the bridge. 'Oooh … the grave will ... enclose ... me,' he bellowed into the night. The incident was never very long out of my mind after that. I believe he did not expect to see the Ord River; but if daring had trapped him, while he lasted, he would continue to dare.

Landscape and People

Having now left the far east in favour of the ugly, widespread city, I find heart, mind and spirit asking to explore once more the wide spaces and brief time—unrecoverable human years; historically a sliver—when those three in this body, younger then, had Gippsland as their familiar ground. Great hazy mountain spaces, with bristly foothills, long-running ranges, and winter snow merged in cloud; lowland plains, lakes, and the long rind of sand blurring in sea-spray; wind-stricken beach dunes, whitecap water and the endless sea; I lived there, and I left, and would look again to see what world it was I inhabited.

Such all-embracing views of country come to practical men more often than to aesthetes, as I found when Gavin Humble took me as an observer of his daily work. Gavin is a fish-spotter who lives in a weatherboard farmhouse at Meerlieu. Every morning, if the weather is right for fishing, his alarm-clock rings in darkness. Gavin leaves the double-bed to his wife and lights the lamp, eats briefly, if at all, and passes dogs and fowls on his way to the shed. He starts his Land-Rover and drives to another shed in a paddock. It could contain hay, or a tractor, but the headlights show an aeroplane. This morning's flight, commonplace to him, is an experience both profound and enchanting to me as my random viewings of the area over four years piece together, forming the grand and whole design I now know Gippsland to be. On the way out to Gavin's I sense this coming, and begin to fear a last-minute calling off of the flight. But no, last night's call on the wall-mounted phone ascertained that the sea will be calm enough for trawling. Thirty-five miles away in Lakes Entrance the Miller brothers will be stirring their Viking frames to get the boat ready to answer Gavin's call. Gavin does his drill on the plane, checks fuel and instruments, stuffs fruit and sandwiches and a magazine into a space and climbs in. First light is in the sky. Gavin trundles the

plane out into the paddock, checks his controls and races down the strip. Dry grass drops away, horses become farm toys, fences change to lines and we rise to see burning-gold clouds in the low eastern sky. In the valleys far behind us are beds of mist and beneath us is fog, a dewy cotton-wool rimple blanketing the lakes and stretching miles out to sea.

Somewhere in the hidden water there will be shoals of salmon, which we aim to find. The Millers are modern fishermen; Gavin says shoals of fish are visible from a boat, but miles of coastline stretch either side of Lakes Entrance, so that when a trawler comes out the entrance, which way does it go? How far? Gavin drones along the coast watching out for fish. A shoal of salmon is as plain in the water, to him, as a stain on a carpet. At a glance he tells between anchovies and salmon. He radios the trawler and tells them his position, and an estimate of quantity. 'Four hundred boxes,' he says laconically, looking out of the tilted plane, 'might be a few more.' If he is well down the coast he lands on the beach, or perhaps a strip of open grass a little way inland. He curls up there, or reads, till the trawler gets to the scene. Then he takes to the air again and guides the boat to a position offshore from its catch. Four big men, tiny figures from our aerial view, head for shore in a row-boat. Two men, or perhaps Tiny Miller on his own, wade through the last few feet of surf with one end of the net. Then the boat rows out in a half-oblong around the fish and in to shore again, the boat is beached and the net is manhandled in. It is made so as to close over and around the fish. When they are captive, they are hauled out to the *Helena Star*, winched aboard and cascaded into the hold.

Sometimes Gavin lands to give a hand, or he will fly off to Hickey's paddock, overlooking the North Arm, to wait for the trawler to announce whether it wants another shot that day. He tells tales about Tiny's enormous strength ('just about haul the net in on his own'), or the fishermen's off-day boozing, or else yarns to the trawler over the radio. These conversations break rudely into our cockpit a thousand feet above the water, commanding the infinite scape of Gippsland, ocean and a crescent of unbroken beach. 'Yeah, down by Conran,' Vern drawls into the mouthpiece. 'Ay? Yeah, about a hundred and fifty boxes. Yeah, a bit far out yet. They might move in, that's if you're interested. Ay? Yeah, I

might have a look down round Everard, might be somethin'. How's Tiny this morning? Huh huh. Shit, did he?' It is a god's view we have of the fishermen's doings, yet Gavin's hard Australian voice and the crackling replies might be the sound-track of a dull documentary. 'Yeah, there was a few near Everard yesterday . . .' Everard! The magic of the white lighthouse on an uninhabited coast disappears in the matter-of-fact style of a man earning a living. A god's view; from the air we watch the row-boat moving silently across blue water, perfect as a lake in paradise. But a shark scares the salmon and the shoal moves into deeper water. The mortals beneath us row on blithely, sweating no doubt, and head not around but towards the shoal. I watch, intrigued; Gavin yells into the radio, but there is no one on the trawler except one man dangling his legs over the side, well away from the cabin. The fish are scared by the shadow of the boat and the shoal divides, with much the larger dark patch moving outside the net. This is plain to us, but the oarsmen row on, beach their boat, haul on their lines and heave in a catch so paltry that they wonder why Gavin signalled them there. Gavin fumes while I reflect on our powerlessness to intervene. And again, when the trawler is reboarded, explanations and the four most common expletives flow backwards and forwards through the miraculous radio, and plane and boat head back for Lakes Entrance. The moment calls for a haunting ballad or even a few lines of jingling verse, but the radio conversation is about the Listers. Their plane is in the air and their trawler is going west up the coast. 'Fat lot he'll get up there. There's about two hundred boxes between here and the Prom. Still, they might need 'em,' Gavin says with a superior chuckle, just a man doing a job. The haunting presence of that mighty hinterland makes his words seem drab as we circle Lakes Entrance.

This is Gippsland's best-known town, the only one to make any promise to the visitor. Bairnsdale tries to beguile the suburbia-minded with its main-street garden, but does nothing else for the caravanners lined up in the camp-park. It is acknowledged that Bemm River and Gipsy Point are for 'the fisherman'. Buchan cynically signboards 'The Caves'—nothing more. Omeo and Orbost are themselves, and make no concession. Bullumwaal lingers in its past like a widow in a tumbledown

house, but Lakes is said to offer play, love, life larger than the working-week world knows it. This is only in the season. As February grows old, even though fire restrictions blanket the country and the fire-towers in the hills are still manned by students and the Forestry's old retainers, the dwindling traffic and the emptying guest-houses declare summer a dying man. Or his spirit is; the midsummer delirium to embrace life reaches its climax on New Year's Eve, there are two or three weeks of the season at its height, then holidays end, cars wind away up Jemmy's Point, melancholy creeps in long before autumn and the young of Lakes Entrance are left, sad as beach-combers, with another year of half-living to wait through.

From the air, Lakes is a one-storey town laid about two waters and a bluff. Between the lake and the North Arm—there is even a Tween Lakes Motel—all is sand, beaches and light soil. Banksias grow, coastal manna gums and pine trees set the tone, except where the Princes Highway becomes the town's Esplanade. There, where a line of palm trees follows a corner, is the Club Hotel, low of course, and weather-board. The roof is red and has two gables pointing back to the line of bungalows in the long backyard. Cars are scattered there, and a line of washing flurries in the wind, the same on-shore wind that buffets our plane. It is a town wide open, without cul-de-sacs or mystery. Little pedal-boats splash around the lake, two shillings a ride; water-skiers bisect the angle of motor-boat wake in the North Arm; caravans are parked and tents pegged in the sand near the absurd battlemented toilet, a sort of children's game fortress that guards the town's entrance. Car passengers also see the cog-wheel of Rotary International. From above we miss these symbols with which the town decks itself, but see how the groynes and sandbars channel the outgoing tide in a living navigational map.

A party of fishermen rows briskly over the top of a huge school of fish, dark against the sandy bottom, then stop to cast their lines a hundred yards too far up the lake. We smile in pity for them, but then what use is our vantage-point? We are so cut off. We miss the jokes as they toss beer-cans in the outgoing tide, tiny shining beer-cans in the choppy waters racing out the entrance, pinpoints of light swallowed up in the

froth on the bar. We are not among those who turn, startled, to watch a hard-driven Holden taking a nervous, laughing group out to Lake Bunga. We miss the heart-stopping bikinis and people dropping into single file to pass each other on the foot-bridge. We are spared the dreadful ornaments made from sea-shells in who-knows-what city of the world and falsely, despicably, labelled 'Greetings from Lakes Entrance'. We miss also the bare-foot children pushing aside plastic strips to buy lemonade, the gilt-framed picture of a Bavarian castle in the Catalina Cafe, and the miserable over-made-up eyes of the girl at the counter. Down to earth then; land; but first, one last wide glance—where are we?

In time, the mid-twentieth century; place, over sand-hummocks, pushed up between the Australia-bounding sea and the lakes spilled out shallowly by the rivers of Gippsland—Nicholson, Mitchell, Tambo, Macalister, Thomson, Latrobe. South of us is King Island, where the Lakes' boats sometimes go, and Gavin flies, and Tasmania, where blue gums also grow, as they do on Jemmy's Point, and the tip of Wilson's Promontory. Seeds blown across? Birds? Evidence of an ancient land-link? Mystery ... let it be. Fly low, see the wind turn the banksia leaves silver-side up, see the wild cattle in the bush between lake and ocean, and the rotting fences and wheel-tracks in marshy ground, the acres of pigface. Follow Lake Victoria, over rotting jetties (look, a liner out to sea!), over Raymond Island (the old ferry taking a car-load across Macmillan Strait), over Bairnsdale aerodrome to see whose planes are on the strip. Look, a fire! We cruise around the blackened oval watching cars pull up and two tankers arrive. They stop it at the highway with knapsacks and stand around to talk. We stay low and buzz Gavin's father's farm. His mother comes out and waves. Gavin waves and tosses out a parcel of salmon. 'Might bruise 'em a bit,' he says, watching it plummet, 'but they're pretty tough when they're that big, anyway.' When we reach Gavin's farm there are sheep in the paddock. We buzz them a couple of times and they crowd into one corner, then we land. Gavin laughs at the sheep on his airstrip. 'Civil Aviation might be a bit niggly about them,' he says, going past in the Land-Rover.

Gavin is a modern man, which is to say a man of his period. Old Spence, his father, argues against concentrating on fish-spotting, but

Gavin has the figures on his side. He gets a percentage of the catch, and catches have been good so the farm is not developed to its full capacity. Gavin smiles through the altercations. His father confides, afterwards, that his sons just can't seem to see obvious farming sense. 'I try to tell 'em,' he says, 'but they won't listen to me.' They in turn try to tell him, but he has a loud, harsh voice and a hearing-aid which is a great device for misinterpreting their best arguments. His farm is on the market because the boys don't want to take it over. 'He wonders why they won't stay with him,' his wife says, as he goes off laughing at all the arguments he has crushed in his lunch-time monologue. Nor do they altogether leave him. Gavin and Gary both have farms nearby and help in the heavy work, and sometimes Neil comes home to do his bit for a while. At other times he is playing in a band, perhaps in Sydney, perhaps in the New Hebrides.

So there is a farmer in each, and their sister Evelyn loves the land, too, but they won't see it with their father's eyes. Music and flying are the glamour worlds they partly move in. Gavin likes to recall his days with his own band. They played at a dance on Friday nights 'with a few snorts for lubrication', enjoying the attention, free grog and adulation. One of the band could always get a girl. Gavin's wife Sally must have been the most starry-eyed of the admirers. Even more than Gavin, she looks back to the band and their inner circle of friends going to someone's place after the dance, and the musicians striking up again to play, sing and drink till morning. A few hours sleep, then off to a dance somewhere forty miles away, and another night of togetherness, a young man's band with plenty of engagements, well paid, never a care about style, just pour the music out; and their girls, swopping around, not differentiating too keenly between exhilaration and love.

Were all of them like this? Sally was; hers was a marriage between two of the group. Moving out to the farm and the splitting up of the band brought them sharply against the realities of each other, alone together in mind as well as in fact for perhaps the first time. Domestic life could hardly compete with the old days, for glamour and excitement; the plane meant more to Gavin than income, as perhaps his father knew. And meanwhile, Gary, who had been a schoolboy proud to show

his teachers that he could drive a tractor, was growing up, learning to fly, forming a band, playing in Sydney; and when Gary was marrying, Neil, only the other day the small boy whose father put so much work on him, was forming a group, having easy money and easy loving in the New Hebrides, being followed to New Guinea by Jill Hardiman, the girl with long blonde hair in the Bairnsdale Library. And all the while their father discusses the faults of Fords and changes to Humbers, plays bowls, lets people know what Gavin and Gary should do with their land ('But they don't listen, I wouldn't know anything about it. I've only been doing it all my life.') and never quite gets around to selling his property.

He farms a few miles south-west of Bairnsdale, in the strip between lakes and highway where clay soil alternates with sandy rises. These are topped by stringybarks and banksias, then you walk downhill, sand spills on top of the clay and red gums take over, with sheokes and blackwoods in attendance. Most of the land is cleared for farming now, though there are still sheer-sided stands of stringies in the high spots of grazing land. The paddocks still have in them the grey ghosts of last century's trees, the forest parkland which the first explorers rode through two lifetimes ago. These shattered giants affront the eye until you learn to give them their due. Huge trees killed in their prime by Christmas beetles throw a complicated silhouette against the sky, a pattemless filigree of untimely death. Squadrons of white cockatooes watch you walk underneath, one insane bird sets the others screeching, and they hover about, producing a deafening, maddening quantity of sound until you want to bat them out of the air in a frenzy. Then they take themselves off to settle on the extremities of some more graceful ruin and it is as if they have placed themselves as candles in praise of the red gum.

These humble giants are the soul of the lowland, in Gippsland as elsewhere in Australia. Lacking the form, foliage or showy flowers of an ornamental tree, they need a whole patch of continent to set them off and our attitude to them is ambiguous, as it is towards almost everything we have done to the Australian landscape. It is a commonplace irony now that we love the bush, so we build there; roads and gutters follow, and it is no longer bush. This sort of thinking can be extended indefinitely.

We also note that even sophisticates can wonder like children what the country was like to the explorers' eyes. 'Before the white man' is our more self-conscious way of saying, 'In the beginning...' In Gippsland you are likely to hear how the first settlers moved through kangaroo-grass up to their stirrups, riding six or eight abreast between the thick boles, their faces dappled, no doubt, by the broken light of a full eucalypt canopy, and their eyes seeing for the first time the Aboriginal country they were to change.

When they worked, it was with the red gum. They ringbarked it, poisoned it, grubbed out suckers. Sometimes you find stumps where the cross-cut saw has started high and cut down at forty-five degrees to solve the problem of toppling the enormous bulk. They milled it, made slab sheds of it, stumped their houses with it, burnt it in fireplaces and stoves. They took adzes to it to make rude strong fences, and still the worn grey post-and-rail weaves a delicate tracery riding up the undulations, disappearing in gullies, man's lines and Nature's lines in counterpoint together. After eighty years, the stumps are eroded; after a century, the trees are hollow-centred, but they still stand. When autumn lifts the fire restrictions, farmers have a clean-up. They light a fire at the butt, the rotten centre becomes a chimney and showers of sparks go rushing down the wind, wasteful but joyous, like fire-crackers.

The next night and the night after that, if you drive out, there will be a red glow back off the road, far more alluring than the steady white lights of the farmhouses. Coming home from a party on a warm spring night you seem to pass between the camp-fires of some nocturnal visitation. There ought to be someone there, or something, but as always when Australia beckons, there is only silence or Nature about her business. People spend weekends in quest of this energy, towing trailers up side lanes, putting chain-saws into dead trees and live ones. The orders go out to mills—red gum only. Road realignments send veterans crashing. Steel saws rip straight edges in the wood. Wood-merchants bargain for them. The railways burn off the young ones. Insects shred them. Yet the plains are still dotted with them, slow-growing, patient as draught-horses, unhurried as the earth that pushes them up. No symmetry, no angularity, recommends them to the gardener; too slow for the forester,

too shapeless to inspire design, too long-lived to give any man pride of ownership, these humblest, mightiest of Nature's vegetables stand, sometimes erect, sometimes drooping their limbs as if cropping the grass, as certain as eternity of outlasting any civilisation, quite unconcerned if they don't.

Eternity is not a thought to be ignored when moving through this country. The Bairnsdale traveller, halfway to Stratford, used to see a fallen stump facing him from the side of the road. On the grey surface, smoothed by the saw of some weekend wood-getter, the word ETERNITY was spelled out in red. Or still, going to Lakes Entrance, you sweep down into Bennett's Brook, once the loveliest part of the road. Halfway up the following slope, the solo evangelist has left his message again. White letters say it: ETERNITY. It is comic to think of this wandering prophet setting his paint-tins about him on the sandy grey soil, breathing over his runny lettering and shinnying twelve feet up a red box tree, hammer in hand, to emblazon his warning.

The old doom-sounder is dead now, by report of the Sydney newspapers, but his sign still stands. I had a thought once to steal a 'Please slow down' sign and nail it to the same tree, but never did it. I reflect on the quaintness of the sign and then on its setting. I remember that wattles used to flourish here, blooming in spring, and there was tea-tree flowering in late summer, and tall trees rose out of the gully. For a time there was a tip—a tip!—just off the road, then bulldozers scraped it all clear for farming land. Snow lay there once, for a few hours, and it was here, one New Year's Eve, that two young people came screaming down the hill in a sports-car, ran off the road, tipped over and were killed. The event left its mark. Gossip pushed their speed over the hundred, and soon afterwards half the Lakes road had double white lines restraining the traffic. Even so, the grim warning of death and judgement has little relevance. One expects to hear, not the Last Trump, but bellbirds bipping away to themselves, though one is disappointed now. One senses the land and the life lived in it; civilisation is so thinly spread in Gippsland, and the landscape is so over-powering. The old man's signs, then, fail to relate; has anyone done any better?

Not really, though one or two of the stump-carvings come close. These oddities are as close as Gippsland comes to possessing an indigenous art. There are a number of them: at Karlo Creek, at Noorinbee, along the Buchan-Orbost road, out near Nunniong Plain, and the best-known one halfway up the Omeo road. This one was carved by a Mr Samuel of Bairnsdale, who worked for a long time with bridge contractors. He sometimes filled the spare hours in camp by cutting the head and features of a man into a stump somewhere nearby. Another of the axemen is Mr Hattam of Karlo Creek. He has a farm away in the far east. When the Princes Highway was little better than a forest track it was reassuring, at night, to pass his house, slow down, and toot the horn. If one of the family was in the kitchen you would be answered by a tug on the rope which operated the figure at the gate. With a stiff-elbowed motion the life-size figure would doff its hat as you pressed on through the bush. Returning several years later, I was surprised to find the figure gone and a different one in its place.

The replacement was a fine piece of carving, head and shoulders, several times life-size. It was painted black and white, though somewhat mud-splattered by the highway traffic. The oval shape of the face was a little after Modigliani. It had a distinct character, but the effect was ruined by a car tyre and fruit-box which sat on it as a comic hat. A near-statement was masquerading as a mail- and bread-box. We met Mr Hattam, who had no modest estimate of his powers as a sculptor. As a friend said, 'It was like a conversation with Michelangelo.' Mr Hattam was very suspicious at first, especially when cameras were mentioned. Therein lay the reason why his hat-raising figure was hidden at the far end of his garage. He feared to leave it at the roadside, because some enterprising person might photograph it, print post-cards of it as souvenirs to sell, and make a fortune that rightly belonged to the sculptor. Indeed, he had ideas in this line himself. He believed he might have colour photos of his figure printed by the thousand; he would place his carving in the back of a utility and travel from town to town. In each place he would drive slowly down the streets exhibiting the figure and announcing that he would be selling photos of it at such and such a spot. 'Think of it,' he said, 'you would make perhaps a quarter of a million

pounds, not quickly, but over a thousand years.' We were stunned by his conceit. I thought of Shakespeare's 'Not marble, nor the gilded monuments of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme' and decided that Mr Hattam had not made the lesser claim. It was obvious that ideas of a religious fetish had influenced his thinking and yet he was incapable of taking a purist approach to his carving.

The one he was so proud of was farcical. Another little man sat on its shoulder and other bits and pieces attached made it a standing advertisement for British Petroleum Limited, whose petrol Mr Hattam sold. As a joke, yes; anything else, an absurdity. Yet Mr Hattam possessed the confidence of a master craftsman. He stood before us, unsmiling, arms folded and axeman's muscles swelling and he gave us some wrinkles on his craft, 'There's plenty of them can carve one side of the face,' he said, 'but it's getting the other side the same, that's what tricks them. There's not many that can do it, very few.' He knew about the pair of figures outside the Forests Commission office at Noorinbee, but obviously regarded them as lesser works. Throughout the long exposition on his ideas and techniques, his son Denis stood almost speechless. It seemed that Denis had worked elsewhere for a time, but, in Mr Hattam's words, 'I needed Denis at home.' My companion commented, 'Imagine living in the shadow of a man like that.' I was relieved to hear, several months later, that the boy had left home to be married.

I met another father and son some years before, in the high country north-west of Ensay. They drove up just as I was examining another of these figures. From a distance it looked like a cross between a stump and a phallus. It stood shaded by snow gums near the edge of a high plain. It was unpainted, moist and partly moss-covered. The axeman had managed its features quite well, but had been unable to go beyond this to embody any very specific feeling. Yet it had a presence, and the country it stood in was so remote and had such character that even a poor expression of a human reaction to the bush was welcome. Yet again, there was this comic thing; someone had nailed an old felt hat to the carving's domed head. I mentioned this hat to the father and his grown-up son, who drove up in their International utility. It then came out that the hat had been put there by the father. Previously the stump had worn a hat belonging to a

young man in Swifts Creek, but he had been killed in an accident, and the man felt, as a mark of respect, that he should not leave the dead man's hat perched out in the hills. He had replaced it with one of his own and returned the first hat to the dead man's father.

I liked this gesture, which brought things back on to a more human scale than the line of thought I had been pursuing. Gippsland was full of timber to carve on, and rocks, and its presence was so strong that it seemed to need figure men to say what the landscape was. I was not able to make this clear to the men in the International, but someone else, six years later, must have had a similar idea. On another trip into the Nunniong Plain area I rediscovered the figure in a different spot, a few miles farther out. It was mounted in a clearing and painted white. But the white was stark, and the clearing was rimmed with heaped-up bulldozer scrapings. Again, the figure did not relate. An unsuspecting bush-walker on a moonlight night could perhaps get a fright from it, and perhaps this was the real intention. The figure was mock-ghostly rather than mystical.

Nor did the best-known of all these figures have much connection with the bush it stood in. Its features were heavy and it stared, beetle-browed, at the passing traffic like some severe football coach glaring at his players. For a long time it was painted with the vertical black-and-white stripes of Collingwood, Lindenow, Lucknow and many other teams. I use the past tense, because, early in 1968, the ever-present vandals took a chain-saw to it and cut its head off. This disgraceful act destroyed more than a landmark (it stood at the half-way point from Omeo to Bairnsdale); its very difference from its surroundings made you look at them again. In among the wattle fronds, dark trunks, gravelly soil, in among the tea-tree, with scattered light breaking through the gum leaves, was this presence; you felt it, and it was gone; you looked at the black-and-white stump man, he looked out of place. Why? What was this place? You looked again, the bush was close, yet seemed farther back, and it had this presence, withdrawn and never yielded. For a fleeting second you felt you had it, and then it was gone and you were left with a quaint stump-carving which had not quite done the trick.

But the land is not only for looking at, and in my acquaintance it was the Borrow family of Glenaladale who best combined admiration with practical use. They have fringe country, up the Dargo road from Lindenow. Looking at their land and their house you are taken back to what was once called 'the real Australia', that farm-family norm which was re-examined and discarded as a national ideal in the 'forties and 'fifties, but there is nothing self-conscious in the attitude of Mr Borrow and his family, who are as genuine as people can be. For years they were beyond the limits reached by the electricity, and they would talk with you while late afternoon drifted into early evening, then Mr Borrow would light the aladdin lamp and put it on top of the cupboard which held the sugar, salt, home-made blackberry jam and home-made tomato sauce, both of which were delicious. Behind him in another floor-to-ceiling cupboard were row upon row of high glass jars filled with preserved fruit. Mrs Borrow would say, 'Of course, you'll stay to tea,' and would start to clear away the cakes and butter- and vegemite-covered dry biscuits from the second afternoon-tea. The table would be clear for a few minutes while Mr Borrow talked on easily, always delighted when people called, and Mrs Borrow shifted things from the piled-up bench to the crowded wood-stove. The kitchen opens off the dining-room, down a little slope, and goes behind the dining-room fireplace, never wider than five feet. The line of little windows over the sink commands a view of their own land, Vin Goldsborough's land, and the bush on the far side of the Mitchell. One day when I was admiring this view, Ann, sixteen, rested a hand on either side of the sink and stared across at Vin Goldsborough's wool-shed. She mentioned that the Glenaladale Young Farmers would be holding a ball there in a couple of months' time. I asked how many of these there would be in a year. 'Probably just one,' she said, and went back to the dishes.

For years now Mrs Borrow, or some other parent from the little belt of farms, has driven their children of secondary-school age the seven miles down to The Fingerboards (Lindenow, Dargo, Iguana Creek, misspelled Ignana, Fernbank) to meet the school bus. The boys all went through the Technical School, Ann to the High. They travelled thirty miles each way, night and morning. So Ann saw plenty of her own

age group, but the wool-shed ball would be that rare thing, a young people's night. The ordinary dances at Glenaladale were attended by three generations, perhaps four. The Glen hall stands on the edge of the Glen cricket-ground. Stony Creek, Iguana Creek and the Mitchell cut their way through the foothills to the Lindenow flats and the oval is at the northern edge of this fertile and valuable country. On a dance night the farmers and their children who lived on the little creek flats and the foothills cleared of timber and tea-tree went straight home from cricket, had dinner under their aladdin lamps and flocked down to the hall. The committee ladies prepared supper in the same unlined annexe where they had served the two teams their afternoon-tea. This break in the game might stretch on for half an hour, the players picking up lamingtons in leathery hands and drinking out of glass cups or yellow ones bought at Coles. When empty plates were stacked you noticed the owners' names on strips of Elastoplast bandage, stuck to the underside. Talk was mostly farm and family, or perhaps guns. The Sheffield Shield or Test-matches were often discussed, the game in progress only rarely. When the umpires began to look around for their things, the visiting captain stood up and twitched his cap in his hands while he spoke a well-practised thank you for the ladies' hospitality.

At night, the atmosphere was different, yet still family and communal. Grandmothers nursed tired five-year-olds while the blooming youth and the middle-aged danced. The band's platform raised them only six inches above the floor. Passing couples brushed against them and talked to them. People occasionally went outside, but you were not left with the feeling that the real doings of the night belonged in the cars parked in the darkness outside. The floor of the tiny hall was crowded with dancers and groups talking. A car-load might drift in from Lindenow South, find the open, hearty communal gathering not to their taste, and drive off to Lucknow, with exhaust thrumming down the road. The Glenaladale dance was a celebration to end the week, not an exploration of the night or the moods of love and release from control. Certainly it was hard to think of any of Mr Borrow's children letting go with unrestrained language or behaviour. The family swore very rarely, drank very mildly, never exaggerated, never let talk enlarge into gossip. This did not

make them unworldly. The conversation one night was about the war in Vietnam. Fifteen-year-old Lloyd, the youngest of Mr Borrow's children, pricked up his ears at the words 'Viet Cong', repeated them in a whisper, then kept a half-smile on his face while his attention wandered. While he drifted off into the imaginative world of torture and violence common with boys of his age I noticed his father looking at him, his mild glance full of awareness.

Clive, five years older, a National Service conscript and due to be sent to Vietnam, had no time for people who went chasing the satisfactions of violence; yet the army had him and he could do nothing about it. Like his friend Ray Goldsborough, an only son called away from a farm that needed him, he could only say, 'I suppose you have to believe what you're doing is the right thing. You'd find yourself feeling pretty queer if you didn't.' The rest of the family felt for Clive, as for Ray, a sort of compassionate sympathy that was ready to accommodate any sharp change in the boys once they experienced the war. Little was said about its rights and wrongs, but Gwyneth, second in the family, single, had been doing missionary work in Vietnam for some years and her letters were studied closely. Evan, the eldest, was well read on this, as on most matters, and Mr Borrow followed the news carefully. You felt that they didn't believe that Clive's half-committed philosophy would stand, and were ready to back him when it didn't.

Mr Borrow hated to see his son go into the army. He said, 'These boys are in the bloom of their youth. It's lovely to see them. And then they get caught up in this.' It was typical of his generous mind that he didn't curse politicians, didn't blame world-leaders, offered no easy solutions to the problem and above all else, that he was thinking of other people's sons as well as his own. It was typical of the family that Clive, though hating the army, brought the lieutenant of his platoon home to spend a leave at Glenaladale and that Mr Borrow should be pleased that the young officer had told him that Clive was the best man in the platoon. This didn't mean that Mr Borrow had a sneaking fondness for what war represented. He summed it up, 'Oh yes, I volunteered for the First War. I thought after a while, perhaps I ought to. I rode into Bairnsdale on my horse, but they rejected me on account of varicose

veins. I thought I was sorry. I didn't get to any wars. Anyhow, none of the Borrows were ever any heroes.'

I liked his attitudes, more broadly human than my own anti-war sentiments, and I particularly liked his detail about riding the horse all those miles to volunteer. One of the many wonderful qualities of Mr Borrow's talk was that he saw life whole. He often said, "Things were different then,' but never implied any criticism of life today. I loved to hear him illuminate the Gippsland I knew with tales of his own youth. 'Oh yes, when we were young we'd ride in to the dance at Maffra from Boisdale. It was only about six miles. There'd be anything up to thirty of us, young fellows and girls, all on horseback ... oh, we'd go jogging along, changing around to talk to different ones, we'd have a bit of a race sometimes . . .' This to me was a magnificent image of youth, this band of young people jigging in their saddles, riding through a summer night. And so was it youth, which Mr Borrow understood so well, when Clive's utility was never home. I asked where he was. 'Oh, he's up at Castleburn,' (one of the Goldsborough properties). I asked, 'He's doing a bit of courting, is he?' Mr Borrow gave one of his fondest smiles. 'He's doing a lot!'

Mr Borrow and I always seemed to find ourselves coming back to the subject of Bill Gallico. Mr Borrow—christened Basil Baden-Powell because he was born shortly after Baden-Powell's relief at Mafeking; his cousin, also named by the time of his birth, rejoiced in the name of Federated Australia Borrow—Mr Borrow, as a boy, had obviously looked up to the young man Bill Gallico, and I, meeting Bill in his seventies, also revered him as the very ideal of the bushman type. By the time I met him, he was the uncrowned king of Briagolong, the ultimate authority on all matters to do with horses, cattle and the hills to the north of the town.

Mr Borrow constantly referred to Bill's leadership of the Skyline Tours, back in the 'twenties and 'thirties. These were parties of thirty or so professional or otherwise well-heeled men who made extensive walking tours of the remotest mountain areas long before the Forests Commission pushed their roads through. Bill used to lead these treks with Steve White and Teddy Lang, and sometimes the legendary

deCourcey O'Donovan, as his assistants. Every year Bill would go to all the local horse-sales, buying up the animals to be used as pack-horses, then he would train them, breaking them in if necessary, and get all the saddles and saddle-bags in order for the trip. I asked Mr Borrow if he did all this on his own (Bill stayed single all his life); wasn't he lonely? Mr Borrow told me, 'Yes, he always was one out by himself. I saw him going off to the First War. He was sitting on his own in a carriage in there at Boisdale. There used to be a line that went through to Briagolong, but that went out of use. Anyhow, there he was and I felt I wanted to shake his hand. He did look lonely. I felt the same way when I rode into Bairnsdale to volunteer. But he wasn't lonely with horses. He'd get them all in a yard and he'd say, "Oh, he's quiet," and whoooosshh, he'd give him a slap and watch him kick. He just did it to have you on. After each summer he'd sell them all and get new ones next year.'

Bill led his tourists—the pilgrims, as they were referred to in Briagolong; it was deCourcey's term—to the remotest places. Over the years he took them to Wellington, the hidden Lake Tarli Karn, over Trapyard Hill, to The Pinnacles, Mount Kent, Mount Howitt, Wonnangatta Station, through all the high-plain country between Licola and Bright, on to the superlative rockpile called Castle Hill, to Mount Tamboritha, Bennison's Plain, the Lost Plain, the Snowy Range, the Crosscut Saw ... Some of the travellers were excellent photographers and Bill still had several of the professionally-mounted albums they had given him. Each year, when the albums were ready, a reunion dinner was held in Melbourne. Everyone from the previous summer's trip attended to relive the mountain journey and to get their presentation albums. Each year Bill used to make the trip down to Melbourne and be feted at these dinners. The albums opened with a map of the country covered and a list of the party. When I first saw the photos I wondered how many of these lively walkers were still alive. Evan Borrow and I had gone to Briagolong to question Bill about how to get to Castle Hill, which we had a great hankering to visit, and how to find an easy way to the top once we reached it.

Bill, when we met the great man, looked well beyond his walking days. We approached his two-roomed cottage with respect. We stood in

the long dry grass and called out, 'Anyone home?' while a dog pushed through the open door and barked at us. A rough, powerful, friendly voice called out, 'Come in 'ere' to the dog and 'Yeah!' to us. We introduced ourselves from the verandah, referring to Evan's father, whom Bill remembered. 'Come in. Sit down.' Bill's place was well-appointed; there was a refrigerator and even a TV set, but the wood-stove, all opened up with cigarette packets on top of week-old ashes, was pure bushman's hut. So too were the can of Sunshine Milk, the White Crow bottle with a red scurf of old sauce around the neck and the breakfast-plate with specks of sausage-meat, lines of tomato sauce and the metal handle of the knife sitting in a smear of egg-yolk. Bill looked all his seventy-two years, but he was a magnificent hulk. I thought of Mr Borrow's, 'Oh, he was a great rider, but he was hard on his horses. He was heavy and he didn't spare them at all. They say he finished some of his horses, rode them right into the ground. Out chasing cattle, he used to make 'em go. You'd see him wheeling them out of a gully, roaring at the top of his voice. He soon shifted them alright.'

The Bill we met was barefooted. There was a quarter-inch tip of grey horn on his toe-nails. His feet displayed advanced arthritis. They looked like a free sculptural rendition rather than flesh and bone. The toes splayed in all directions. His fingers had huge knots at the joints. He could never have put his hand flat on a table. He overcame the awkwardness of being with two strangers by getting the photo-albums of the country we were interested in. To do this he had to hoist himself out of the depths of his disintegrating leather chair, reach for his tea-tree stick and go into the other room. The dog followed him, and rubbed against our legs when he came back from the bedroom. We looked at the photos, many of which were outstandingly good, and asked about the pilgrims. How did he like leading a bunch of men so different from himself? 'Oh, they were good blokes,' said Bill, 'out to enjoy themselves.'

Mr Borrow had told us of an incident in the hills on one of these trips. Bill had led the party down to Lake Tarli Karn, but on the way back to their hut, a mist drifted in. Bill ordered the men to keep in sight of each other and on no account to move out of the line. But when they got back to the hut three men were missing. It was dark by now,

but Bill and his bushmen had to go out to look. They searched around for a long time, and eventually found two men. Then they thought they heard a faint answer to their shouts. They moved in that direction and, sure enough, a man was calling out. Mountain mist was still swirling about, but Bill knew exactly where he was. He shouted to the man not to move so much as a foot. Bill hurried up to the man, who was right on the edge of a steep fall, and led him back to the hut

When Mr Borrow told us this story I had already seen the organ-pipe rock-formations on the Gable End and the sheer side of Spion Kop. Seen from Bennison's Spur, with ten miles of lesser hills in between, they were awesome. The thought of a figure crashing down those sides on a misty night had sickened me. Here was Bill now in front of us, gouging in a tobacco-packet with those thick fingers of his. 'Oh, they were never any trouble. We had a cook, gave 'em good tucker. One of us used to go ahead and fix the huts up a bit. They'd just walk along there, start singin' a bit sometimes.' Bill made it sound simple. In Mr Borrow's version, he got the three men back to the fire, let them dry out and have something to eat. When he judged that they were over the shock of their experience, 'Oh, he really did let them have it. He called them for all the silly so-and-sos; oh, he did go to town on them. He really dressed them down. He was hard, but it was a warning to the others. They didn't do what he told them, and it put the other men in danger.'

Bill, of course, had done much more than lead these parties. For many years he had one of the cattle-leases out in the high-plain country. Mr Borrow could tell you the Briagolong men and the runs they used to have, who had the Moroka, who had Wellington, who had Valencia Creek. He himself was very familiar with the valley of the Freestone Creek, where he and his girl, now Mrs Borrow, had often ridden out rounding up cattle. Sometimes parties of men went out on shooting-trips, after the wild cattle. 'Oh, Bill, he knew where all the cattle were. We used to go out to the head of the Freestone to try and shoot them. We found piles of their dung, but we never got the animals. They must have been up one of the gullies, there were gullies leading off everywhere. You'd spend a lifetime finding them.'

With this background, Mr Borrow was very satisfied when his son Clive started to work with Vin Goldsborough. The Goldsboroughs have land at Lindenow, Dargo and elsewhere, but their fame comes from their wide runs on the Dargo High Plains, which have been held by their family since the 1870s. They are the only Gippsland family brought to mind by the book title *Kings in Grass Castles*. This is more from their commanding situation than from anything in their characters, although Mountain Jack Goldsborough has the hauteur and imperious bearing suggested by the expression. The Plains were once very difficult of approach and even today the well-made road through from Dargo to Mount Hotham is impassable once the winter snows start to fall.

The climb out from Dargo is a fitting prelude to the crossing of the Plains. Driving through the town you see houses which were brought down from Grant when this old mining township finally died, back near the turn of the century. The buildings have huge chimneys. A sign declares one road impassable. The grades are steep, the comers sharp. You pray that no timber-jinker is coming down. Round discs on the trees tell the miles from Dargo—ten, eleven, twelve, and still climbing. A sign says 'Spring Hill', you are on the shaded side of the range and the road is wet. The road forks; Mount St Bernard to the right, Grant to the left. At Grant there is nothing but blackberries, broken bottles, untidy clearings, holes, some piping, a shed or two in among the peppermint trees and a remnant of masonry wall, scored by hundreds of initials. 'They took it all in to Dargo' is the standard explanation of the deserted scene, bush-fires perhaps a better one. Nailed on trees are a few signs from the Back to Grant weekend of some years ago. One points into the bush—'Bandicoot Arms Hotel'. In behind the wattle scrub is a grassy clearing, some small exotic trees, flower-beds of a vanished garden. No remnant of building material remains. Another sign on the track points to the Grant cemetery. You walk off the road, seeing nothing but bush. Irregularities under your feet are the first indication, then you catch sight of some cast-iron lacework. It fences in the butt of a huge gum tree. You become aware of other mounds, and huge trees pressing on them.

You go on; wide vistas present fragments of themselves between the young trees lining the road. Here and there someone has cut back this

bush. The clearing at Grant is visible, just an earthen gash in the timber. A distant rocky ridge has flakes of snow adhering to it like an irregular lace. The ridge is deep-blue, the sky a sullen grey. The cattlemen have made rough yards where the road dips into a saddle. Down the steep sides, the bush is dense. Tall woollybutts tower overhead. What would it be like bringing cattle out of here? The Goldsboroughs run their stock on the high-plain grass from December to May, if they are prepared to take the risk of being snowed in. Sometimes they come out earlier; sometimes they leave their exodus until late May and get away with it. Clive Borrow tells me that three times in fifty years they have been caught by snow on April the seventeenth. When the cattle are snowed in they drive them around in a circle until their feet cut through to the grass; then there is something to eat. Or if the drift is not too thick, they walk their horses backwards and forwards, making a track, then they lead the cattle through. In earlier years they tried running sheep on the Plains, but dingoes were too damaging and they no longer bother.

I listen eagerly as Clive tells me this. Right from my first days in Gippsland people have been asking, 'Have you been to the Plains yet?' The Plains have a mystique about them. It seems that the Goldsboroughs are people to know. Unlike almost everyone else in Gippsland, their position seems unassailable. Gippsland is not wealthy enough to have a breed of masterful squatters dividing their time between Royal Shows, work on the property and parties for their daughters at Nine Darling Street. Nor are the Goldsboroughs even faintly like this, but there is the feeling that the quintessential Gippsland activity is their seasonal migration of the cattle. Here, as with Gavin Humble, something of the glamour is rubbed off on seeing the powerful transmitter at Vin Goldsborough's Lindenow property and hearing that he uses it to keep in contact with Castleburn, south of Dargo, and with his run on the Plains. Vin, too, is a modern man; he has been on a world-tour with a party of other farmers, and has a reputation as a scientific fanner. It is claimed that his intensive grazing techniques greatly increase the carrying capacity of his country. All the same, the long drive of cattle to grassy uplands and their return when the cold winds of autumn warn them to go, beautifully combines current practice with pioneering tradition. It is obviously a piece of

practical management, but as a seasonal response to the snow-speckled hills visible even from the coast, it strikes a deeper fancy.

This aura is created around the Goldsboroughs rather than by them. River Jack Goldsborough—to distinguish him from Mountain Jack— is rarely on the Plains these days, but remembers being out looking for sheep in the year that these were tried. A fog settled on the plain and he soon found himself wandering around among the trees, quite lost. There was little chance of the fog lifting before dark and he was some distance from the houses. Then he found his classic solution. He took off his braces and tied one end to his dog's collar. He held the other end and did his best to keep up with the dog without restraining it. Before long, with Jack holding up his trousers, they were out of the timber and on the track again.

Mountain Jack's lost-in-fog story is different. He was out riding in the hills with J. H. Willis, the naturalist, and Professor Cherry. Fog settled. Mountain Jack challenged his distinguished companions to show the way they had to go. Needless to say, they could not. Jack, however, coooeed in several directions and noted his echoes carefully. By judging the timing of their return he was able to gauge the bearing of the ridges that were no longer visible, and thus ride on with certainty. His style of doing things and his choice of company do not make him the most popular man in Dargo. Jack has theories about forest control. He would like to see the Wentworth Valley used as an experimental area in an attempt to bring it back to its original condition—big timber, grass, practically no scrub to act as a fire hazard. Jack led a convoy of Land-Rovers up the Wonnangatta to demonstrate the practicability of an all-weather route across the Divide to Mansfield; Jack can write ballad-style verse, or a fine newspaper article. Jack spoke up at meetings held to post-mortem the big bush-fires of 1965. In a suit, in the main street of Bairnsdale, Jack is instantly noticeable. He carries his weight with a long, uneven stride. His paces are slow and measured. When he stops to look at something, he carries his head back and swivels it to bring his one good eye to bear. When talking to people, he shifts his head into position to stare fixedly at them; they feel they are being gripped by his concentration and often do not like it. In Bairnsdale's Terminus, after a

sale, he may look for someone to talk to beside the Dargo contingent, and may quote poetry in his clear, penetrating voice.

Even with those who dislike him, he compels respect, as his friend J. H. Willis did one day in the Dargo Hotel. The eminent gentleman made the claim that most eucalypts could be recognised by the taste of their leaves alone. He was challenged and offered to demonstrate. A group went out to gather leaves from different species; Willis was blindfolded and leaves were placed in his mouth, one by one. He chewed each one briefly and announced the species, correctly each time. Someone—'of the sort that would be called a "wag",' Jack said—offered to get one more. 'He picked from the verandah a small piece of dog shit and put it on Willis's tongue. Willis tasted it, reflected and announced, "That ... is *Eucalyptus dogwood*."'

The Dargo Hotel, where this occurred, follows its own laws, or rather, the whims of Mr George O'Day, the publican. He opens and closes the bar when he feels like it. Twenty years after the event, Dargo people still talked about the enormity of the Stratford police raiding the hotel and demanding to know why it was not shut at six o'clock. It was far more likely to start serving at that time than to close, as a friend and I discovered when we called in at five minutes to six and were forced to wait. Also waiting, squatting on his haunches in the late afternoon sun, was Jack, and it was that evening that I came to appreciate his excellence as a conversationalist. Some months later, on a return trip, I was challenged by a surly publican and reminded of my praises of Jack. 'You said he was a very original and learned gentleman, didn't you? Well, we don't like the bastard.' Mr O'Day's flat uncooled beer tasted even worse after that sally.

Mountain Jack's unpopularity is more than a matter of his imperious manner. ('Well, I'll take one more of your cigarettes and then I'll have to pack you off. I've got to get this paddock finished.') It goes deep into the way Gippslanders think about themselves. Jack acts as if he is on top of his situation, and this goes down badly because hardly anyone else in Gippsland thinks in this way. There are few wealthy men in Gippsland and fewer still who are accustomed to a leisured, influential life. The pattern of a handful of well-established families running a town or district

does not occur. It is a region full of small men taking what governments give them, many of them employed by government agencies. Bairnsdale's shop-keepers say rain makes business, rain brings the farmers in to spend, but their bread and butter also comes from the pay-packets sent into the town for the teachers, post-office and railway-workers, police, and the CRB and SEC men. This, of course, is a State-wide pattern, but in a country town it means that most major decisions affecting the town's future are made in the distant metropolis. The State system, spidering out from Melbourne like the roads and railways on the map, has caught up with the frontier. Bairnsdale and the outlying towns beyond it no longer feel they have the making of their own future. Perhaps they never did; the frontier age was a period doomed to be short. It is quite touching today to read of the nineteenth-century rivalry between Bairnsdale and Sale. The two towns were like brothers competing for school marks, unaware that their efforts took place in a larger world. Sale crowed at getting the railway ten years before Bairnsdale, but then Bairnsdale's gas-works, finished in 1889, was bigger than Sale's, and better; and wasn't Bairnsdale having rather the better of the football exchanges between the two towns? Reading today about matches with two or three goals scored on either side and the boundary marked by a single plough furrow, it is hard to take this rivalry seriously, and it no longer matters now; radio, TV, airlines, fast cars ... the frontier is no longer isolated.

This is regularly hymned as progress, in the Bairnsdale Advertiser, as elsewhere, but there is no doubt that something has been lost. 'Never glad confident morning again!'; Browning's words could fit many a remote village. Think of Bullumwaal, sitting on the western side of Boggy Creek, just above the untidy flat. Manna gums grow on the flat, the bush pushes up behind the scattered houses, some very old, others made to be carried in halves on a truck. Goats roam about and there are vegetable-patches. A wood-stove, doorless, serves as a mail-box for one well-painted cottage. North of the town, a mile along the Tabberabbera road, a new bark hut has been erected. There is a cradle, a clay-stained shovel, and diggings. Further up the same creek are the rotting remnants of a big overhead flume, made to bring water to a rusting battery. Tail-races divert the creek away from the workings. Ferns and blackberries

grow in the rock that has fallen over the openings of the miners' drives. On top of the hill are huge holes, broken-down brick chimneys, and rusty steam-boilers. There are more relics further out in the hills on the way to Tabberabbera and on the Nicholson. Old pictures show lines of new weatherboard cottages, carriages moving along, and the photographer's lettering declares, 'Bullumwaal Main Street'. The hall of that period still stands, though nearly all its boyhood companions are gone. It looks perpetually damp and, though sound, it seems to have relaxed. The wooden forms inside dispute with the Great War Honour Roll for the title of most recent addition. The little stage - piano, room for eight people – is masked by a painted curtain. In the centre oval is a lake scene with pine trees, a boat and cattle drinking. Surrounding this pastorale are local advertisements for the Shoemaker and Repairer (water-tights 16s.), for J. R. Bishop, Baker and Pastrycook, and for H. Payne's Main Hotel, Bairnsdale (office of the Bullumwaal coach; beds 1s., meals 1s., night porter kept). W. Minter is advertised as a Blacksmith and the Clements Bros, as Bakers and General Storekeepers. And painted on the lake is an heraldic shield, flanked by an emu looking backwards and a kangaroo glancing awkwardly over his shoulder, their feet placed on a riband that entreats ADVANCE BULLUMWAAL.

Brave days, laughable in the case of Bullumwaal's cock-sparrow pretensions, still impressive in the persisting colonial grandeur of the best buildings of Ballarat and Bendigo. Even Melbourne has its debt to the building confidence of the goldrush days, but in Gippsland, though there were mines enough, the lasting effect has been slight. In Omeo the main-street shops and bitumen still struggle to follow the lines of a mining village, but none of the buildings, apart from the famous log jail, date back to those days. The 1939 fires wiped out much of the old Omeo, including the three-storeyed, lacework-ornamented Golden Age Hotel which dated, like many of Gippsland's hotels, from the boom days a decade before the nineteenth century ended. Bairnsdale has its Imperial, its Albion (Sale had a Caledonian Society and Bairnsdale a Hibernian Racing Club, to complete the tribute to the British Isles). Others are the Club, the Terminus, the Orient. The two-storey part of Bruthen's Star Hotel and Sale's grand Criterion were also erected in the same short

years of confidence. We have to come right forward to the rash of petrol-stations and motels of the 'fifties and 'sixties to find an equivalent change in the town's appearance. Even these have not changed the predominantly single-storey nature of a town like Bairnsdale and the pubs are still impressive guardians of the corner-sites, castles of the common man, fortresses against loneliness and the exigencies of the economic system that built them, and until recently sanctums of a peculiarly Australian type of masculinity. Look in to the Albion, Bairnsdale's perfect hybrid.

From 1889 until 1967 this hotel was Bairnsdale's only three-storey building, and an ornament to any town. Seven years before the new State Government Offices building topped it in height, the beautifully-proportioned wooden verandah and its delicate lacework were stripped off the building. The cast-iron decoration, made in Bairnsdale at Alexander's foundry, went off to be incorporated in the fence of a house overlooking Newlands Backwater and the lakes, and to the patio of the Dingley Dell farmhouse south-west of Bairnsdale. The white coat reflecting the afternoon sun gave way to a clay-coloured rough-cast cement. The hotel sits there sullenly, exposed, no longer allowed to put on a face for the world. The old lath- and plaster-lined weatherboard annexe which contained the dining-room came down, when ten o'clock closing changed the drinking habits, in favour of a new lounge made of bricks which are too close or not close enough to the colour of the cement rendering on the main building. At night, the illuminated 'Foster's Lager' catches your eye before the sign 'Lounge'. Aesthetically, the once-beautiful hotel is now a horror, but the service inside is the best in Bairnsdale—Jock Tolley sees to this—and Mrs Tolley's counter-lunches are unsurpassed in Gippsland. Workmen in blue-flannel singlets take Mrs Tolley's savoury-mince roll, crumbed-cutlets or egg-and-bacon pie to the waist-high shelves around the walls. The plumber's labourer holds his knife with the handle poking between thumb and forefinger and the barman clacks the plastic pepper-and-salt shakers together as he picks them up in one hand to take them further down the bar. The door of the lounge is constantly open as shop-girls, bank-clerks, tourists, insurance-agents and families in for shopping press into the lounge in hopes of finding a table.

A little unframed blackboard stands outside declaring the menu, but a greater enticement is the delicious smell drifting out. To stand on the corner opposite the Albion as noon approaches is to encounter one of those subtle markers of the day's progress which every town possesses. The first of the day is the revving of Maxwell's milk-truck as one of the Donovans slews it around the corner. Consciousness is momentarily gained and blissfully let go again as he clinks the full bottles together or jingles the crates with the empties. The working-day actually begins when the whistle at Jamieson & Blackett's mill blows a few seconds after the eight o'clock time-signal on the radio. Traffic is still quiet then, there is dew on the racecourse, the racehorses' morning run is over and they are back being stabled. The fog in the Mitchell Valley begins to lift and the TV antennas to sparkle as the sun takes over the day. From far down in the town the whistle gives a breathy hoot to mark the first of the day's public hours.-It will blow again at twelve, at one and at five, but then it will be as normal as the work it directs. The day's ageing is more subtly marked. On warm days there is the moment when the cool breeze back off Lake King replaces the south-westerly that dropped without your noticing. About a quarter-past-one there is the plangent sound of the Gippslander hooting its way through the last few railway-crossings out west of the town. Trucks keeping pace with it stop in front of the flashing red lights and urgent ding-ding of the warning bell. Drinkers in the vanished BRC Hotel used to glance over their shoulders to see the iron wheels turning lightly as a cartoonist's train's as the carriages rolled through the grassland, the driver throttling back and the heavy train coasting down to Bairnsdale station. The influx of buses is another sign that the day sees its time going, and the sign outside the station—ROAD MOTOR SERVICES depart from here at 1.30 p.m. (Sundays excepted) for Lakes Entrance, Orbost, Nowa Nowa, Buchan, Bruthen, Ensay, Swifts Creek, Omeo and Paynesville—is an indication that Bairnsdale is a half-way town, an entrepot, a depot shared by Melbourne and the outlying townships. At ten-past-two the train will head back again and it is sad when people you know are on board, to hear the distant hooting and to know that your friends are staring out the windows while the great landmarks on the skyline are dropping back behind them.

In the goods-shed at the station there will be a flurry as the carriers load their trucks and make their deliveries. Bairnsdale Carrying Service will soon be around with the niners of beer, hauling up the cellar covers in the foot-paths, lifting the empties and lowering the full ones by their loops and ropes. This too has its regularity, like Laurie Potts nudging barrels from the cellarless Albion's backyard, along the foot-path to the corner door. He gives the barrel a last push with his foot, collars it before it can head for the gutter, and angles it up the step. This means ten-to-ten on Saturday morning, but it can be at any other time according to the consumption, so this little routine of replenishment does not have the unbidden grace of the noon-time aroma from Mrs Tolley's kitchen. This is pure bonus, an unexpected delight no matter how often sensed. There are steak, fish, sausages, curry and rice; common enough, but the hotel dishes have a different savour from the same things cooked in homes, cafes and restaurants. Here is the perfect cross between modern service and the old family hotel.

The women who bring in the dinners on aluminium trays with spare change spread in one corner are all of a type; untemperamental, working-class, forty-five, cheeky with people they know but not flirtatious. They often have red hair and a matching complexion and to the last one they are fast and efficient. Their blue smocks seem to refer back to the days when the Albion had an island bar with three narrow little rooms opening on to it. All were concrete-floored for fast cleaning and only the presence of a few framed photos of North Melbourne's star footballers proclaimed which was to be regarded as the lounge. The new lounge has green vinyl chairs with gilt ferrules on the black legs. The laminex-top tables are dotted with paper-coasters from the gin and whisky firms. The carpet, drapes and wallpaper are expensive, but when Laurie Potts comes to empty the ashtrays he still reaches through the beers with a cheery crack at the drinkers, bangs the glass ashtray on the grey smokers receptacle he has just picked off the floor, pokes the tray through the swirl of smoke in the air and goes on to the next table. Soon he will be hack behind the lounge bar, a portly figure prone to sweat when he hurries—and he is a fast barman and does not spare himself. He wears a clip-on black bow-tie on an ordinary white shirt. When it

is time for his lunch, his relief comes from behind the bar doing up his top button, Laurie whips off the bow-tie and hands it over. The relief assumes the tie and a professional expression, Laurie walks out dabbing inside the neck of his shirt, and the beers are poured without interruption.

There are cocktail mixtures aplenty lined up on the bar, a plastic barrel of ice, a saucer full of orange and lemon slices and a glass full of swizzle-sticks, for this is a ten o'clock closing, mixed-drinking lounge with expensive ugly table-lamps and the unspeakable prints of blue-faced gold-jacketed Asian beauties who look like the mistresses of comic-strip Hong Kong gangsters. Yet the drapes and carpets do their work, and the lounge is Bairnsdale's best place to drink on a warm summer night. In the main bar during the afternoon, with two or three of the town's more brutalised drunks arguing about the races, the atmosphere is still one of inner-suburban crudity, despite the decor. But Jock Tolley is undisputed master of his pub and the noisiest sessions are still made up of solid, experienced drinkers who don't overflow from the bar any further than the first two tables. Laurie Potts surveying the lounge from his plywood-faced bar may represent a rather provincial brand of sophistication, but then one thinks of other things—football club-rooms awash with beer, town lavatories reeking of unflushed urine and charcoaled from floor to ceiling with obscene drawings, fish-and-chip shops known to the locals by some name like 'The Greasy Spoon'—and there is a heart-felt relief on seeing Laurie dipping in the refrigerator for his white table-wines. Besides, like the Eternity man's sign, he provides his own corrective. There is no cellar, you remember. The niners are pushed through from the backyard and often enough Laurie leaves the four-foot-high double doors open. Under the wines and liqueurs, under the black-and-gilt wallpaper, behind the three beer-barrels, is the sun-blasted backyard with its dirt and wood chips, and perhaps a few coke-bags or the wheel of a trailer peeping into view.

A quarter of a mile away, and like the Albion set back a block from Main Street, is the Terminus. For years it lagged as far behind modern hostelry as the licensing inspectors allowed. The ill-lit toilet was away across the backyard. In winter time, if the globe was out, you found your

way in in the dark. If someone had been sick in there and one of the two Mrs Dooleys wanted to know who it was, she would ask around 'discreetly', 'Er, you didn't go across the yard then, did you?' But the Terminus was efficient, too, in its own way. Every hour or so there was a whirr and powerful refrigerators throbbed underfoot in the cellar. When a barrel had to be changed, Jack Dooley disappeared. A few minutes later the floor of the bar heaved up and Jack came up the ladder. If you caught his eye, he glared at you like Mephistopheles preferring to enter unobserved. If you kept watching him, you might see him empty the dregs of Scotch into a newly-opened bottle, regardless of brands. He kept a weather-eye on the till, possibly because his brother Mike was likely to stand by it scratching his head, then suddenly dive into the cigarette cupboard underneath for the roll of notes he was looking for. Mike was the wayward one who got the fun out of fishing. It was Mike who used to say, 'Oh bugger it,' and upend the brandy bottle to give you an extra half-measure. It was also Mike who made up for this by grabbing some of the spare change on the bar when he felt he had been generous enough for one day. It was Mike's boy, Little Doodles, who rode his tricycle around and around the series of bars, stared up when legs blocked his progress and stated flatly, 'Beep beep.'

If the legs belonged to Collie, Ab Collinson, the giant blacksmith, Little Doodles was called upon to produce his licence, or was accused of speeding. Little Doodles never answered him, but pushed through to where Dimsie, the slaughterman, Shieldsy, the horse-trainer, and the Hurley brothers, Tim, Nick and Leo, were in their regular places under the fishing cartoon cut out from Post and taped to the panelling. The little tricyclist would ride through there and past the lounge where his mother and a few friends used to sit over a beer, the lounge with the semi-competent oil paintings, the room where Oswald Harris came in with a shotgun and killed his wife's lover sitting beside her.

Harris himself, out after two years, would very likely be in the next bar the child entered. This was the one where for years the Terminus's Chloe hung above the advertisements that surrounded the open fireplace. The little billiard-table stood here, along with the sheep- and cattle-sale posters and the bills listing the events at the next meeting of

the Bairnsdale Racing Club. Some of the railways' men drank here—Mr Rogers in his black hat and his black waistcoat over his blue shirt. Alec Chatfield might accost you here, saying, 'This is gonna cost you two bob,' writing your name on a ticket while the words were still on his tongue. He would pocket your coin and say, 'Come on, Jack, two bob.' While Jack fumbled in his pocket, Alec might explain, 'It's a turkey, aid of the footy club. Drawn this arvo, after the match.' As Alec moved on, Jack might murmur, 'Last I'll see of that, or the footy club either.'

Alec's next call would be the main bar, frequented by drovers, and the stock-and-station agents. Bairnsdale is a town without headmen, without established leadership. The Council is seen as a group of functionaries, Rotary for all its pretensions impresses only itself, and the Gentlemen's Club could hardly be called exclusive. It is more likely to be recruiting members than picking them over. This group in the Terminus is the solidest body in the town, a hard core of traditional jobs and values. When three Greek brothers flew into a temper and shrieked abuse at each other, with a knife being pulled, Jack Dooley and Jack O'Reilly just glared over the bar at them while some of Collie's workmen held them apart. The old-style Australianness of the Terminus men was such that they chuckled at the wild-eyed trio. Nick Hurley commented, 'Gettin' stirred up a bit, ain't they?' and later, 'They seem to be mates again now, anyhow.'

Nick is a Springton man, of a Springton family. He has been too far and seen too much to let three excitable Europeans upset him. His marriage broke up years ago, so that when you are talking to him it will be in one of Gippsland's pubs—or Western Australia's, or Queensland's, or Tasmania's, if you travel that far afield—or else in the lounge at his brother Tim's place. Nick has a hard voice, but there is little harshness apparent when he talks about his time as a prisoner-of-war of the Japanese. 'They put me in the death-house twice. Oh, it was just a shed with a lot of bags for the walls, not really a building, just a lot of bunks stacked on top of one another. If they reckoned it was no good keepin' you in the camp hospital, you were finished, they stuck you over there

to let you peg out. They stuck me in there twice, but I come good. I didn't like bein' in there.' And there was his story about a truck-load of prisoners getting caught in an ambush. A number of men were shot and collapsed on top of the others. The Korean guards panicked at the thought that some of the prisoners might take the chance to get away, and they started to shoot into their prisoners, dead and alive. Nick was lucky. 'I was right at the bottom and I had a fella right on top of me. They never seen me. I thought I better stay where I was till they got a bit of sense into 'em.'

Of the thousand and more who entered the POW camp Nick was one of the tiny band who came out alive, yet he discussed the Japanese with the same easy balance he would bring to talking about a few bets on the TAB. 'There was a few of the Nips reckoned they'd make some grog. Poisonous stuff it was, too. I suppose you'd call it rice wine. They got a lot of rice and water in an old bath. They got it fermenting somehow, I suppose they got some yeast, and when they had it all bubblin' and brewin' nicely they all sat around it in a circle with a little cup, a bit like them ramekins you get at Woolworths. One of 'em'd dip it in, and he'd have a sip and he'd hand it on to the next fella. By the time they'd been around a couple of times they were passin' out like flies. You'd see a fella have a sip and then he'd go back on his nut and miss a turn or two. The fellas that were sittin' up'd just pass it over the fellas that had flaked out. Made 'em silly. They left their guns lyin' around, they sung out to some of our fellas to come and have some, but they weren't gonna be in it. They reckoned it was sake, but I never felt like any.' Nick flashed a big smile. 'Very potent brew.'

Nick glanced at the Channel 9 dancers on the TV for half a minute or so before adding a postscript. 'We coulda knocked any of 'em off real easy, but it wouldn't been worth it.' I asked a question as he rounded off, to see if there was some residual bitterness to be expressed. Nick merely recapitulated, "They'd sit up after a bit and join in for a round or two then whoompl Down he'd go again. Very potent brew alright.' He didn't cultivate an artificial detachment, however. It was something of an effort for him to hint at what he'd seen when the Australians captured a post where the Japanese had been cut off for some time without supplies. 'Oh,

it'd turn you up. They were just ... cannibals ... they'd been cutting slices off these fellas ... like, that's their own men. Very nasty.' The only time I saw the bland Nick ruffled was when Tim's TV set showed the Japanese Prime Minister laying a wreath at the Canberra Memorial to Australia's war dead. Nick was inarticulate and furious. What he was looking at was wrong, though for everyone else in the room this was the beginning of an inevitable reconciliation of the two nations. Japanese transistors and cameras were already obliterating the reputation for trashy goods which underlay the saying of Nick's generation, 'He must have a Japanese bladder.' At Montgomery, a few miles from Sale, the first Gippsland agency for Japanese cars proclaimed itself as Tokyo Motors. Unthinkable in wartime, the name was readily accepted in the climate of the 'sixties when 'international' was a word dripping with prestige. Here, then, were the major experiences of Nick's life being robbed of their meaning.

On another occasion, it was an inept question of mine which painfully brought home to Nick the rush of time. I had been telling the Hurley family of my exploration of remote bush tracks near and beyond Mount Baldhead and of a strange house I had found, all on its own at the edge of the bush. To my surprise, they knew the house very well. It was the last survivor of the old Springton where they lived as children, and it was the dwelling-place of Nelly Wainwright, a name which was soon to take on a legendary significance from their tales. Nick accepted my invitation to make the trip again and he was a fountain of fact and lore as we drove out into the hills. Not all of it was old. At one point he called for a stop, a few yards past a disused timber-cutter's hut which had 'Carlton Club' scrawled in charcoal on the door. The seepage of a little spring kept one part of the table-drain full of cold water. Nick lifted a piece of bark out of this pool and uncovered two cans of beer. We must have been thirty miles from Bairnsdale; if I had been put down a hundred yards from the road I doubt if I would ever have got home; it was years since Nick had been anywhere near the place, but he had heard Fred Prowse, the bush boss of Jamieson and Blackett's mill, talking about this spot and he knew where it must be.

Nick quietly sipped his way through one of the cold cans, then brought two hot ones from the back of the car. He put these in the

cold spring water and helped himself to the other cold one. As we drove away I marvelled at the correctness of the cache having two cans. More than two might have been dangerous for the driver of a timber-jinker; one would have been parsimonious. I was brushing against the fringes of the experience and ways of the timber-men, by which they coped with these endless lines of hills and the huge trees they felled. Standing deep in the bush, the source seemed more than the end, the forest more than the houses, yet the men who understood the forest best were there to chop it down. Nick's brother Tim had told me how Fred Prowse could stand on a ridge and tell by the leaf-colour and the habit of the trees which species would be growing on the next ridge. 'Anything you want to know about that country, Fred can tell you,' Tim said. 'Fred's been all over it, everywhere, on foot, looking at the timber.' Although I regretted the exploitation of these overwhelming forests, the timber industry did at least give rise to the fascinating huts scattered about the hills.

Nick and I inspected the one at Mount Seldom Seen. 'Used to be a pub here,' said Nick, and set himself going on the pub and the people who ran it. Nick had a good memory for detail. The most lyrical outpouring I ever heard was Nick's on the subject of their old dog Betsy that the Hurleys had had at Springton. Nick had drunk enough one night to be single-minded in his recreating of the dog's ways, fights, pups, its affection for them and its death. For minutes he held the floor, no one breaking into the long silences, remembering his childhood participation in the life of the family dog. At Seldom Seen, though he said little, the hut seemed to set him on a similar train of thought. Seven miles further on, he called another halt as we came near the spot where a tiny stream flowed under the road. Dense blackberries prevented any sight of the water and obscured the edge of the little bridge. 'This is what we used to call the White Bridge,' Nick said, and described how he and his brothers used to ride up here as children, and how the wattles used to bow under the weight of winter snow and block the track. I looked about. I only saw a clearing and a tumbledown hut. I did not know that the creek was the Wentworth, that a mile downstream was the place where the legendary Giles Wainwright lived, nor that the water underfoot flowed from the crown of Mount Baldhead. In my innocence,

asking the obvious question, it was hidden from me that the red-haired Wainwright and the bald peak presiding over his country were to grow large in my mind and loom over all other impressions Gippsland had to present. 'What's that hut, Nick; what was that?'

It was a sorry heap of weatherboards and rusting corrugated-iron, leaning almost to the ground, just holding itself together with the help of twining blackberries. Its broken windows were like blind eyes. Nick said, 'I don't know. It wasn't there when we were kids. It's been put up since.' I looked at the mildewed boards and at Nick, who seemed much affected. After some thought, he went on, 'It's thirty-five years since I was here. It makes a man feel old.' We were very subdued as we drove away from the hut. I remembered Macbeth's reference to Satan as 'the common enemy of man' and thought that time and decay better merited the title. Till then, I had seen the bush as the place of a static beauty to be grasped when afternoon light and a quiet mind gave rise to a mood of union. Now, through my gauche question and Nick's answer, the worm was in. All things aged, life worked on you even while you looked at it; history was pain, time a robber. Beauty was no longer the source of Oh! and Ah! but was the spring of poignancy.

Months later it was my privilege to make the same trip with three Bairnsdale-dwelling Hurleys—Tim, Nick and Leo. This was a day which reached great heights with our rediscovery of the long-deserted Wainwright property, cleared at the turn of the century and abandoned a few months after the disappearance of the red-haired Giles.

To begin with, the old Springton had also to be rediscovered and this was not easy. On the day we saw the ruined hut, Nick and I drove through Springton without him recognising his birth-place. This gave rise to a certain amount of indignant setting-the-record straight on Tim's part. He'd know it straight away, he was older than Nick when they left. Yet even with the three Hurleys on board we were into the cleared country before the brothers realised that we had gone too far. We stopped while they lined up a road, fences, a certain bare hill and other landmarks of doubtful age. It was Nelly Wainwright's isolated cottage that finally gave it to them and we went back on our tracks a little way. We stopped where the road ran beside a tiny flat. In the bush on

the other side of the thin clearing a grey weatherboard lavatory could be discerned. The brothers felt sure that this was it. We pushed our way up a few feet, through regrowth box trees and even thinner saplings. The ground we walked on was covered with dry leaves and a few tufts of grass. Our feet found the evenness of a footpad, many years older than the saplings growing out of it. 'That's it,' said Tim. "That's our track from the house to the school. That'd be right. The school was just up there. Old Tommy Johnny Gleeson. Remember the goats?'

His brothers could remember them well. Tommy Johnny Gleeson, the schoolmaster, was old and his main interest was in the goats he kept tethered around the schoolhouse. In winter, when the snow fell as low as Springton, the goats sheltered under the floor of the schoolhouse which was built on a sloping hillside. 'Aw, the ground was thick with their droppings,' Tim said, 'all in under the school. Hoh, it did get high.' It wasn't made clear who looked after the goats when Mr Gleeson was away. The teacher divided his time between his three schools. One was at Dawson City, deep in the valley of the Haunted Stream as it ran away from the Roman nose of Mount Baldhead. It was a tiny mining settlement, finally abandoned at about the time the First World War broke out. Nick dimly remembered that the very last building left standing was an old shed half full of musty hay, 'but that was years after everyone had left.' When Tim and I found it, in 1961, there were no buildings, and precious little else. We travelled out on a road quite new to both of us, took our bearings off Mount Baldhead ('There's His Majesty,' Tim announced, when we saw it.) and plunged down into the two-thousand-feet-deep valley. All we found were a few pipes and remnants of the big pump that brought water from the stream to the battery. The battery was gone, all the equipment was gone. There were a few rusted pieces of iron and one tiny rectangle of levelled ground, just a few square feet in area. Tim studied this thoughtfully and told me, 'That's where my sister used to live.' It was strange to stand by a blackberry-hedged stream at a place no longer named on the maps, and to feel dimensions of my friend's life stretching back into this remote mountain valley.

We left Dawson City chased by claps of thunder rolling and rebounding up and down the valley sides. Fifty years before us Tommy

Johnny Gleeson used to walk up the other side of the valley, over the big Angora Range and down to his charges in Springton, whom he saw one week in three. The Hurleys had tales about putting a dead snake in his drawer, but the only thing he taught them which had stuck in Tim's mind was the botanical name for yellow box. 'Eucalyptus melli-o-dora, yellow box, I can always remember him teaching us that. He told us a lot of others, but I forget them now.' T. J. Gleeson's first two schools were only five miles apart, but the range in between was steep. On the day we made the trip together Leo pointed off the side of the road as we were winding around behind Mount Baldhead. 'That's where we went when we took the battery down into Dawson City,' he said. 'It was pretty steep. We had the team pulling it along on a sort of trolley, but there were parts where you couldn't do that. We had to put it on a sort of sledge and have wires going back up the slope to different trees. Then we'd let go the wires a few feet and gradually lower it down. It took a couple of days to get down. Then after a few years they took it out.'

It seemed crude to drive, even slowly, over ground which Leo had crossed with so much effort in the long-gone mining days. The lonely road was full of landmarks for Leo. 'You used to turn down that gully if you wanted to get to the King Cassilis.' Other spots reminded him of the Pheasant and the Silver King. There was a good deal of discussion about a tree called Tom Thumb, and then we came on a huge hole in the ground, just over the edge of the road. A few charred roots rose up to a vanished butt. 'Biggest tree in the whole area,' Jack said, 'bigger than the one at Wainwright's. It was all hollow at the bottom. Fellas with teams'd hop in there if it was raining. Oh, they'd light a fire in there, cook 'emselves something. You might get a few of 'em in there, just sittin' around till it fined up.' His brothers remembered Tom Thumb ('Oh, it was like a little house inside.') but not how it came to be burnt down. Travelling with the three brothers, the area took on another dimension. They mentioned how T. J. Gleeson used to set off on foot for Livingstone, his third school, twenty miles away from Springton. 'Oh, he might get a ride on a cart or a waggon. You'd see him there with his legs danglin' over the back, glarin' at all the kids. Or he might have to walk all the way. It never done him any harm.'

On the day of our visit, Tommy Johnny's school was no longer to be seen. There was, however, a pine tree rising over all the young gum trees. Leo gazed mildly up the hill and told us, 'I planted that. Old Tommy Johnny got me to plant it just by the gate.' It was now the biggest tree on the slope. The three brothers worked their way down the footpad which they had made as children, keeping an eye on the pine tree for their bearings. Dead leaves crackled under their leather shoes, then they found the spot. It was marked by another exotic planting, a little clump of snowdrops. Tim reminded his brothers that these used to be just by the back-door step. The footpad confirmed this by running right up to the flowers. The three men looked down and tried to work out who had planted the flowers; they decided that it must have been their mother rather than one of their sisters. The house where Mrs Hurley kept the Springton post-office and brought up her children was gone with no trace, gone with the fires that were her answer to the winter snow, and the fires that she kept going till late at night, every Tuesday, when she baked the week's supply of bread in her big camp-oven. On the old Springton site there were not even the mounds of chimney stones lingering among the dogwood scrub that commonly hides former mining settlements. Most of the buildings had been hauled away, some to the 'new' Springton, a collection of farms still over-shadowed by the hills but just those two or three reassuring miles closer to the Tambo River settlements.

At the 'new' Springton, on the same day, we met Mrs McNamara, a tall thin old woman, steadily going blind, who possessed a Dame Mary Gilmore type of dignity. Her house—one thought of it as hers despite the presence of Old Teddy—was an assemblage of 'old' Springton buildings. Mrs McNamara was in the habit of pressing mud between the boards to stop the cracks. She was delighted to see the Hurleys and to remind them of some of the incidents of their boyhood—how Nick wanted to ride the bucking pony, so Mrs McNamara put her hand over one of its eyes; the other eye was blind, so Nick was able to get on; how Tim caught a kangaroo in old Lucas's fence, and it pulled a chain of his fence down trying to get away ... Mrs McNamara spoke of her children,

including two of her daughters, Bridget and Theresa, one a nun, the other, unfortunately to Mrs McNamara's mind, not.

The Hurleys had also been brought up in the Catholic faith. Leo still went to Mass, but Nick was a renegade and so too was Tim, though he would admit, 'If you get the old priest on your door, puttin' the bite on you, it's a bit hard to knock 'im back. You usually finish up puttin' your hand in your pocket.' It was harder for Tim, because he lived just across the street from the residence of Monsignor and his priests, and his brother Len was gardener and general handyman around the church and parish buildings. Every Wednesday night, as regular as clockwork, Len came over to spend the evening at Tim's and every Wednesday night, while the Hurley's dog Patch was alive, Len was greeted with loud barking. Each week, no matter how quietly Len approached, the dog set up its clamour and on each and every occasion some joking reference was made to the dog's never getting used to Len. That it should be so is typical of Tim and his household. Both Tim and Rosa, his wife, are village people—town, if you prefer to call Bairnsdale that, which is not to call them parochial, for both, especially Rosa, are quite capable of forming balanced opinions on people and events in the larger world. They do, however, put people in front of trends, doctrines, -ologies, -isms and all the other mind-confusing abstractions, and people are what they have learned of human nature in the living of a normal life based on 61 (59 until the Council renumbered the streets) Barrett Street, Bairnsdale.

If you draw up outside, as likely as not you will see a bicycle, or else a well-worn Standard Ten. Tim's other vehicle, the first car of his life, bought when he was in his mid-fifties, is an Anglia utility, least sophisticated of all post-war motor vehicles. On a workday morning Tim goes out to the back lane in his paint-splattered overalls and sees if his vehicle will start. If he is in luck, the tiny canvas-roofed garage in the dead-end lane is filled with the brrrerrr of tappets and a cloud of blue smoke. His sons Robin and Victor used to delight in the way this filled cats and dogs with terror and aroused the neighbours' poultry. When the mornings are cold Tim starts the Anglia a couple of times 'just to make sure' before going inside to have his breakfast.

The mysteries of registering a car and filling in insurance forms were too daunting for Tim for the first few years and he used to get his friend George Banks to do it for him. George had shares in a garage and ran a truck line that carried timber for one of the Tambo Valley mills. I fancy it did not raise Tim's standing in George's eyes when he used to rummage around among the wads of papers in the combination glasses cabinet and bureau in the little front lounge and finally produce last year's papers instead of the current ones. George knew his trucks, commerce and businessmen and moved easily among them, and Tim's meek way of never claiming more than a thin slice of this world's goods must often have seemed too small-scale for a rewarding friendship. George in his waterproof cap and jacket, off in his big new Chevrolet to play golf, was a far cry from Tim's Saturday afternoon, stretched out on Victor's bed with a transistor and the Sun racing-guide, shoes off, tie loose, having a snooze between races.

Their wives were much closer. Most days of the week you would see Jean Banks's little two-tone car parked under the elm in the middle of the street. Here again, there was a world of difference; leaning against the wall of the little skillion which squeezed in kitchen, bathroom and the boys' bedroom would be Rosa's transport, a lady's bike which she rode with cautious dignity when she went down to do her shopping. Moments after getting home she had the basket emptied and the meat and groceries all put away, the kettle on, the dining-room swept and a cigarette lit. In Jean's lifetime the two women used to make this room their regular rendezvous. Towards the middle of the afternoon they would sit, Jean in the chair next to the refrigerator, Rosa near the window so she was aware of who moved up and down the path at the side of the house, tea by their elbows, cake between them, kettle on the slow-combustion stove, knees together for Jean, legs crossed for Rosa, quietly smoking and chattering. In voices quiet but lively (Rosa), husky and lively (Jean), they spoke of ironing school uniforms, the incidents and accidents of the previous weekend, altered times for the buses and trains and what the sergeant said to the constable who was in the accident. Each was deeply aware of what the other thought on the important things and their conversations were full of oblique but sufficient

references; 'Mind you, I think there was a bit more in it than that,' or 'No, well, he kept that very quiet, the old lady was still alive then.' They had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the longstanding Bairnsdale families and kept a good tab on the transfers and new arrivals among the town's policemen, teachers, bank-officials and doctors.

Length of stay is the major class distinction of Bairnsdale. True, there is a wide gap between the Housing Commission homes, identical in being different, and the doctors' homes, perched on vantage-points around the town. And Gerard Fearnley, the dentist, driving over the Alps to return with a Land-Rover full of vineyard-bought wines is a far cry from Wally Hicks sidling out of the post-office when the mail is sorted for a few mid-morning beers at the Commercial. Still, Doctor Wanless—astringent, abrupt with some, charming to others. ('After all, you do need a twenty-square house if you want to live, and I could have twenty squares, but [smile] I'd have to give up grog.')—Doctor Wanless fronts up to the same counter in Edgar Jensen's licensed grocery as Pineapple, the town drunk. Both play out their lives before the same people, both are judged and valued in the same public opinion. Each, of course, gets his due; Doctor Wanless's preferences are mentioned to wine buyers with hushed respect, whereas Pineapple has to stand humbly to one side while there are other customers in the shop. Once when Edgar and a customer were carrying on a between-connoisseurs line of dialogue, Pineapple delighted me by holding out a cheap Orlando port and saying, 'This is a good wine.' Edgar was jovially condescending in ignoring this, chatted the customer out of the shop, then turned to Pineapple with a brisk, 'Now.'

All the same, Bairnsdale opinion had a place for Pineapple, for all that he was last and lowest. Once again, it was Tim who told me most of what I knew. Tim is a painter. He works for himself, without any helpers, which means that the big jobs, like the new State Public Offices or the Albion Hotel, go to one of the teams of German painters, such as Rudy Hollenberg's highly-expert crew. Tim is content to pick up Public Works Department jobs (They're slow in paying, but you know you'll get it.') or to paint the hundreds of humbler weatherboard homes of the town. He is used to picking his way over skillion roofs weighted down

with axles or rusty pieces of forgotten farm machines. He is used to little annexes covered with painted malthoid, or to decaying gutters hanging by a piece of wire from a nail. He knows just when to touch with his brush and when to leave well alone.

He is also very astute at finding out how people live with a minimum of questions asked. It was when he was working for Pineapple's sister that he found out about the old toilet being used as a bedroom. This was the haven to which Pineapple and his drinking-partner, Sympathy, returned every night. Pineapple and Sympathy, also known as Pineapple and Strawberry, were a town institution. They could regularly be seen about the town, their faces ominously flushed under the grey scurf of four days' growth. Schoolboys used to delight in coming on them under a huge peppercorn tree down by the river, where they would sit in the shade on a summer's day, still wearing their dirty, dun-coloured gabardine overcoats, and working their way through the bottles of cheap wine in their sugar-bags. The boys used to offer them rides on their bikes. Neither could ride, but both were willing to have a try. It was a common sight to see lines of boys shrieking out laughter and advice as the two alcoholics, heads hunched into their shoulders like trained monkeys, wavered about in unsteady circles or fell ignominiously in the dust. Such scenes continued until the five-to-one bell sounded from the school, when Pineapple and Sympathy would return to their shade, or perhaps mooch along the river-bank path to another spot down by the old wharf. Pineapple eventually became confident enough to ride a bike through the streets of the town. He got in the way of a car one day, was knocked down, and had his leg broken. Tim was at the hospital when the nurses took him into a room to strip his clothes and wash him. He let Tim glimpse the lid of a small whisky bottle and said, 'They won't get this off me.' Then Pineapple was taken in, and out through the half-open door came his squawks and every last stitch of his filthy clothes. That night when Tim went through the public ward Pineapple grinned, reached under his sheet and flashed the little Corio bottle at him. Tim told this as one who understood the tiny triumphs of unimportant people.

Long after, he went to work for Pineapple's sister. He described her as 'a good old lady, but oh, she's harmless, she's ... she's just not the full shilling, you know what I mean.' The sister's arrangement with the two alcoholics was that they could sleep the night at her place, and in the morning she would give them their breakfast, and then they had to stay away for the rest of the day. Their bedroom was an old toilet in the back garden, with a few weatherboards missing. A mattress took up the whole floor space. If they slept at full stretch their feet poked out the door. Talking of this, Tim looked soulful and said, "That's, that's what they got, that's, it's their life I suppose.' His sons, both highly articulate when they chose to be, were impatient at Tim and the load of significance he placed on these feeble words, but I made a point of looking out for the two men to see what he meant. I passed them each morning as I drove to work. They used to walk down the hill in Victoria Street, overcoats undone and sugar-bags over their shoulders, with the whole town before them and the easterly sun pouring into their watery, bloodshot eyes, setting off on the tiny Odyssey which was their day.

To each his own role, and let each one play his part properly; this was Tim's philosophy. He was not articulate and rarely said more than two or three sentences on end, unless it was to retail some anecdote where it was a story that held attention, not his opinion. Yet there was a consistency running through all he did; you did the right thing, and when in doubt, the careful thing. Over the years of constantly moving in and out of people's homes he had eliminated from his habits and character everything that might give offence. He moved unobtrusively, rarely asked direct questions unless with well-trusted friends, and was particularly careful of people's 'bits and pieces' when on the job. He never laid down the law, rarely went past some little observation suffixed by, 'That's the way I see it, anyhow.' Yet you discerned after a while that he was a Labor voter, that his sympathies lay with the little man and that he was first and foremost a peaceable man. There was nothing sensual or coarse in his character. His life was contained within a routine that satisfied him. He worked within a circle of a few miles radius from his home. This was as much a matter of temperament as a distrust of Biddy, the failing blue Anglia which would certainly not pass a roadworthiness test. Tim

never drove in the Main Street and if he had to cross it to get to a job on the other side of the highway, he did so at one of the less-frequented intersections and at, for him, a nippy speed. This was the cautious Tim holding to an arrangement with the local police, whose heavy-handed jokes about the utility let him know where he stood with regard to them.

Tim worked, and he came home to lunch. While he waited for Rosa to finish getting the food on the table, he would ask a scattering of questions—'Where's Miriam?' 'What happened to Victor's bike?' 'I'll bet you never got to school on time this morning?'—which filled in the gaps in his surprisingly complete picture of what his family and their friends and pets had done, said and felt that morning. He returned to work, he came home somewhere a little nearer four than five, and he put on a cardigan, or a clean shirt—some little change of dress before going off to the Terminus where he regularly took his place with Leo and Nick, if Nick was in Bairnsdale, in the little bar with the door off Macleod Street. He left in time for tea at six-twenty and went to his car—the Standard now—which he left far enough down the street so that there would be no cars parked at awkward angles next to him. Quite commonly he drove Dimsie, the ginger-haired slaughterman, home to his place before he nosed down past the Catholic Church, past the old Prince Regent Theatre, past the Monsignor's residence and the Catholic school and down the narrow alley to the little canvas-roofed garage at the dead-end. Tim was home. He had tea, let Rosa sort out who would help her with the washing-up—though he was quick to quell any complaint from his eldest son, Robin—and settled in the lounge with the fire, The Herald, the Bairnsdale Advertiser and perhaps The Sporting Globe or Truth. He glanced at the TV from time to time, had little naps, then jumped up to close a door or to go and get some more wood. His children complained that his fires were too big for the little lounge, but he said, 'Oh, too hot! A man'd freeze if he took any notice of you.' Rosa would occasionally put in, 'It is getting a little bit uncomfortable, Tim,' but was more likely to part the curtain behind her and push the window up an extra two or three inches. If the phone rang, Tim said, 'Turn that thing down, Victor,'

and then told the caller, to a chorus of complaint from his children, 'Just a sec, Les, they've got the blessed TV blarin' here, I can't hear a thing.'

Les would probably be Les Houghton, a boiler attendant and general handyman who lived about a hundred yards away on the same side of the street. If Les and Lorna came down later, Tim would set two cans and a few hotel beer-glasses on a gaudy metal tray and start pouring beers. On a Saturday night Tim and Rosa might go out with Les and Lorna or some other couple they'd known for years. If there was no party or function on they went to one of the hotels, very likely Nicholson, Swan Reach, or Faynesville; handy, but out of Bairnsdale for a change. On Sunday morning there would probably be a little group gather in the dining-room for a few more unhurried beers—or perhaps a shandy or a port wine and lemonade for the ladies—and a rambling discussion of the townspeople and their doings. As one o'clock loomed up, Rosa would press everyone to stay; most said, 'No, really must be off,' or 'Never catch up with my work if I don't go now.' There was a flurry of goodbyes, then Rosa produced the casseroles and pie-dishes that had been warming in the slow-combustion stove. Her sandwiches and the beer dulled the appetite, but it revived at the first taste of her excellent food. Rosa was a very fine cook, yet you never ever caught her making things—they just materialised.

On Saturday mornings, though, she had a rest. This was Tim's day to get breakfast and he took it to his wife in bed. He also cooked toast and bacon and eggs for Robin, Victor and Miriam if they were up; if not, Tim hung around the back of the house in his dressing-gown reading The Sun and slinging off fondly at his children for still being abed. The night before, Friday, he had more than likely been down at The Club—the men's club; the so-called Gentlemen's Club, though when people scorn this institution, there is really no one to scoff at—and had probably had a fair skinful. 'What annoys me,' said Rosa, 'it gets me really mad sometimes, is that he never gets a hangover. Look, I've seen him come home so full he can hardly stand up. I've seen him fall over ... but he'll be alright in the morning. It's not fair.' Tim was a regular drinker, certainly, but not a heavy one and he rarely disgraced himself. Hence his family's amusement about the night he walked into the wardrobe. Tim

and Rosa slept in the front bedroom, a few feet away from the street. On the night in question Tim woke up in the small hours and went to go outside and relieve himself. He was betrayed by the street-light reflecting off the wardrobe mirror, directly opposite the window. He went in the wrong direction, groped about for some time, pulled open the wardrobe door, passed through and closed it behind him. He struggled for some time to find his way out, gave up, and went back to sleep. Rosa found him in the morning and told the story with a wry smile, as if to say, 'That's my man.' The children took great delight in the tale, especially the boys. They were at the age of closely observing their father and finding him richly comic. Adolescent dissatisfaction was to come later.

Perhaps its most pointed expression, early on, was Robin's technique for getting privacy to talk to his girl-friend in Buchan. He used to put the phone at the end of the ledge behind the lounge-room sofa. He took a chair out to the front verandah, then came inside to put his call through. When he had his connection, he would pass the handpiece through the open window, go outside to his seat, and close the window. The exchange at Buchan was very indulgent with extensions, so Robin sat on the verandah for long stretches of time, leaving the rest of the family inside with the phone cord trailing through the curtains. This was taken mildly, unlike Robin's late arrivals. The year after he left school he had a clerical job with the Motor Registration Branch in Melbourne. Every weekend he got rides home to Bairnsdale or hitchhiked. Every week, from Thursday on, Tim inquired about for a ride back to the city on the Sunday afternoon. The more sober and reliable the driver the better, and an early start on Sunday afternoon was much to be preferred to setting off after dark. Robin showed no gratitude for these rides. They were one more thing arranged for him when parental management was the last thing he wanted. Once Robin had gone to Buchan, Tim would be sick with anxiety that he would not get back in time. As the time for the ride to Melbourne drew closer, Tim would ring the driver with apologies, explanations and assurances that the moment Robin appeared he would be hustled down to keep his appointment. Robin made a point of being late. Tim would sit on the sofa hardly able to contain his anger and his misery, waiting for his son. As often as not

when Robin did arrive, he would decide to take a day off from work anyway. Frequently it was Tuesday or Wednesday before he bothered to set off for Melbourne, and every few weeks he came home on Thursday night.

Poor Tim was badly divided. He wanted Robin to be sacked—it would serve him right, and such cavalier treatment of one's work could not, without a serious breakdown of the moral order, go unpunished—yet he hated the thought of his son being unable to hold down his first job. 'It can't last,' he used to say, 'it can't last. How long're they going to let this go on?' Rosa used to watch these goings-on with deep understanding, sometimes checking Tim, sometimes chiding Robin, always maintaining a balance. Once she said, 'Oh well, Tim, he's a man now, he's got to work out some of these things for himself.' Tim bit back hard.

'He's not a man, nothing like it. A man doesn't go on like that.' Later the same evening, out of Rosa's hearing, he protested, 'It takes a lot to make a man.' Rosa, of course, had a pride in her son's nineteen-year-old maturity as well as a loyalty to her sixty-year-old husband, yet she always kept the balance. She recognised the endless crises—Tim sweating on Robin to bring the family car home safely, Robin's provocatively flash driving—as inevitable stages of the father-son struggle, and played her loyal role to both. Besides, she had Miriam getting ready for high school. This, she knew, would be her real test and one on which much depended. 'I do hope she's a good girl,' Rosa said, showing herself like Tim in wanting the correct things done in the proper way.

Tim was hampered by being inarticulate. When Robin's cultivated disregard of proper form caused Tim embarrassment, he would quiver with silent rage, lips trembling but soundless. Much of this anger arose from the fact that Tim's courtesy and sense of propriety was more acquired than natural to him. Robin was like him and each knew it; Tim did not have the words to show his eldest son how his life's experience had made him what he was. Tim depended on Rosa, just as much as Robin did, to be that stable thing around which a life could be built, but the father had a wife, the boy was then a virgin. In Buchan, Robin's remarkable likeness to the most famous pop-singers of the day gave him a glamour not possessed by his stolid relatives, the Gibson boys. In

Buchan, forty-eight miles from Bairnsdale, Robin was a young man with greater potential richness of emotion than the plainer-thinking young people of a farming area. In Buchan, where his aunts had taken him on to the floor and taught him how to dance, he felt safe from failure and safely removed from his father. 'He's never home,' Tim used to complain during Robin's first year in Melbourne. 'Soon's he gets home, he's off to Buchan.' Tim hated to see him dash off, but hated to refuse him the car. Robin would get the car and Tim would walk over to the Terminus on Saturday morning, and the Sunday afternoon drive would be with the Houghtons in their car. Sometimes Tim would forego the drive to sit at home, waiting for his son's safe return.

So the two of them tore at each other; Robin striving for independence, constantly missing his step and taking it out on Tim when he did; Tim being devoted, erratic, his paternal fondness completely exposed, frequently abused, often rejected. He said to Victor one night, when the arranged time for Robin's return was drawing close, and tension mounting, 'I know Victor'll never leave me, will you, Vic?' Tim went through agony for two years or more, but never tried to shortcut himself out of the situation. It was something that had to be gone through by both of them. Both had to see it through until the bond between them had changed its nature.

Five years before these events, while his children still doted on him and he on them, Tim told me the tale of Giles Wainwright and his family and the weird house they lived in. Despite the unattractiveness of the central figure, it seemed to me the archetypal story of pioneering life and there was something elemental in the tale going beyond the particular historical circumstances.

Giles Wainwright worked for a gold-mine, across the Dividing Range, somewhere west of Omeo. To get water for their operations, the miners had dug a long tail-race, miles and miles of channel, all dug out and established by hard work and simple tools. The water actually came from the Wentworth River, which runs off the northern hip of Baldhead, then swings in a wide arc until it is flowing south. Still deep in the hills, it joins the Mitchell at Tabberabbera, and its waters go down to the lakes and the sea. The miners had had a special survey made

to find a way by which water from the Wentworth could be brought across a low spot in the Divide. Giles Wainwright's job was to patrol this water-race, unblocking it and cutting fallen trees out of it. In his constant riding about the high country he discovered a fairly flat area, heavily timbered, which he believed would make fertile land if cleared. So he gave up working for the mine (Tim called it the Jern Key; when I questioned him about the name he said, 'It was a foreign name, I don't know how they spelt it, that's the way we used to say it.') and took up a selection at this place. Tim did not know if he ever had any official title to the land, but he set about ringbarking the trees and clearing away the scrub, He married and brought his bride to a most remarkable home. He felled a gigantic tree, and another one almost as big. He hauled the lesser one alongside the first. He nailed thin poles across the gap and laid a roof of bark sheets on these poles. The roof went a few feet along the trunks, then there was an end wall, also of bark. At the butt end of these fallen giants he constructed the fireplace and chimney. To enter the Wainwright dwelling you passed between this structure and the wide butt of one of the trees. There was a huge opening in one side of the fireplace, and a small opening on the other side. Keeping the fire fuelled was simple. Chains were attached to a dry fallen tree and it was hauled to the Wainwright dwelling; the chains were taken right through and the log was hauled until the end was in the fireplace. As it burned away, the log was pushed or hauled in a few feet further.

Giles Wainwright was red-haired, and red-bearded. 'He never had a wash in the fifteen years I knew him,' Tim told me. 'Do you know what he used to do? He never had his beard trimmed or anything. He used to get a basin with some kerosene in it, and he'd dip a rag in it and he'd smear it over the big shaggy mop he had. Then he'd light it! That was his hair-cut. Oh, he had so much fungus on his face you could hardly see his nose stickin' out. He had these big eyes and his nose and his mouth and they were just stuck in there in all his hair.' Giles used to farm pigs. He had hundreds of them, grubbing and scratching all over the country he'd cleared and in the bush around it. 'He used to sell 'em in Walnut Flat. They'd follow 'im. You'd come on him ridin' down the track and there'd be all these bloody little pigs scratchin' along behind 'im. Then

the next two or three miles you'd keep seein' pigs. They'd be strung out all over the place behind 'im. But he'd get 'em there. And everything he got, he kept. He never gave poor old Mrs Wainwright anything. If it got a bit cold up there, sometimes he'd go down to Walnut Flat for a day or two. She'd have to stay up there and look after the kids. By gee, it could be cold, too. I've seen the snow lyin' around there for days.'

Mrs Wainwright must have had a hard life. She bore thirteen children in all; seven lived, six died early. All were delivered by Giles himself. Apparently he used to say, 'Seven out of thirteen. Not a bad average, eh?' When Nick told me this saying of Wainwright's, he dropped into a beefy grunt, which was his imitation of Giles's voice. Tim said, 'He delivered the lot. He was the mid-wife. She never had any women with her. There were a couple of women used to do all the deliveries in Walnut Flat, knew as much about it as the doctor. But he never got them.' With each addition to the family, Wainwright used to enlarge his tree-house. He would knock out the end wall, roof in a few more feet of the space between the trunks, and rebuild the end wall. 'Down the far end,' Nick told me, 'you had to stoop or you'd knock your head. It was alright at the front, but it was still best to walk on the side where the biggest tree was.' The family had shelves and ledges cut into their tree walls. Near the door hung the bullock's horn which was their signal to the cows. 'You'd see Nelly go outside and give the horn a few blasts and you'd see all the cows start to come in. They'd straggle in, bit by bit.' Wainwright discouraged visitors, and would not let his family leave the one hundred and eighty acre farm he'd cleared. His children grew up as shy as animals. "They used to clear off into the bush if anyone came there,' Nick told me. 'You'd see 'em peepin' over logs and through the grass. If they knew you they might be alright. Even then they were pretty scary. We nearly shot Chris once. Leo and I were up that way shootin' and we seen somethin' move behind a log. You could see the grass twitchin'. I said I'll chuck a stick at it and you let him have it when he comes out. I picked up a nice little stick and I hit the log and Leo's all lined up, when Chris Wainwright pokes his head over. We were gonna say we were sorry, but he cleared off; we never seen him for weeks. We went and had a look where he was hidin'. He'd been scratchin' around like a wombat.'

I asked about Mrs Wainwright. The brothers agreed that she was a very nice woman. 'I had dinner there plenty of times,' Nick told me. 'She was always glad to see someone.' And could she soften her husband at all? 'Oh, no,' Tim told me, 'she trembled when he spoke. Oh, no, he was the boss.' Wainwright seemed to think his sons were his slaves. They got no wages, and never got into the shops. Only rarely did he allow them to work for someone else, and then for very brief periods. As his sons grew to manhood, they came to hate him. He dominated them, held them, would not let them go. 'In the end, well ... well, there's no one can really say what happened to him. Let's just say he disappeared. Oh, there was plenty of people in Springton had their theories, and Walnut Flat too, but there was no real knowing what become of him. He was a mean old bugger and he'd been tellin' people how he was saving for a trip overseas. He was goin' to England, that's where he came from originally. He was a Pom, though he talked just like everyone else; you didn't notice it in the way he talked.' What about Mrs Wainwright, Nelly, and the boys? 'Oh, they had to stay and mind the place. He had no intention of taking them. Some people reckoned he wasn't going to come back either, once he got there, but I don't know about that.'

Giles disappeared at a time when he was supposed to be going on a trip to Melbourne. It is not clear whether this was the first leg of his journey to England, a business trip of some description, or only a fiction put out by the family to cover his disappearance.

For some months his absence aroused no suspicion, then the policeman from Omeo went to investigate. He questioned the three eldest boys separately. They all agreed that their father had set off for Melbourne, but after that their stories varied. One said that he had accompanied his father as far as Mount Seldom Seen, then he had returned to the property while his father rode off in the direction of Bullumwaal. The second son said that he had ridden with his father as far as Bullumwaal and had seen him board the coach to Bairnsdale. The third son declared that he had gone right to the Bairnsdale railway-station with his father, who boarded the Melbourne train. The policeman was naturally very suspicious, but the area was remote, other matters intervened, and the investigation lapsed. When it was resumed, the

Bullumwaal coach-driver offered the categorical statement that he had picked up Giles Wainwright at Bullumwaal and had taken him to the Main Hotel, Bairnsdale, the terminus for the coach run. Giles had told him that he was going to catch the train to Melbourne.

Giles was never sighted or heard of again, in Gippsland or anywhere. If, as one theory suggested, he had got lost in the bush, no body was ever found, nor any trace of horse or clothing. Speculation about his fate was rife in Springton and Walnut Flat, but the police investigation came to nothing. The family stayed at the tree-house for a few months longer, then they went their various ways and the place was deserted.

It is certainly no surprise that the missing man was never found. Next time I travelled the Baldhead road, I thought of the hopeless problem facing any searchers. If he had wandered off the track, there were so many mine-shafts and tunnels. If he had collapsed somewhere in the thousands of immensely fertile gullies, the next rain would wash leaves and dirt over his body and the growth would quickly hide it. And I mused on the strange story of the father's egotism and his children's hatred; it was a strange complement to the majesty and serenity of this immense region. Wainwright's farm occupied one of the few relatively flat areas in the huge complex of ranges running away from Mount Baldhead. Baldhead's child is the Nicholson River; standing on the snow-grass pate of the huge mass, it is hard to realise that the dampness underfoot, soaking, seeping, dribbling downwards, reinforced by the run-off of innumerable gullies, will become the river, beloved of fishermen, that moves broadly into Lake King, thirty-five miles to the south. The miracle of Baldhead is that from the beginning you can see the end; through glasses it is easy to follow the last meanderings of the placid stream. There are the picture-book lakes, the dull bushland strip, the hazy sea and, often enough, a band of dark-blue cloud echoing the mountains where the waters had their birth. Flanking the river, like the overwhelming escort of some princeling, are two long ranges, twisting and dipping, out and down in a vast descrescendo that settles in the lowland. To come out from Bullumwaal is like clambering up the wrist of some majestic sphinx. Before Mount Baldhead is a huge basin where

the Nicholson waters gather, a vast hole ringed by ranges, big enough to receive an asteroid.

Deep in the silence of this watershed is the clearing that was Marthavale Station. Nick had stories about this one, too, of stolen cattle hidden away, and of his brother Leo trying to ride from Marthavale to Springton at night, getting lost, and letting the horse have a loose rein to find its way home. Further downstream, the Yahoo Creek runs in, and the Barmouth. This is mining country, too, like the Haunted Stream that runs off Baldhead to the Tambo. In these deep valleys are manna gums, straight as gun-barrels, and mossy flats where the grass grows over chimney mounds, camp-ovens and bullock-team chains. Wattles grow out of the miners' tracks and lichen encrusts the little wooden stops and wheels in their water-races. Fallen sheds no longer protect the rusting trucks of depression-era gold-seekers. A corrugated-iron roof sits in a sea of blackberries, brown above deep green. Stringybark walls lie flat on the wet earth, holding pools of tannin-stained water. Black cockatoos screech overhead, or sprinkle the ground with ironbark blossom. Mountain lorrys burst into view, red and blue, dipping in flight. Kookaburra laughter rings through steep gullies, streams ripple, ant-eaters claw in the gravel and the delicate lyre-birds show themselves when mountain mist makes the valleys dank.

Somewhere here was the stringybark hut of Dowsett and McCully. Dowsett was a local man, a miner from way back, who knew the hills as one who had walked them. McCully was a retired engineer, a suburban man taking a wonderful new lease of life as he planned and operated the pumps and engines of a mining venture. Their hut was like a recreation of the rotting past; beds made of bags stretched over saplings, wallaby-skin rugs, billy and camp-oven dangling from hooks over grey ashes that rekindled when they threw on leaves. Eating utensils and pannikins sat on river stones by the fireplace. Vegetables grew in a yard fenced to keep out the wallabies. Their tunnel went a hundred yards into the slope and their shaft went down to meet it, leaving in the earth a gash visible from Valentine's Knob, the peak in front of Baldhead, sometimes called Mikado Hill. Their crushing plant, brought from Bendigo, was firmly embedded. It was good to see Mr Dowsett shovelling into the crusher

while Mr McCully oiled the engine and the huge wooden flywheel painted with the name of their mine went round and round, Yahoo, Yahoo, lumbering over and over, Yahoo, Yahoo, Yahoo. Further downstream, the river is taxed to give Lakes Entrance its water supply, then it passes under the bridge where timber-trucks crash through the railings every few years. It pushes through snags of fallen manna gums and willows, and finds its way through lush flats of dairy country. Jersey herds and farmhouses with white fences and red roofs attend the last few miles of its progress. Tethered boats bob in the water, or lie upside down on the lawn outside the Retreat Hotel, and water-birds dabble in the saline mixture that flows under the Princes Highway.

The highway is the lifeline of modern Gippsland, the artery through which the pulse of the motor age beats most strongly. Travelling down from Melbourne you will always find a patch where 'they've got the road up', straightening out curves, reforming, widening, as the coach trail aspires to the autobahn. The emphasis is on speed. The endless traffic swooshes past finger-boards pointing to Frew's Road, Munro 1, or Swallow Lagoon. Caravans bigger than the miners' huts wobble behind Customline Fords, Chrysler Valiants, or the ubiquitous Holdens. At weekends and holidays the highway is full of vehicles with boats, which range from row-boats tipped upside down on the pack-rack to cabin-cruisers on specially-built trailers. One looks in vain for truly nautical names. At best there may be *Anna*; more likely the modish sign-writing will say something like *Bambi* or *Melody*, the sentimental names reflecting the owners' wishful hopes for their leisure. Something similar comes out in the quaint names first remarked on by D. H. Lawrence in *Kangaroo*; a boat will be called *Fris-ski* and a seaside house '*Freeneezi*'. A more blatant vulgarity appears in boat names like *Chunderguts*, and the tourist slogan "The Gippsland Lakes—Playground of the Latrobe Valley'.

Official policy in Bairnsdale and beyond is to encourage tourism, but there is a very ambiguous attitude in the far east towards Morwell, Moe, Traralgon, Yallourn and Newborough—the Latrobe Valley towns. They are country towns swamped by industrial growth, with neither

the intimate familiarity of a country community nor the variety and sophistication of a city. The Valley—Sir Henry Bolte once described it as the Ruhr of Victoria—presents itself to the traveller with a line-up of service-stations, hillsides of Housing Commission 'development' and smokestacks belching into the lowland between the surrounding hills. The far east hopes the valley people will buy blocks in their sub-divisions, stay at the motels, fill up at the service-stations and use local labour on their holiday-homes, but it offers no more than that. The outsiders are welcome to bring business into the town, but there is little other contact.

Bairnsdale people rarely distinguish between the towns of the Valley, but refer to any or all of them as 'somewhere down the line'. Their comprehension of what industrialisation brings to a town clings to the obvious. Many parents prefer to see their children complete their education in Yallourn itself rather than Melbourne, giving the reason that it's closer; there is also the submerged thought that it is less likely to offer the promiscuity, student demonstrations and night-life to lure the young away from home and family thinking. People stress how dirty it is in the Valley, and how smelly. 'You can't leave your washing out on the line, it gets covered with soot.'

But, of course, the Valley offers employment. The number and range of positions goes far beyond the simple filling of unskilled and semiskilled jobs advertised in the Bairnsdale paper—pulpwood-cutter, housekeeper, shop-girl, cashier, butcher, baker, apprentice panel-beater, bulldozer-driver, hairdresser, nurse, girl to live in. The young of Gippsland who aim a little higher often go down the line. Others succeed in their courses and enter professional ranks. They will, if they eventually settle in some country town, resemble the doctors, dentists, lawyers, teachers, vets and engineers of Bairnsdale—a scattering of individuals too different to cohere as a class, too busy or unambitious to try and run the town, too far from the metropolis to achieve fame in their field. Professional practitioners and educational tradesmen, they serve the society they live in. In return, it offers ski-clubbing, golf, yachting and the dinner-dances at Paynesville and Metung hotels. The doctors have their foreign cars—Volvo, Jaguar, Lancia, Mercedes Sports,

Alfa Romeo—but even their money can only buy pieces of a way of life. Any cultivated tendency has to cater for itself with wine, books and gramophone records ordered from specialist shops in Melbourne. In glassware, pottery and jewellery the country town has little to offer besides a two-hour (hobby) class at the Tech, and a certain willingness to buy the lolly-like Australian gemstone trinkets at the jewellers. Beneath this again are the unspeakable goods at the gift or gifte shops— paintings of wanly-lit waves on an empty beach, or a rose fallen disregarded on a staircase, its petals moistened by a single tear; barbecue equipment to be bought and never used; pseudo-Swedish glasses with brightly-coloured 'jewels' fused on to the sides; purple-glass flower vases shaped like some hybrid of a Grecian urn and a rooster's tail. To see the commercial travellers taking their suit-cases and order-books out of their station-wagons, or repacking before they go off to the motel for the night, is one of the most depressing sights of Main Street. Like the TV antennas that spread a thin mesh forty feet above the town, they indicate that the town will take what it is given, will do its deal with the metropolis: we'll pick the beans, you can them; you come and paint the countryside, we'll grow the beef; you sing, we'll listen.

If the town loses much in this deal, it has its revenge. Voices take the banner headlines for their own purposes; 'Wasn't it terrible about that earthquake?' 'I see they haven't caught them fellas yet.' 'Miss Australia? I don't know why they picked her, she's nothing marvellous. I've seen better at Lakes, I really have,' The great world offered by press and television is enjoyed vicariously, its extravagances and absurdities used to justify the values and bolster the self-satisfaction of village people. Occasionally the worlds overlap, as when the young DJ on 3TR sings the praises of the stoves at Griff Purdue's or the used cars at Corringle Motors with the same hyped-up intensity as the cigarette advertisers on national television. No one is deceived. Griff Purdue is still Griff Purdue, whose working and playing, eating, drinking and electrical servicing are done with total disregard for the clock. And Corringle Motors are well handled by local gossip, which remembers how the garage sold the old car when the Aborigine couldn't pay the repair bill and how the sales manager was had up in court over that case about the truck that time. And the

town has plenty of stories of its own when The Sun sends yet another reporter-photographer team down to Lake Tyers to fill the centre pages with 'The Plight of the Aborigine'.

This cuts no ice with Tim and Rosa. They recall the various managers of the station over the years; how Lyons was 'difficult' ('But can you blame him?') while Mr and Mrs Gannaway were almost saintly in their devotion to the black people. 'Never done any good,' Tim says. 'They'd bail 'em out, they'd be full again next weekend.' Tim's friendship with Alan Shore, the Public Works Inspector, gave him the inside story on the thousands spent on the station buildings. 'Look, you paint it, you go down there next year and they, they've been, aw, what, look, they've been usin' the bathroom for a toilet. And they got one outside, just out the back door a bit. You know what? They spent hundreds, they put those colonial stoves in. They give 'em all one, I don't know how much it musta cost. Alan goes down there and look, they've pulled 'em all out, they're cookin' in the open fireplace, just like they were before. And pulling boards off the house for firewood, and now they want to go and build all new houses for 'em. Ooohh . . .'

Anthropologists and welfare-workers might take exception to Tim's analysis, but essentially he and Rosa are correct in applying the ultimate standard of 'integration', that they judge the Aborigines by the same standards they apply to everyone else. Rosa says, 'It's no good while they've got that station as a funk hole. I feel terribly sorry for the black people, I think it's a terrible shame to see them drunk, and the police are pretty short with them sometimes when they bundle them into the back of that van—mind you, I don't think it hurts them to have a night in the cells to sober them up, and they get a meal and nothing happens to them—oh, they might have to do a bit in the garden, but it isn't very much. But they are a pest, they ask you for money—I avoid the corner if I see them there. Look, I think they're a pest to themselves. You can do so much for them, and then they've got to work it out for themselves.' Tim will put in, 'And one of 'em tries and all the rest come hangin' around, won't leave till they've eaten all he's got. What's he gonna do? Poor fella can't get rid of 'em.' If Tim and Rosa don't have any answers, they at least know when others are evading the issue. One day when The Sun gave

a double-page treatment to Lake Tyers, with the Aborigines' hypocritical complaints quoted at length, Tim turned the page murmuring, 'Oh, they're at it again.' On another occasion, the Reverend Jamie Chanter devoted his church column in the Bairnsdale paper to the same issue, He ended his fulminations with '… and I will join any organisation that anyone may form to overcome this problem.' Tim commented, 'Fat lot o'good he'll do,' as he pushed the Advertiser under his chair.

The almost completely charitable attitudes of Tim and Rosa rest, among other things, on the fact that their opinions are absolutely central to normal society. Tim, in his work as a painter, and Rosa, with her endless stream of women coming in for hairdressing appointments in her well-fitted little bungalow, are both involved, almost every moment of the day, with the minutiae of public opinion. They have relatives further upcountry, and relatives in the city. Their children's friends are in and out of the house, often staying for a while, and at the other end of the scale, Rosa's mother is still a hale and active old lady. At their respectable working-class level of society, they come in contact with all types of behaviour and they centralise themselves accordingly, though Tim allows himself a little impish fun occasionally, like driving down the wrong side of the road one night because the detour signs were badly placed. He woke up straight away, despite Biddy's glowworm headlights, but said, 'Ooh, right in front of Ed Palmer's. Oh bugger it, he won't see me,' and sailed on for a block or two before slithering across the central plantation.

Tim knew he could do this sort of thing because Rosa was there. It is hard to imagine a more balanced mind than Rosa's, or a person more free of fear. It is not detachment that gives her this balance but her certainty of herself as wife and mother. She is not demonstrative; she only needs to know that all is well and that is all that need be shown. Miriam came to Rosa in the dining-room one day when Rosa had done some little job on her clothes. Miriam was twelve at the time, feeling a sort of calf love for her mother. She came up, face pink and full-fleshed, and began to rub her fingers on her mother's fluffy lambs-wool jumper. Rosa turned, glanced at her face and said fondly, 'Go on, I don't want you all over me.' Or there was the time when she had been away and Victor,

sixteen, came into the same room. Rosa was sitting in her afternoon-tea chair, smoking. Victor edged close to her, tried to put butter and honey on a piece of sliced bread, made a mess of it, and finally dropped knife and bread. Rosa said, 'Well, you're all excited. You're all a-tremble because Mum's home. Go on, get me a rag and I'll clean this up.'

Victor was all a-tremble three years later in the waiting-room at the clinic. It was Sunday morning. He looked grey, hung over, and suffering from an emotional shakeup. Tim was near him, composed, not bothering to finger the magazines. 'Goodday, what brings you here?' he asked, and chatted away for a minute. 'Victor's had an accident,' he said. Despite Robin's treatment of the cars his father had subsidised, Tim had bought his second son a Fiat 1100. He had bought it for him two years too soon, but it was a gesture of faith in the second boy, a loving demonstration that Robin's mistakes were not entered on Victor's account. Victor had driven into the back of a car parked outside the Imperial and there had been a humiliating scene with the get-tough owner. There was no reproach in Tim's voice, nothing but reassurance. Doctor Wanless came out with the paper certifying Victor's absence from work. Tim was all respect, 'Oh, thanks, doctor, sorry to bother you . . .' Doctor Wanless patted Victor on the back, 'There you are, my boy, there's nothing wrong, you'd better take this.' Tim accorded the doctor Vice-Regal respect. 'Thanks, doctor, take the form, Vic; good, doctor, thanks very much.' He almost went out of the room backwards. At the outside door to the clinic was Doctor Jellicoe, hair a little tousled. It being the Sunday morning clinic, he was dressed in an old pair of grey trousers and a roll-neck sweater, and was seeing his patients out. Tim gave him a playful nudge in the ribs and a pat on the shoulder. 'Goodday, doc,' he said, 'how areya?' I wondered at the familiarity, but the explanation came next time the family were talking about Olaf Swindell.

For years Olaf and his mother lived next door to the Hurleys in Barrett Street. It is a street of mostly weatherboard houses with small blocks and tiny front gardens. In recent years Italian families have moved in and a number of houses are painted in 'Mediterranean colours'. The house next door is now a dreadful blue-green combination chosen by the Giannaccini family; they engaged Tim to do the job, but when he

heard the colour schemes proposed for indoors, even Tim, who thinks nothing of painting every drawer and cupboard door a different colour, decided that enough was enough, and he found other work to prevent him doing the job. The Giannaccini family and connections used to disgust Tim by checking and tuning up their chain-saws early on a Sunday morning in the concrete-floored, iron-walled and iron-roofed shed a few yards from the Hurley house. But that was nothing, apparently, to the phenomenon of Olaf Swindell.

Olaf had at one stage been an art student in Melbourne, but had been upset in love—he said; Rosa surmised that the girl had never done anything more than try to be nice to Olaf. He had returned to live with his widowed mother. His excursions outside the house were always unannounced, and silent. Rosa would be in the dining-room and would turn around to find Olaf in the room behind her, wearing sandshoes and carrying some flowers. These were for Rosa. He would stay for a while, then return home, if someone knocked at the front door, by lightly vaulting the five-foot paling fence. Rosa said she was used to Olaf's appearances and they did not frighten her until much later. This was surprising in view of his night prowling. 'You'd just hear a little thud, just light,' Tim told me, 'on the edge of the verandah, just the one. You'd never hear the gate squeak or anything. We used to be listenin' for it. Hello, Olaf's here. And you know, it wouldn't matter how quick you were, when you opened the door, he'd be mizzled off. Oh, look, the times I've sat just there with my hand on the door ... soon's I heard him, I'd be out. But he'd be gone, you'd never catch him.'

I asked if this frightened them. 'Oh, that's nothing to the way he used to perform; oh, he used to go on like a real lunatic, yellin' and screamin' and ravin'. He used to get the poor old lady in such a state, she'd be in tears and he'd be shoutin' away at her. We used to have a look. If we peeped off the end of the verandah there we could just see into their living-room. And you know, whenever we did, he knew. He was that cunnin' ... He knew you were there. He might do a bit of a stamp and a yell, then he'd stop and make a face at you.' If fed by questions, Tim would enlarge. 'He built this ... oh, I don't know, what would you call it, sort of tower in his bedroom. Out of junk, every blessed thing you could

find, all piled up and stuck together. He used to get down and worship it; oh, he'd pray and wave his arms— Oh, Allah, Allah, you know—he used to keep addin' things to it. When they finally took him away, I went in there to help the old lady clean up and, you know, he'd built this blessed thing up, he'd cut a hole in the ceiling and it went right through. And he had a loaded three-oh-three rifle in his wardrobe. I never knew it was loaded. He used to get out the front here, just outside here, and he'd march up and down with this rifle over his shoulder. And there was this poor little girl of Thomas, oh, she was, you know, she was really simple. She used to follow him and everything he done, she done it too. He'd go stampin' and struttin' and goose-steppin' and she'd be right behind him doin' everything the same. Oh, I tell you . . .'

I suggested that he must have worn a track. 'Wear a track! He had a circle he'd worn in the back lawn, he used to do these dances, you know, sort of rain-dance sort of thing. He'd go round and round—Oooooohh wah wah oooohh wah wah—you should've heard him. Oh, he used to do it for hours of a night time, singin' out.' I asked if the police didn't take a hand. 'Oh, yes, they did. He got so bad and none of us wanted to bring them into it. We didn't want to hurt poor old Mrs Swindell, she looked after him, she used to humour him. He give her buggery. He used to hold a court. He'd be the judge, and he'd get something, it might be a hat, and it'd be up on trial. Oh, he'd act all the parts, and she'd have to sit there and listen. He'd sing out to her, "Isn't that so, witness?" and she'd say, "Yes, Olaf." He'd scream out, "That's not how to address me." "I'm sorry, Olaf." "The witness must address the bench as Your Honour." And he'd make her call him Your Honour; oh, it was cruel the way he used to go on.'

Rosa would carry on the story. 'It got so bad that in the end someone did bring the police into it, and they approached me to let them know when he was performing and they'd come down to see how bad he was. I suppose they wanted to judge for themselves. Well, Olaf would start to perform and I'd feel after a while that I just had to ring the police. Do you know, the moment I lifted that receiver, he'd stop. He'd hear the little ting when I picked the phone up, and you wouldn't hear any more from him. The police used to come up the back alley, and

they'd come down the other side of the street, or they'd sneak through there where the Catholic school is now, and the moment they came around, he'd know. He just sensed them, and he'd be quiet. The moment they'd go away, he'd start up again.' Apparently, the noise one night was particularly bad and Tim went to intervene. Olaf was threatening his mother with a carving-knife. When Tim remonstrated with him, he advanced and said, 'I'll try it out on you.' Tim withdrew. The next time he entered the house, it was with Doctor Jellicoe. The doctor had been called to see if Olaf was certifiable and he didn't care to go in alone, so Tim went with him. The doctor's excuse for calling was that he believed he had made a mistake in the last prescription that had been made up for Olaf. Could he come in and see the tablets to check that they were the right ones? Olaf was very polite. Oh, certainly, doctor; come in. He produced a large box full of junk hoarded over the years—slippers, letters, nuts and bolts, radio parts, bits of clocks— Doctor Jellicoe said he couldn't see the tablets, would Olaf get them out? Olaf tipped the box upside down, spewing the contents all over the floor, and grinned. 'Find 'em for your bloody self,' he said.

Olaf was eventually certified. When the police came to get him, he was as meek as a lamb. When they took him to the station and questioned him, he was as lucid as could be. They were apologetic but told him they would have to detain him for a while. Olaf went out into the police-station yard and put on a tremendous performance, stamping, yelling and rain-dancing among the sergeant's vegetables and flowerbeds. The whole station came out to watch. When they were all out looking at him, Olaf stopped. "There, you got what you wanted,' he said, and strolled over to the door of the cell block. His parting words with his mother were on the same imperious plane, 'Stop your crying. I want to go. It's the best thing that could happen.'

Questioned about her feelings, Rosa did admit to some apprehension when the children were old enough to play outside, and also, characteristically, that it did disturb her when people called and commented on how much worse Olaf had become. 'Living next to it,' she said, 'it was going on all the time, I was just accepting it. I never felt that he would be harmful in any way, however much he made a noise. Towards

the end I did worry a bit. Not that I thought he'd do anything, but I wondered how it was all going to end. There were reports of a Peeping Tom around, and I know the police had their suspicions it was Olaf.' Listening to Tim and Rosa was a lesson in tolerance. There was the law and the mad-house, if things got bad enough; there was proper married life, which they valued and held to; and everything else just had to be accepted. Eccentric people could not be dismissed, they were the unfortunate offshoot of some family and they had their place. Someone had to look after them, and it was the townspeople's business to recognise the relatives' feelings in their treatment of the unfortunate one. Besides—and my admiration for Tim and Rosa knew no bounds—even the strangest had their human dignity to be preserved; to treat them otherwise was to lessen oneself.

This came naturally to my friends, who had lived most of their lives in the town. Even so small an area as the few blocks bounded by Main Street, the Catholic buildings, Riverine Street and the Lakeland Ice-works contained an infinite web of human relations, a network which spread into newer residential areas and the countryside beyond the town. Listening to Rosa and Jean chatting with complete familiarity about people and their homes—'You know that little shed he's got down there at the end of the side path, the one with the creeper all over it?' 'Oh, yes, Jean, go on.'—I often recalled my first weeks in the town, trying to come to grips with it. My first approach was to the printed page. Like many before and since, I went to the library and asked, 'What is there on this area?' There was very little; the novel *Providence Ponds*, Eve Langley's *Pea Pickers*, and a few booklets of the Back to Bairnsdale type. Hal Porter's superbly atmospheric stories were appearing in The Bulletin at the time, but it was some time before I was aware of this. The town had honoured few of its sons; apart from the usual soldier memorials in Main Street and a sprinkling of Angus Macmillan cairns about the countryside, the only public recognition was for the first settler, the first baby born and the first marriage celebrated. And I did see in the Children's Library a metal plaque, a low relief of Marie E. J. Pitt. I was told that she was the local poetess; dead, but one of her descendants still lived somewhere about. I

borrowed her slim volume of verse from the library and was very scornful. I copied out some of her verses in a mood of high derision.

O Bairnsdale by the Mitchell side!
A city still you are to me
When night brings peace that day denied,
And dreaming sets my spirit free . . .

There is a path among the years,
A path I scarcely dare to take,
Lest anguish of forbidden tears
Should start for some old sorrow's sake.

Yet Father Mitchell still, I know,
Keeps one old play-place dear to me, . . .

And one white road will keep alway
Youth's sweetest memory ever green,
A wayside chapel worn and grey,
The little school 'Sixteen sixteen'.

On trips back to Melbourne I delivered these verses in sobbing recitation to university friends. Such archaic sentimentality! Yet night after night I went in search of the town myself, staring at the goods on display in the shops, comparing them with the up-to-dateness and teeming variety in Melbourne's windows. I entertained the idea of learning all the shops in the order of their line-up. After all, the cold electric light did offer something to a stranger. If Bairnsdale had a heart, surely it must be here? Lewis's experience delighted me, pointing to my own reaction to those forbidding back streets.

Lewis was doing final-year architecture at Melbourne; a recent memory was of him seated on a patio at the fag-end of an all-night party, still fresh, dandling a walking-stick and observing, as five swans flew over in a perfect V, 'Ah, Nature up to her old trick of imitating art.' Lewis the perfect, conscious aesthete in Bairnsdale! The Shire Council

had ideas of erecting a Civic Centre. They invited the final-year architecture students down to study the problem and submit drawings; it was mooted that there might be a 'competition'. The idea was doomed to dissatisfaction, but the students duly came and were met by their billets, various Rotarians and shop-keepers. Lewis got off on the wrong foot by missing the afternoon train and arriving late at night. His hosts, Dick and Margo Campbell, quickly smoothed this over. They told him at breakfast that they were spending the night, Saturday night, with friends. Would he like to come? Of course, he mustn't think he was under any obligation ... Lewis remembered a relative, found him during the day, and left the Commercial somewhere near midnight.

He set out to find the Campbells'. As he said, 'All those corners look the same. There's just a street-light and a lot of dreary houses in every direction.' After wandering for some time, and losing his sense of where even Main Street was, he decided that this corner seemed more likely than the others. He set off down the street and found a house that might be it. The outside light was off, but while Lewis deliberated the street-lights went off, so he had no choice. He went down the driveway and examined the back porch. 'Now, back porches are not so very much unlike one another.' He ventured in, groped his way into the kitchen and dared to turn on the light. 'Now, between one reasonably up-to-date kitchen and another, there are few memorable differences.' He stole down the hall, counting the doors, and decided that if he was in the right house *this* would be his room. In an agony of indecision he stood for a minute or more, his hand on the light switch. Who would stir or scream if he turned it on? He plucked up his courage and mercifully the light revealed his case on the bed.

It was awful to be in a country town. The shops shut and night fell, leaving a string of street-lights above the Princes Highway. Many of the Main Street addresses were not lit up at night. If you left the footpath it could only be to buy a milkshake or hamburger. The films at the Prince Regent were the ones you ignored in Melbourne. There was after-hours drinking, and you had the privilege of using the public phones. Or the garages offered you the commoner makes of cars, new behind glass and second-hand in the yard, locked. Even this was scarcely more than one

street deep. Behind the shop facades were rank on rank and file on file of houses. You could count on one hand the ones that were architect-designed, or pretended to be, but costly or poor, well made or jerry-built, each was a fastness. Each stood in a darkened garden, showing the night and the stranger one or two rectangles of light. Families moved in closed cars, or young men cruised around the streets looking out from their darkened cabins. There was no public life one could participate in. Well, there were clubs, apparently, and the town band played a few numbers amid the traffic noise on a Saturday morning, but everyone, from the doctor who owned an ocean-going yacht to the grubby school cleaner, had a functional job—groundsman, carpet-layer, painter, shop-assistant. What deTocqueville called the arts that adorn life were practised only in spare time, as hobbies. The town was incapable of a general statement or celebration of its life and being.

Older friends said, 'It'll seem different once you get to know a few people.' Would it? I looked in the obvious places and was disappointed. There was the school's concert. Twice a year the Prince Regent theatre had a change from films; once for the Catholic Ball and once for Education Night. For two nights of the year the huge old building was filled, though I never understood why people presented themselves for the speeches and rural school items of the latter occasion. Still, Miss Caithness was to conduct the High School choir, and the last of her three numbers was to be 'O Bairnsdale by the Mitchell side!'

Miss Caithness was one of the town's possessions. Though her teaching of dress-making and singing at the High School had a dismal reputation, she was never quite dismissed. She belonged to an era of Bairnsdale's past that the town could not easily put out of mind. Old newspapers carried the notices of people setting themselves up as paper-hangers, gas-fitters and teachers of the mandoline. Like these people, Miss Caithness pre-dated the age of official qualifications for jobs. Although she could not play the piano herself, she had ideas about voice-training and production which she put into practice with her pupils. You either believed in her, or you didn't. Most didn't. Yet she had been a figure of fun for enough years to have earned her place in the town's gallery of

public figures and the personalities in this select band could not easily be dismissed.

She approached her rostrum with airs sufficient for the Berlin Philharmonic. A grey suit, flared at the knees, covered the figure which claimed your attention when she rode down the street. Breasts like melons and a matching belly were hemmed in by rigid arms and powerful foundation-garments. Her buttocks bulging behind the little bicycle seat were like a tightly-rolled mattress. Her back was poker straight. Her lips were pursed in whorls of flesh and her eyes were fixed at the middle distance straight ahead, as if all traffic dangers lay there. If she looked to the right, she free-wheeled.

Her concert audience, familiar with all this, enjoyed her bowing to them. She had modelled her style on the amply-built divas of the Golden Age of Singing. With back bent and bust drooping, she nodded here and there, her body pivoting about a stationary bottom. One felt that so very, very many of the audience must be her dear friends. As she turned to the stage, she threw up her hands as if in delight that a perfect instrument for realising her musical dreams lay to hand in the choir of girls and pre-adolescent boys. It was said that many of them were dragooned into the choir by shameless blustering. Cocking her right ear as if to catch ethereal harmonies, she laid her head to the left and offered her audience a loving sidelong smile. One thought of a swollen Baroque angel, as perhaps one was meant to. Then, her back to the audience, she nodded to Mrs Turner. The introductory bars on the piano were flaccid and unphrased, whereas Miss Caithness's ten fingers, spread fanwise against the well-lit backdrop, waggled with great spirit. At the split second of the choir's entry, Miss Caithness's mouth became a sizeable oblong, rimmed by fleshy lips. The attack, at least, was good. Arms still sweeping the air, she mouthed the words at her singers. Several of them giggled. She turned elsewhere and added her voice to the failing sopranos. The unexpected power in the first part put the altos off, so Miss Caithness leapt to their support, taking half the sopranos with her. 'Girls!!!' she hissed between verses, and the second verse went according to plan, though the alto descant was ragged.

'O Bairnsdale by the Mitchell side!', when it came, was notable for the thinness of the voices. The first vowel in *Bairns*dale was too goat-like for comfort. A number of the girls were conscious of this and their mischievous grins and nudges went ill with—

> Ah! who shall say what vows long made,
> What prayers like lilies incense-crowned,
> Live yet beneath your pine-trees' shade
> To keep you always holy ground?

Although Miss Caithness frowned at the restless elements in her choir, she was not disconcerted by their amusement. She herself often told them, tongue in cheek, that if they did not marry and were careful of themselves, they could have a figure like hers, and to her classes of pubescent boys and girls she categorised herself as 'one of God's unclaimed treasures'. One wondered if they would ever feel for her the naive sentiments of Marie Pitt's:

> O little school, O place apart,
> Bush Alma Mater wise and true,
> Who gave us all of saving art
> And kindly knowledge that we knew!

The choir rallied for the last verse and gave Miss Caithness her extra volume. With life opening up inside them and in front of them, they sang regardlessly through:

> O Bairnsdale, Bairnsdale, when my will
> Breaks free of day's poor broken schemes,
> You are my morning city still ...
> My city of a thousand dreams.

Their unconcern for what they were singing was surprisingly touching and presaged the fact that the beautiful, poignant and memorable things

of the next twelve years were to be accidentals, moments of realisation of what lay beneath the unremarkable surface.

Such realisations took time, and involvement. There is no marching into country towns, picking the plums and strolling away again. You are offered as much as you offer, neither more nor less. But apart from deeper commitments, the mere fact of living in a small town exposes you to an endless wash of talk, contact, news and incidents observed. I noticed, towards the end of my stay in Bairnsdale, that whenever I entered Pannam's Bakery my eyes went straight to the bread orders laid out on the shelves. The loaves sat in rows with family names lettered in black texta-colour on the white tissue: GUILLOT, GRAHAM, WOODBURY ... the names begin to resonate … JONES, BILLS, FISHER, FRANCIS, MANN … some known to me and some strangers, but all, like myself, elected to play out a part of their lives on the board called Gippsland … STEPHESON … how did they spell GUILLOT properly? ... HARRISON, WALSH, FERGUSON, HOWLETT, PAYNE ... Australian names, a roll-call of the living almost as moving as the lists on the war-memorials ... BULMER, GOODMAN, CHIPPENDALL, GROVE ... the idle mind waiting for the rows to be served lets itself wander in free association ... GROVE ... there were two brothers went through the Technical School. One was drowsy and slow-witted; the other, though a gifted relaxer, had a superb figure, like a native policeman. Both stood head and shoulders over their mother but had her olive-brown skin, white teeth and curly black hair. Michael was known as Boongey, Tony as Marbuk; the contrasting response to them by the other boys was nicely caught in their nicknames.

The town is full of nicknames. There is Super Feet, who works in the hardware and timber-yard out the back of Deakin's, Doodles Dooley, the publican, and Skeeter Marshall, who runs the bicycle-repair shop. Scores of children and their not-so-wealthy parents depend on Skeeter to find a bit from somewhere, instead of making them buy a new part, and Skeeter does it, in his little wooden premises between the Big Garage and Eastern Roadlines. The town is full of nicknames, though like the raisins in the cake they are thickest at the bottom. They fly thick and fast in the railways goods-shed and the hotels. When Nick

Hurley was barman at the BRC, he often spoke of Hawkeye, Strange Freddy and Canadian Joe, all members of the pub's clientele. And the whole town, with an indefinable correctness, accepted the labelling of the over-efficient motorbike policeman as Sputnik. The name and the tone of saying it was as damaging as the bag of sugar that was tipped in his petrol-tank. Till the day he left, people looked up as he revved past and said, "There goes Sputnik! Who's he after now?'

His actions were always antics to the Main Street audience, who understood very well the use of nicknames for derision, and also for labelling their own. At the football both sexes and all ages call out, 'Hoot Meehan! Yours Hoot!' or 'Get into it Porky Ellis!' because the players are theirs. They are a part of public property, just as Tiger Walsh and Drake Ibbott are in Lindenow South. Deep-seated attitudes show out; Doctor Jellicoe is Toby, but the drover with a house of secondhand bricks a few yards from the cemetery is Plugger McClure. When the horses are brought into the bull-ring over at the sale-yards, Plugger hops on to show them off. If the owner insists on riding them in the ring, Plugger stands by the wooden wall and flicks the horse with his whip. He shows his teeth in a bony grin as the horse skips around too fast for the rider's comfort in the tiny space. The rider can hardly get off in the presence of so many horsemen and judges of horseflesh, so he has to sit it out till the auctioneer shouts, 'Gone!' and someone murmurs, 'He's a bastard when he wants to be, Plugger.' But when the rodeo comes to town and all the riders are strangers, people are pleased to see Plugger in the arena roping in the horses at the end of the rides. He makes a spectacle out of it, and draws a round of applause and the comment, 'Old Plugger. By gee. He coulda been a famous rider.' The nicknames are thickest among people who have led most of their lives in the town. For them, ageing bodies are just the latest of the fancy-dresses life puts on their childhood friends. At the Wy Yung Hall one night, with Wy Yung the flag winners for the first time in twenty-eight years, two beer-carrying men approached each other. Both were in their fifties and both wore hats despite the crowded dancing; 'Owareya, Bonker?' 'Alright, Tiny.'

Wy Yung is a farming community a mile or two north of Bairnsdale where the Woodbury family predominate. In Swan Reach it

is the Morrisons, at Goon Nure the Kyles, at Meerlieu the Blandfords, at Glenaladale the Borrows, and there are Scotts in both Lindenow and Dargo. Gippsland's stalest joke is that in Buchan there's nothing but Hodges, Rogers and rabbits; but stale or no, there is no getting away from these area families. There are two or three in every rural school, tennis-club, cricket-team, fire-brigade or Red Cross Auxiliary and half a dozen listed in the phone book. Out at Mount Taylor you may hear someone say, 'The bloody Langs, they want to run everything; they can't keep their nose out of anything.' The girls who have married never lose their identity ('Oh, yes, Peggy, she's a Lang.') and with their claim on their husbands' loyalties are a sort of submerged threat to any open discussion of public affairs. Local issues seem to get resolved along lines of For and Against the most numerous family. Their smugness can be infuriating. They take local history no further than Granpa and Granma. The mind tires of hearing people fumbling to describe the individuals in the ruling house of some area of two miles by three— 'Jack, well, yes, now he's different from David, although there's something about 'em alike, too. But Chris, he's different altogether, though I suppose he's a bit the same, really.' The weight of their opinion is a heavy brake on each other and on their neighbours, especially if one of them has the biggest house in the area, when people with peasant-like attitudes will accuse them of playing the squire. Wy Yung is lucky in having the Woodburys, who are community-conscious and middle-of-the-road progressive.

For a conservative, we have to turn to Mr Jones. He is the best-known of the partners in the Bairnsdale Newsagency, unless you are a frequent buyer of Tatt's tickets, in which case your dealings will be with the austerely benevolent Mr Price, senior. Mr Price's desk is halfway down the shop. It is knowingly mentioned at the Men's Club that this technique for making lottery-ticket buyers walk past the magazines and greeting-cards is 'worth a lot of money, over twelve months'. Someone once described Mr Jones as the personification of Karl Marx's bourgeois shop-keeper. He growls at his newsboys and shop-girls and talks at his customers while he presses the cash-register buttons to ring up a sale. Then he interrupts himself to say, 'What am I doing?' and he peers over the top of his thin-rimmed glasses to find where he has pressed the

wrong button. The light overhead catches his sparse silver hair as he says, 'Oh, that'll be right,' and digs out the change. 'Wait a moment,' he says, 'I'll wrap it up for you,' and the liquid glue or box of ring-reinforcers goes into a white envelope. The girls nearly always use brown ones, but Mr Jones conveys an air of not wanting to be petty as he rips the bag off its string. He never handles the toys. If he sees a child sneaking a look at a comic, he calls out, 'Hey! I say there, chap! Come on now, right away from there.' He turns around and explains to the nearest adult, 'Nothing but dogears, we couldn't sell them if we let them have a free go. Look, you've got no idea, some of them . . .' All the same, when the paper-van is late he lets his newsboys flick through the paperbacks and comics, even though his permission is disguised as, 'Who said you could look at that? Look, before they've been in a week they're all in tatters. You be careful with those, or I won't let you touch them. When's this blessed van going to turn up?'

While he waits, he will deliver his views on recent events, very likely extemporising on a text taken from the front page of Truth. He is a conservative whose causes are largely lost now. In the days when tours by the Queen and the Queen Mother climaxed the romance between the Australian newspaper public and British royalty, Mr Jones felt himself on solider ground. Menzies ruled Australia, Asia's rebellions were no more worthy of study than South America's (trouble was caused by the Communists), the British were right at Suez, except that they didn't go far enough, and the British Empire—call it the Commonwealth if you wanted to—was still the most potent civilising influence in the world. Mr Jones was likely to challenge a schoolmaster with boyishly-garbled versions of his views on The Empire, inferring disloyalty to Her Majesty. Now that his certainties have been swept away, he still acts as a guardian of public morality but the double standard is more obvious. He pauses in a tirade on censorship to serve a PMG linesman with Post, Pix, or one of the other weeklies with a beach-girl cover and a feature article on 'Teenage Sex' or 'Unsuspected Dangers of The Pill'. If pressed more closely, he will say, shaking his head as one who knows only too well, 'Some of this stuff they're bringing in, well, it's just filth, that's the only name for it. And they want to do away with censorship altogether! Oh,

no! Oh, no!' All the same, when the ban was lifted on *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, the Bairnsdale Newsagency was quick to make a window display out of a dozen or more copies of the book. And the shelves with their hundreds of paperbacks are only a few feet behind Mr Jones. There are the good stock lines—E.V. Timms, Georgette Heyer, *They're a Weird Mob* and its sequels, *Doctor in the House*, Ion Idriess titles, *Steak for Breakfast* and Arthur Upfield's Bony books. There is a range of the latest Penguins, and then there are the long lines of covers depicting seduction, flagellation and imminent rape. Mr Jones lets himself out with, 'We keep an eye on that stuff; that's not for the kids.'

The children's books, and the hard-covers, are at the back of the shop. If you want to buy one as a present, you follow Miss Morrissey down the shop, half-admiring the unselfconsciousness of her stumpy gait. She moves among the shelves like a sturdy tug and points out the new books: 'All good books, lovely books, they're all very lovely books.' But these are only the margins of her domain. We come through to the desk littered with publishers' lists of two or three years back and look around while she talks. This corner of the shop, her corner, has rows and rows of well-worn books. There are no plastic jackets, but each one bears a round yellow sticker, 'Bairnsdale Book Club', and if the signs are to be believed, borrowing is still done in sixpences and pennies. These doses of escape from the domestic round—for male borrowers are rare—are classified for easy reference. There are AUSTRALIAN books, and TRAVEL. Two other groups are STORICAL and AUTO & BIOGRAPHY. Wherever is ROMANCE? There's no escape without romance, except through Tatt's. Miss Morrissey is pleased with herself this morning. Here's a woman in a new, dotted-white frock, and Vera only has her drab blue shop-dress on. Vera is a chinless miss and the newcomer has dyed hair, a strong deep voice and a flashing ring, but Vera is on top this morning. The ticket they shared won ten dollars, but Vera had another one and that brought her a nice cool fifty. Where is romance? What does Vera say? 'Oh, you'd never growl about Bairnsdale. It's a lovely town. You've got everything here.'

This is the most common public statement on Bairnsdale by its people. Stock- or estate-agents will add, with aggressive friendliness,

'What more d'you want?' If the town were less favoured by Nature, the attitude might be more defensive, but as things are, it is a fair question. 'You've got everything here,' they say. Once again we have to distinguish between the civilisation and its setting. The completeness of the landscape is profoundly satisfying, whereas the civilisation spread over the lowlands and squeezed up the valleys is less remarkable. As a region Gippsland has a unique flavour, but as a sampling of twentieth-century civilisation, it is strictly mediocre. When arrangements were finally completed for the Victorian Symphony Orchestra to make their first-ever visit to the town, they came well under full strength and played simple works. About the time the Hippy cult was dying in San Francisco, or wherever it began, the adventurous young of Bairnsdale were writing 'LSD for ever!' on the stage backdrop at the Mechanics Institute dance. It was common for commentary on a Melbourne League game to blare across the field as a Bairnsdale player lined up a shot for goal. Arthur Montrose, whose amplifier is responsible, wonders why you protest.

Yet the same Arthur Montrose is, in a wonderful way, the twentieth-century town-crier. His Ford Fairlane cruises around the town with Arthur at the wheel and someone beside him holding a mike. The amplified message bounces back from the shop facades and washes down the street behind the grey metal horn mounted on Monty's car; 'The paper-drive that was to be held this afternoon is now cancelled. Because of the rain the paper-drive that was to be held this afternoon . . .' The words are lost as Monty swings into Service Street. Another day he will be back with, 'Don't forget tonight, the night-football game to be played at the West Bairnsdale Oval; Buchan versus Wy Yung. The seconds' curtain-raiser starts at six o'clock and a good night's entertainment is guaranteed. This is the last game of the season. Tonight at West Bairnsdale Oval.' In the street on a Saturday morning, Monty's messages give unity and contact. His powerful amplifier spreads village news and village values, just as it broadcast the rising sense of urgency one morning in March 1965 when, faster than usual, his car moved around the town crying, 'The fire situation has deteriorated. Volunteer fire-fighters are requested to report to the Lucknow Hall immediately. The fire situation has deteriorated ...'

The days of fire crisis in that year were a time of heightened living, when Bairnsdale felt a unity in itself, with its outlying towns, and a sense of importance in the eyes of the State. The great fire began on a ridge north of Briagolong. To begin with it was caused by a lightning strike, but when the fires had run their course and died, there were voices claiming that someone had had it from a chap on one of the towers down that way that two fires started up in quick succession, on a ridge where there was a road, 'and the second one was back from the first; he was on the way out when he lit another.' This sort of rumour, as unverifiable as divine truth, was rife throughout those days when the town created a sense of crisis as part of its response to the danger in the hills. The Mitchell was low at the time, and many people must have wondered, as I did, what sort of water-pressure would be offering if fire approached the town through the dry grass paddocks to the west. At the best of times there is a certain salt content in the river between Bairnsdale and Lake King; in the week of waiting before the fire rushed out of the Dargo road hills, gossip produced a classic. At two o'clock one day I was told that the water at the Mitchell River swimming-pool was twenty-five per cent saline; at half-past five, outside Woolworth's, it was anxiously bleated that the pool was unsafe because it was forty-five per cent urine. Some elements of the town seemed to be preparing for plague.

The omens, however, were of fire. All one Sunday a stream of smoke issued from the west, yet the major peaks were still visible. It was like a ship on fire beyond the horizon. At one in the morning a hot wind got up, whipped the red glow into terrifying activity and ran the fire fifteen miles to Cobbanah. Every leaf in every valley it ran through was burnt, every trunk was blackened, the gravel took on a scorched appearance. Cobbanah's post-office and only house was abandoned just in time as sparks and burning leaves fell miles in advance of the main fire. The streets and gardens of Bairnsdale, thirty miles away, were scattered with ash and seared gum leaves. Then for a week and a half the fire sat in the valleys off the Dargo road, flames ankle-high licking through the grass and bulldozers scraping lines to contain it. For a week the sky was a yellow-brown murk, with the sun a sullen yellow in the eastern

sky and a baleful red in the west. People recalled the 1939 fires ('They had the street-lights on in the day; you couldn't see the other side of the street.') and wondered what was coming. On a Wednesday the wind got up again and fire raced down the Dargo road, through Glenaladale, over the Mitchell and into Melwood. Further north, Bullumwaal huddled in its valley breathing in smoke and spraying water on logs in the mill-yards. Long tongues of fire ran across the Nicholson country, one almost touching Marthavale at the feet of Baldhead. At night, in half a dozen directions, clouds reflected the smouldering red beneath them.

Thursday was still, so was Friday morning. Then the wind lifted again, the sky went brown as a dust storm. In Bairnsdale itself there was a hush, as if in the middle of a hurricane. Then tankers and peculiar reports began to fill the streets. 'They reckon it's got to Lakes.' "They reckon the Bruthen road's closed, they sent the school buses home at half-past-two.' "They reckon the line's down to Buchan, there's nothing been heard from them since ten o'clock this morning, there's been cars through, they reckon it's pretty bad.' On Friday night the flames ran through Wy Yung, igniting gas from the dry grass and the eucalypt leaves in balls of fire far ahead of the main fire. From Bairnsdale's Picnic Point the other side of the river was a mass of glowing stumps and blazing grass. The wind was streaming off the fire towards the town's western end where, between the houses following the ribbons of road, were dangerous fields of long dry grass. An invasion by the fire demon seemed certain, but the tanker crews quelled the blaze. In the morning it seemed certain again, with hot winds billowing in from the north. The town was rife with rumour—'They reckon it's into Bruthen; Sarsfield's gone. It come in there west of the pub.' The rumours were not far from the truth, but their point was to create a garrison-town mentality, which was heightened by dramatic aerial photos in the Melbourne morning papers.

A considerable organisation was set up at the Lucknow Hall, with tankers and area units reporting the fire situation back by static-ridden radio. As in the great campaigns of war, the messages and notes were kept and filed in order of receiving. Lines of exhausted fire-fighters, still in their blackened clothes, lay in blankets on the wooden floor. A first-aid station bathed eyes and treated burns. There was tea and food

available in generous quantities. Maps lay over tables. The command-post worked night and day, piecing together the fire picture from the messages that got through, and despatching fresh tankers. Railway-trucks brought water and eager fire-fighters smashed down the fence near the East Bairnsdale railway-crossing so that tankers could back right up to the line. The tankers themselves came from far and wide. In white letters along both sides of the red bonnets were names of South Gippsland towns, names from down the line, names of veteran brigades from the Dandenongs, brigades from Donald and further west, all flocking to the aid of Gippsland. The supporting tankers moved down Main Street on Saturday morning under an ominous sky, the crews conscious of being watched, saying nothing and looking purposeful, like soldiers in armoured gun-carriers. Loads of toys were taken, somewhat unnecessarily, to the outlying halls, in case there were stricken and homeless children in need of amusement.

The battle lasted through the long weekend, with Monty's van making its call on the Monday morning. It produced results, in the shape of hundreds of unlikely fire-fighters flocking to the Lucknow Hall in the most delightful assortment of hiking, gardening, genuine army and army-disposals, sporting and cast-off clothing. There were rakes, brooms and improvised beaters. There were crowds swarming all over every tanker to set off for the scene of action. Fifteen men struggled to get into the tray of a Holden utility until Mr Cassidy, the CFA officer in charge, came out with a trans-hailer in one hand and his left thumb hooked in his belt to persuade a few of the zealots out, I noticed the librarian, the Presbyterian parson and a sprinkling of other less active men drifting around to the trestle-tables where the town's womenfolk of middle age had answered the call just as readily. They had hundreds of bags of sandwiches and rolls and limitless quantities of tea, but no one wanting to eat or drink. Hundreds of cars double- and triple-parked each other for the quarter-mile before the hall. It was interesting to note that very few parked beyond the hall, despite the confusion. Bairnsdale was defending itself, and beyond the hall was fire territory, despite the charred hillside to the north which had presumably been lit as a break. For the fire-fighters making their way into the hills, the smoke clouds

billowing from behind nearby hills were ominous. It was easy to believe Mr Cassidy's words in the Orient on the Saturday night, 'Stop it? What do you mean stop it? The Ninety Mile Beach, that's all that'll stop it, if it gets the wind behind it.'

The wind died, and with it the sense of living dangerously that kept the town keyed up while the tankers rolled in and the papers told the country as much as they knew of what was happening in Gippsland. The fire-fighters chain-sawed trees off the road and filled in burnt-out culverts with rocks. They drove home through grass burning lightly, and little flicks of flame running up the stringybarks. Millions of stumps glowed in the night. Branches crashed down, showering sparks in the darkened bush. The out-of-town tanker crews remembered their jobs and farms, and went home. The bush smouldered for a fortnight, and then there was rain. People reminded each other that fire can burn underground, in the roots, and come up to the surface days, even weeks, after you think it's safe. But the high excitement was over and we fell to discussing fires and fire-fighting. 'It's a funny thing, fire. When it's not there, you don't know where it can come from. When it's there, it's terrifying, it'll kill you. And when it's gone, you look at all the mess and you wonder, well, how did it do that?' It was a good comment. The insubstantial fire had drawn a response from the town which suggested, palely enough, what I imagine would be the mentality of a town under siege. For weeks afterwards we discussed what we thought and did when there was danger in the air. Our minutest actions and observations took on an importance from the presence of a dangerous enemy. Our talk was like the My War articles and books that came out in a rash in the 'fifties.

For farmers whose stock and property had been destroyed, it was a different matter. In its first rush through Glenaladale the fire took almost every blade of grass on Mr Borrow's property and almost took the house. When the blaze came rushing out of the hills on the Wednesday afternoon, the Borrows, like everyone else in the area, were ordered to evacuate. Mr Borrow told Sid Jeffries, the first constable, that Mrs Borrow was inside and that he didn't think she'd go, unless the policeman himself told her. The policeman, never one to confront a situation, said, 'Tell her she's under orders to evacuate,' and drove off. Given the message, Mrs

Borrow said, 'I don't think I will. I don't think I will.' One can imagine her beautiful, lively eyes setting firm in her much-wrinkled face at the thought of abandoning her home. It was a weatherboard farmhouse, many years old. There was little in it that was new, or expensive, but every board, shelf and cupboard had been in continuous use by a family who put living in front of appearances. Mrs Borrow was persuaded to leave, and Mr Borrow stayed.

He must have felt very small and unprotected as the wind rushed the smoke of the oncoming fire past him. His son Evan was away somewhere fighting it and Evan's wife and small children would at that moment be driving out of the foothill country for the shelter of the Lindenow flats. As the fire came, his neighbour Lyle Bowes arrived. The fire swept up, burnt grass and many of the trees by the roadside, and actually set alight some of the rubbish under the old house. Lyle dived under to put it out, horrifying Mr Borrow, who sang out, 'Let it go, Lyle, come out of there. It's gone now, let it go.' But Lyle sprayed water on the burning material and Mr Borrow sprayed water on him, and they saved the house. Mr Borrow's heart was not good and it must have been a fearful strain. Hours later, when Evan returned safe and sound, Mr Borrow was overcome. He was unconscious for some time, though when I saw him next, he claimed that he was quite alright ('Oh, just a bit of a spell, you know.') but he looked so forlorn, wandering slowly along a line of charred fence-posts and blackened, drooping wires. All the hills and gullies of his land were blackened, and there was a lurking smoke haze all over the country. The air still smelt of fire and burning bush. Yet Mr Borrow, rising nobly to the occasion as ever, discussed with my companion the plight of the bush creatures, nosing around the fire-blackened gravel trying to find something to eat.

Between his house and Bairnsdale were miles of farming country. Much of it was in the same state. Tongues of burnt grass ran up to garden fences, and stopped. White-walled houses stood in a sea of black. Animals wandered about stupidly. Farmers who hardly knew where to start with getting their farms in order wandered about with knapsacks, spraying stumps and smouldering pats of cow dung. No lives had been lost, but there was so much to do and it was hard to find the faith that

the land would ever recover. I remembered with discomfort my sharing of the general mood in the town, the rush of enthusiasm to get into it. No lives had been lost, there was great coming and going by day and by night—it was all rather like a successful party to the swarms of volunteers in Bairnsdale. Weekend wood-getters were pleased to get into action. CMF members acted, very capably let it be said, as in a realistic exercise. Hundreds of the town's young men forgot school or their hotted-up Holdens to throw themselves into the battle.

And the battle was with Nature, or the destructive force she had loosed on herself. For a brief while, defending the town and holding centre-stage in the State news, events spectacularly recalled the frontier days when what happened at the perimeter vitally mattered. Then also the struggle was with Nature, when horsemen searched for the best route for the axemen to cut the roads, when boats nosed up the lakes charting the channels, when small selectors made slab huts and squatters imported names from home to dub their holdings—Lindenow, Lucknow, Montgomery, Kilmany, Murrungowar. Today, folk-museums eagerly search for the few remaining artefacts from that dialogue with Nature. Perhaps the most wonderful of them is the red-gum bath found and restored by Harley Wills of Bairnsdale. He found it half-buried in dirt under a tree at one of the earliest-settled farms near Metung. Contemplating this oddity, three feet long and perhaps six inches deep—with a plughole!— it is amusing to think of the pioneer farmer carting his bucket of hot water into a lean-to shanty, or perhaps a shaded spot under a tree, stripping himself naked and dabbing beneath the armpits while dogs and roosters considered their master. Rough, yes, but the fringe mattered, then, as civilisation made its outward move. Things like the bath, and hand-carved bullock harnesses, fascinate us today, but they were by-products; the real creation of the period was the nineteenth-century village, and elements of it are still to be sensed in Bairnsdale, though they may not press themselves on one's attention at first, for Bairnsdale's centre of gravity has changed.

Main Street is still, and always was, Main Street, that pregnant term we borrowed from the American frontier, but once it led you to the river

and now it takes you through the town and beyond. The concrete bridge over the Mitchell is a very minor incident on Highway One and photos of the river in flood are curiosity pieces today. Once there was a punt, and a punt at the Nicholson, and a punt on the Tambo at Swan Reach, and then you went down to Cunninghame at the lakes' entrance to the sea. And if you had a mind to go right on to Orbost—travelling by land, that is—why, you avoided the creeks that feed Lake Tyers by going along the beach. The mouth of the lake was usually silted up with sand. And then your track went inland a little; far enough to keep Ewing's Marsh well to your right, not so far that you had to cross deep boggy gullies. At Orbost, punt again, if the Snowy was peaceable. But why not travel around by boat? You could get through the Snowy's mouth at Marlo, and if you came through at Cunninghame—Lakes Entrance—you could go up the rivers to Bairnsdale, Sale and Mossiface! These were the days of water; water the barrier, water for travel and transport, and water the lure, the automatic attraction. Nothing is so touching about the early tourist brochures as their endless featuring of water—little rilly rapids, quiet reaches overhung by poplar and willow, sodden gullies with fern trees and sassafras. Booklet after booklet had round or oval photos of watering-places guaranteed to bring Wordsworthian delight to the tourist and relief to the traveller.

At night he stayed, drinker or not, at the hotel where the coach changed horses. If he came through from Sale, there was a stop at Stratford, taking its name inevitably from the Avon River. The long stretch through dry red-gum country was broken by a red-roofed building now dying in the sun a few yards west of Tom's Creek. At night there was the Imperial Hotel, the one near the wharf, or the Exchange Hotel, at the top of the rise from the river into Lucknow. The buildings are still there, the Imperial renovated, the Exchange transmuted into an all-hours fruit-shop, grocery and milk-bar, just as much a period-piece in its new form as in its old. The hotel at Sarsfield, where the bridge spans the Nicholson, is delicensed; Bruthen still flourishes, but the pub at Tambo Crossing was burnt down and the changing-stations at Double Bridges and Wattle Circle Creek exist only in the handed-down say-so of local history. It is fruitless to look there now. Try as you may, it is hard to see

these grassy clearings peopled with travellers, big-wheeled coaches and sweaty horses. Stare as long as you like at those haunting name-boards on the Omeo Road—Piano Box Creek, Bark Sheds Creek, Battle Point—you cannot bring their past alive again. In Bairnsdale, though, if you savour certain parts of the town long and carefully, it can be done.

The river is the place to begin the search. Costly new homes are still being built overlooking the river. Couples drive down there at lunch-time to eat sandwiches, and talk. The Camping Park is set right on the river and enjoys its reputation and prizes for creating a lifeless and degenerate form of suburbia. Even its mini-trees, gravel drives and power-point for every caravan are somewhat overshadowed, though, by the presence of Johnson's Tannery.

In an architecturally poverty-stricken town, this building stands alone for the soul and spirit it possesses. Like the Imperial Hotel, on the opposite side of the built-up highway, it has seen floods enough. They tell tales of the waters swirling around the bar of the Imperial and the tannery has often had its ground floor awash. The building presents little resistance to a flood. Most of the under-storey on the river side is open, yet once you take a few steps inside, the impression is of darkness. In front, you see nothing but chinks of light finding their way through the partitions and machinery; to the side, everything is seen in a brown light; looking back, you see in silhouette the rods and levers that agitate the hides. These are immersed in the tanning liquid which Mr Johnson calls bark liquor. It is a common sight to see a truck pulled up on the weigh-bridge just outside, loaded with bundles of bark stripped from the black wattles in the bush. Sometimes on outlying farms you see these same squarish bundles stacked by the road ready to take in. The bark curls as it dries, grey outside and brown on the inside. It is broken into chips by one of the tannery's many pre-industrial-design machines, some river water is pumped into a concrete trough and the tannin is extracted from the chips. You stand among the rows of troughs looking into a liquid like over-stewed tea. Above you, the belts slap and the levers creak and something fleshy stirs in the tannic brew. For a moment the rows of hides surface, burgundy waters run off and you see the curing skins, then they lower out of sight and light catches the bubbles. You see these

same skins when you enter the building. The concrete floor has a fatty feeling for some yards before you come to the drying-stack. This is a well-squashed pile of skins oozing with fresh dark blood and dull crystals of salt gone soft with the moisture absorbed. On the top of the pile are the skins still soft from the slaughtered animals. The sides have row upon row of woolly fringes curling out. Just outside this area of the tannery are forty-four-gallon drums, with dry bent poles resting on them. Other poles rest on these poles in a rough design and you wonder ... but a few days later scores of skins are strung out in the sun along these sticks. The tannery truck has been out to the abattoirs to collect the spoils from the endless massacre of sheep.

A huge chimney-stack shows where the boiler used to raise steam to work the pumps and levers. The boiler has been sold for scrap-iron, which is unusual, because the tannery is littered with reminders of its past. Wandering through the huge, largely disused building, you come on a stencil, black but very dry now, for labelling bundles KARACHI. That was during the war, when the tannery was kept 'really busy'. Other stencils lie in abandon on the floor. Tea-tree sticks, oily from hides, rest on rolling and cutting machines. The oil in the cogs has caught dust and cobwebs. More grime obscures the expensively-framed presentation made to Mr Johnson's grandfather on the occasion of his leaving for a trip to England, back in the 1890s. The fifteen or so workmen and their employer stare fixedly from their oval surrounds, many of them moustached and suited with all the solemnity called for in the early days of photography. The tannery, also pictured, seems unaltered. The staff now is so much smaller. There is Vic Casey ('been here twenty-eight years') who would be foreman if the working crew was larger. Vic is efficient and it is hard to believe that the place could give its final flicker while he is there. There is Kirk Johansen and his son, Igor. Kirk is big-chested, wears a blue singlet, has grey hairs on his chest, shoulders and shoulder-blades. The little tufts growing out of his ears are greying also. Igor will be big, too, though perhaps not as big as his father. There is no friction between them. Big Kirk has a soft smile and a furry warmth about him. He rides back up the town at the end of the day with his sugar-bag over his shoulder, not noticing the traffic swishing past him. Neither does

young Igor, which is alarming because he has very bad sight. He cocks his head and squints out the good corner of his eye, then straightens his head and pedals his way into the fog in front of him.

Mr Johnson is the manager. He is always mentioned as 'Jimmy Johnson', but the Christian name does not spring to mind when you are with him. He wears a dark coat, collar and tie. He is conscious of where he is putting his hands. His speech contains little of the vernacular idiom and his voice has extreme clarity. He moves quickly. If he leaves you to attend to something in the office, his silvering hair is off in the darkness in a matter of moments. His manner is quick and responsive rather than welcoming, but he values any appreciation of the huge building he has inherited, though he is nervously quick to return to factual matters if you mention the atmosphere of the building.

This is the point, perhaps, on which he feels exposed. The tannery has no standing in the town. It is tacitly ignored, or it is 'that dirty old place', and the small fry of the town automatically say 'poooooohh' when they go past it. It brings very little money into the town, and that is important. And, of course, the tide of events is running against it. Synthetics are in, and there is no glamour about a genuinely rural industry of this sort. The town is anxious to keep up with the times; verandah posts give way to cantilever, cast-iron lacework comes off the hotels, the ageing Main Street shops are face-lifted with terrazzo tiles and aluminium. The vast gloomy tannery always was something of an outcast, because even when the town first began, the stores and homes mostly stayed back on the rise two or three hundred yards from the Mitchell, while the tannery took its place on a bend in the river, pumped in water and spewed out effluent as it has done for ninety years or more. There are people who say, 'It could come again. Jimmy doesn't push it,' and perhaps that is so. He flits about the huge place like a nervous spectre, tells you about the hides but lets no pride show through, though the rough-cured hides have the lovely quality of an elemental thing brought halfway to man's idea of beauty. The rows of pinky-buff hides suggest, not leather, but themselves transfigured. They will soon enough go off to be dressed and used, but for a while they exist sufficient to themselves in the huge upper-storey. Rough-hewn uprights of red gum and coastal

mahogany rise through the three levels of the building, supporting thick Oregon horizontals and a rusting iron roof. Underfoot, the floor has boards nailed over holes, and odd little openings where something once went through. A skylight gives an unreal, sauterne-coloured atmosphere to the centre of the building, then the gloom darkens. A touch of Mr Johnson's hand on the simple wooden louvres and your eyes wince at the daylight outside. Behind you, the shadowy hides stir faintly in the draught. The floorboards lighten a little, but the heavy beams and rafters are unaffected. Not a mouse stirs. The men's voices are inaudible. It is quite silent, or the ancient machinery has a soothing sound. Bags and twine lie beside a press. The scent of tanbark rises from the mound outside. A truck approaches and the engine stops. A profound quietness fills this survival of the past.

In the hush a voice calls out, 'Are ya there, Vic?' and there is a hoy from Vic, somewhere away beneath. A double door slaps open and the truck off-loads on to the middle floor. Down on the under-storey the rods jerk stiffly up and down, as if still learning their action, and the racks of animal hides move their few inches through the bark liquor. The simple chemistry goes on, big Kirk puts the skins through a fleshing machine and the greasy waste piles beside his feet. Vic signs a docket and Mr Johnson emerges from his almost secret little office to go up for the mail. He steps into his green Japanese car and drives off, leaving Vic, Kirk and Igor working down below and the hides drying in the dark stillness at the top.

More mutable than the tannery is the town's sense of where its importances should lie. Upstream from the tannery, beyond the camping-park and the old School of Mines turned Technical School, is the swimming-pool area. Even the swimming-pool, now in disrepair, is a Johnny-come-lately. This part of the town was always 'down at the rowing-club', but now there is an unfamiliar void. The site of the long-derelict boatshed is now marked by a big rectangle of uneven and broken bitumen which was the floor. The boats not irreparably smashed by vandals were given away. The sagging walls were stripped of the crew photos that illustrated many a Bairnsdale family-tree. The old pensioner who lived in two back rooms of the shed has vanished, leaving a few

geraniums halfway up the bank as his mark. The basin he washed in lay around for some months till boys threw it in the river. The landing-stage where fours and eights pulled in is breaking up. Bits of planking have been stripped off for Aborigines' fires or boys' games. Yet the past, and its belief in its importance, still presses upon you. Pictures first printed in the defunct paper Everyweek showed crews at the bank, people crowding the balcony of the vanished boatshed, and the lawn beside it thronged with sunshades and crinolined ladies. The lawn where they stood is swiftly turning to long grass. The rowing-club's monument to its fifty-odd members who went to the Great War comes as a surprise to most people who push aside the palm fronds.

Palms! The seventy years since these trees symbolised a wish for prestige and permanence have caused two of them to almost cover the monument and another to go pencilling high into the branches of a dying manna gum. Also planted, and still looking young enough, were the natives that looked acceptably exotic—the silky-oak and the flowering gum. Rising up to Riverine Street is a set of steps and lengths of piping polished blue by innumerable hands. The steps are just boards set in the ground with pegs to stop them falling forward. The dirt retained by these boards has packed, and then been scooped out by the town's bare feet. Children still count them and argue about how many there are. Boys wait for girls to come up and don't leave them enough room to get through without brushing against them. At tea-time on a hot day cyclists gather at the top, still in their togs, with towels over shoulders and perhaps cheap naval caps bought at Woolworth's on their wet hair. When the gang has gathered, boys and girls together set off in a flotilla of bicycles to go back to the Housing Commission area.

Night falls and cars cruise down. Aborigines drift under a pepper tree. Drinkers find a way down to the pool. There will be cans and cartons around in the morning and a broken beer-bottle near the monument. Cars come down looking for other cars; there are shouts and there is a race up the hill to the streets above. Lovers sometimes go there. Most of the town leaves the river-bank well alone at night, but is delighted to hear whispers of a nude swimming party. They tell with relish the tale of the hand-brake failing in a Morris Minor, how the car went into

the river and how a certain young lady ran naked to the police-station to get help for her man. On an autumn night the valley will often fill with mist and if there is a full moon the view is like clouds seen from an aeroplane, except for the ragged red gums on the rise a mile away, beyond the backwater. Further up the river, there are pines and oaks on a breast-like eminence at Picnic Point. Moon and mist play about the huge trees to create a nightscape of Chinese ink. Lovely river, with its willows drooping ... no wonder the town edged itself that way. Let the railway go on the morass side of Main Street. All that was best and most significant lined itself up to look at the Mitchell—the Church of England, the Manse, the three-storeyed Albion Hotel, the Court House and Lands Department, two-storey houses built in terrace-style and still with the iron lacework of their period, the Post Office and the first Shire Hall of Bairnsdale.

At the top of the steps are white railings and wire mesh, and signs— ONE WAY and NO STANDING. Along a few yards, the post-and-rail fences still mark the border between street and river-bank. Road-building has heaped dirt almost to the level of the bottom rail in many places. Rails are broken and the posts are weatherworn but still unrotted. One is surprised to see them still standing in the built-up area, but stand they do, often in quite unexpected places. If we leave the riverside for Main Street, which now flourishes the sign-splurge of modern retail, the horse-and-buggy past keeps lingering. Main Street, dear old facaded false-fronted, frontier line-up of buildings, has its ghosts about it still. Above the cantilevers, around the sides and at the rear are the unnoticed announcements that the present is another layer, tissue thin, laid upon the all-absorbing past: ABOVE ALL FOR VALUES. SHARPE BROS. GENERAL DRAPERS. The letters are hard to read, but wait, faintly legible when the sun is at the right angle are more words beneath: PROVISIONS AND PRODUCE. BUSH'S GROCERY STORE.

Search the town and find them. The Bairnsdale and District Agricultural Society has the rooms where the Transport Regulation Board had their sign, the rooms where C. ROWE once declared himself to be a watchmaker. Search in the street—SPROULE'S CHAMBERS; search behind it, high on the huge old hardware store—COLE'S

FURNITURE. COLE'S IRONMONGERY. ROBINSON & CO'S PLOUGHS AND BINDERS. The dated words whisper, like the Roman general's fool, 'You, too, are mortal' to all the signs freshly painted in the modern street, MERCURY OUTBOARD, HOLROYD'S HARDWARE STORE FOR AWA DEEP-IMAGE TELEVISION, HOLROYD'S FOR DULUX SPRUCE, 100% GLOSSY EXTERIOR, 100% ACRYLIC. HOLROYD'S FOR PORTA GAS. THE BIGGEST NAME FOR GAS BEYOND THE MAIN. Lambert's florist-shop is in new quarters; the sign at the side just survives the westerly sun: produce store. There are new buildings; there are! The town does well to ignore its own ghosts. Even the most tawdry Main Street renovation is a sign of hope and those early men had hope enough. The dates that mark the river end of Main Street—1884, 1890, 1894—have still a touch of defiance about them. And the buildings you see from the riverside, down by the pool, still wear a little of the faith they were dressed in. The terraces are sought after, St John's old hall and Sunday-school has gone for a manganese-brick Education Centre, the PMG will keep for a few more years their quaint old office which has enlarged to absorb the little residence once attached to it. The Court House still displays its unwittingly funny show, Collected Vulgarities of Western Architecture.

It is not so easy to remain balanced when considering the now-hideous Albion, and the squat old Shire Hall, never very beautiful, is tired. The cement figures admit its age—1868. It is no longer used as an emergency classroom. The Rotary Club has it now, as the depot for their waste-rag collection. Windows are broken, the back door is open. No, the first impetus of the town is spent. Around it, the life of the land goes on. Trucks and travellers pass through it. Motels and service-stations take their life from the artery flowing down Main Street. The day of the car is at hand, a new brand of masculinity is pampered in the shops and admired at the football-ground and, girlhood once past, there is nothing very creditable by the river for a woman. The changing-rooms at the swimming-pool maintain a distinction not to be thought of today: WOMEN-GIRLS. Obscenities are scrawled on the notice prohibiting dogs, there is mud splattered on walls, several swastikas—but no hearts—are charcoaled here and there. The pool is not repaired. The

swimming-club—treason—hope they will soon have an Olympic Pool on the old Botanical Garden site in Pearson Street, and let things go in hopes of putting pressure on the Council. The palms still stand, and the gum saplings and pepper trees are recovering from the last bout of municipal butchery, but if we wish to lament all this we will do so by day. We will not go down at night.

Where can we go? Nowhere where we can be anonymous. In a country town all lives are seen in three dimensions. We are constantly on view, whether sending a telegram, casting a vote at the State elections, or even standing idly outside Pannam's bakery and fruit-shop. A friend moves out with some parcels; I know his other friends, his failings and temptations, his abilities, his popularity and his standing. All lives intersect. A reducoed blue Zephyr with silver stars on the bonnet burbles past, then stops to pick up a girl. I ask who she is. Someone says, 'I don't know, but she lives up the top end of Wallace Street. I don't know the fella, but Maurie Bowen had that car before he sold it, he'll know, I'll ask him.' I also know the former owner of the car and feel pleased that one day I will know the names of the driver and his girl. Why, why? Curiosity makes us want to know all about those who are wanting to know us, judging us, summing us up, and wanting, also, names and faces to attach to the endless circulation of gossip and stories we hear. I move into the fruit-shop and while I wait I study the shop attendants. That young lad there, wasn't he in a reformatory for a while? Wasn't there some story about him threatening a girl with a toy pistol and trying to violate her? I wonder if the story is true. I doubt if he was mature enough, a year ago, to do it, but I study his red face and shifty eyes, wondering what's going on inside his mind.

I drift outside and see another young man I heard mentioned only yesterday. He is young George Dobbie who works for Collie, the welder. Collie was complaining that he was on workers' compo when there was nothing wrong with him. There's young George now, sitting behind the wheel of a late-model Studebaker. Studebakers are cheap because they have gone out of production and there is an automatic gravitation towards them by the young men in the engine-power-equals-statement-of-virility set. Young George has a hand on the wheel and an arm

around his girl. I don't know her name but I've seen her walking with the girl in the blue Zephyr. Suddenly there is the ba-barp of a strident car horn and some more of young George's set flash past in a lowered FJ Holden. George's hand drops to the horn and he blasts a ba-ba-ba-ba-barp at his friends. They respond without slowing down, George replies again, and the quiet shopping mood of the street on a weekday is broken by the brazen music of car horns, erotic and flashy. George starts the Studebaker and accelerates after the FJ, the cars still braying at each other like a pair of high-pitched trombones. There is something magnificent in this swagger, but there is no channel for it in a country town; it leads ... I was going to say nowhere, but a month later I am driving to work and I see young George walking—where is the Studebaker?—past Palmer's bakery. His hair is oiled and he is wearing a blue suit. Another young man with a mop of unkempt black hair dragged into place by a quick combing is walking with him, also in a suit. What's on? Ah, it's Thursday, Court of Petty Sessions day; well now, I wonder what's happened there?

I get the mail at midday and as I get into my car, they walk across the road. George gives a piercing whistle at someone on the far corner and calls out, 'Artie!' He seems unchastened. Perhaps it is safe to ask, 'Howdya go?' George gives a faintly sheepish grin, says 'fifty' and marches on, still in step with his companion, past Holman's garage and away from the Court House ... The full story would be available easily enough, but these chance observations, when added to hundreds like them, map out some of the paths open to young George and people of his section of the town. I am aware of the effect of all this on Mrs Dobbie, whose perpetually sharp expression states her aggressive-defensive stance in life. She lives in a closely-packed part of the town and knows that nothing is left out of the endless commentary of public opinion. I am aware too of Frank, her husband. I have pushed his car when it wouldn't start; I saw him borrow the money to buy it. I have seen him drunk and sober, healthy and ill, fawning and confident, as I have seen hundreds of others in the town, and as they have seen me. I have seen him at work, where he is one of the unskilled lackeys who are minions to Collie's will.

In this, despite the fountains of abuse that pour from the huge blacksmith, Frank is very fortunate, for charity flows as freely from Collie as profanity, and he is famous for that. When you walk in to get a job done, he greets you with, 'Fuckoff. Whadda you want? I don't want you hangin' around here, I've got seven fuckin' thousand dollars worth of jobs to get out before I knock off. Go on, piss off.'—all said in one breath. You don't piss off. Collie would be scornful if you did. You start to explain. He grabs the object out of your hands, ridicules it, points to the truck trailers and shed frames lying half-finished out the front. He hands it back and demands to know why you come in and expect him to drop everything, real work, for a pissfarting little thing like this. 'Why don't you fuckin' well do it yourself, you're not that useless, are you? Give it here.' Collie takes it and puts it down. 'I can't do it today, it's no use you hangin' around. Piss off. Come back tomorrow.' You stay where you are. He is, as he says, very busy. He is fast and highly efficient, but there will be brief moments while something is cooling when he could have a rest—or he could do this extra job that has been brought to him. The town makes big demands on Collie. Men who are paying off their trucks come to Collie when something has snapped and ask him to improvise a part so they can get back on the roads. Timber-jinkers are brought in by men who go broke if they can't keep up their contract work. They too get the rough edge of Collie's tongue; what the fuckin' hell were they doing to break it? Why did they buy such a thing in the first place, they never were any good. But he puts aside the job in hand and gets the battler out of trouble as fast as he can. The jobs from Collie's works are first-class, and everybody knows it.

It is a case of appearances being deceptive because the premises themselves are the dirtiest and most derelict in Bairnsdale. They are unfenced. Nothing prevents people helping themselves from Collie's racks of angle-iron and steel rod except the guileless way they lie open to the weather and everyone who passes. The only danger to any would-be thief is the high probability that he will trip in the impossible confusion of new metal, discarded scraps and ancient machinery parts left around because they might come in handy some day. The shed doors are locked on the machines and equipment but offer little resistance to a

jemmy. By day, when the place is open for work, light streams in through cracks and chinks, through doorways opening towards the railway line and through windows of incredible filth. When the fan in the forge has been blowing, the atmosphere is a heavy solution of charcoal dust, and the little particles dance in the rays of afternoon light. It is a kingdom of iron and fire and Collie is the ruler. He bends over the bed of burning charcoal, face red and sweat around his ears. In the fire is a twenty-inch bar which is going to be an axle. Half its length is red hot. Collie grabs the dark end and pushes the bar under the electric hammer, twitching it round so that four flat sides start to form. When the job is done, he throws the glowing bar at the feet of anyone who may be watching him and warns them, in another flood of profanity, that they'll do their toes if they stand around there, doin' nothin'. What do they want? Why don't they piss off, quick fuckin' smart?

This endless profanity deceives no one. Collie is the softest touch in Bairnsdale. When Frank Dobbie put the bite on him for a hundred pounds to buy a car, Collie made him wait till the after-hours session in the lounge so that fewer people would see the money handed over —and that would be in protection of Frank, not of himself. Collie must have known what was coming because he had a roll of notes in the pocket of his working trousers and peeled off the hundred pounds with thick, hardened fingers. When Frank had gone off, Collie said, 'They're all drivin' cars, better cars than me,' and it was true, 'They' were his workmen, and he was far from ruthless in his choice. There was the fellow with the thin face, long neck and big Adam's apple, a slight man with a tendency to stutter. One night in the Albion I heard a truck owner proclaiming how he'd sacked this man—'I tramped the little bastard;' a fortnight later I heard ... I heard ... three dimensions ... all lives intersect ... the unemployed driver pleading with an embarrassed and reluctant Jack Howard for an extension of his credit at the West End Store; the saveloys and tinned fruit in his hands that he couldn't pay for were obviously his family's tea. The next time I saw him, he was putting pieces of metal in place for Collie's welders; and the time after that—Collie, the teacher—he was using the oxy-torch to cut the lengths they needed.

I can imagine the lesson. 'You got the angle-iron cut yet? What's wrong with you, you useless so-and-so. Get hold o' this. What'd you do with me matches? A wonder you're not wearin' me fuckin' strides. Light this first, don't light that or you'll finish up a lot o' shit on the wall.' It was charity, but they worked, and they learned. Knowing Collie's reputation, an Aborigine came up to him one night in the Terminus Hotel. No, Collie wasn't going to give him any money. He'd give him a job, if he wanted it. He could bloody well go thirsty and he could turn up at five to eight in the morning or he could be castrated for all Collie cared. Collie gave him a lurid account of the arduous jobs he'd be doing, and no stops for smoko either. The black man said, with the blatant insincerity of his race when cadging, that he'd be there. Collie described what would happen to him if he wasn't, and said, 'Here's a dollar to go on with. Stick it in your fuckin' pocket, I'm buyin' this one.' For a white man, the rough-handed treatment would have continued, but for the dark man, Collie drew aside from the huge school he drank in and had a quiet and lengthy talk—letting the Aborigine buy some of the drinks.

The other half of Collie's old wooden shed is where Wheely Marshall demonstrates his expertise as a welder. Wheely is perhaps even more of a master craftsman than Collie, and like the giant blacksmith he hides a warm heart under a surly exterior. He rubs his already filthy nose with the back of a grimy glove, glares sourly at anyone walking in, and goes back to his job. As with Collie, this is a cover, but in feelings as in body he is not built on the same scale as his employer. Collie gives him his due, though, and stays out of his side until the phone rings. Then the blacksmith squeezes into the coffin-sized office and takes up the receiver, putting one in mind of a bear with a toy in its paws. 'Yeah, fair enough,' Collie says, making notes with a blunt pencil. 'Yeah, coupla days. Yeah, cost you the same as last time.' He hangs up, riffles through a few papers and announces, 'Christ, I'm goin' broke.' He marches out to the job at the front. 'I'll sting these bastards.'

The street where he has his works contains secondhand car-yards, panel-beating shops, tractor agencies and farm-machinery depots—all practical necessary concerns where the men have a no-fripperies-here this-is-the-real-stuff approach. Yet their businesses seem hollow and

lightweight compared to Collie's, where tricks are not practised, excuses are not made, and every job has been done by one person for another. There is none of the cynicism that comes of taking the markup or handling insurance claims. Collie's huge, soft personality is involved in every wallop of his hammer. People matter, work matters; the despondency aroused by some of the older parts of Bairnsdale, the town that tries, hopes, and doesn't know how to renew itself, is dispelled by a visit to Collie's. There, inside the shed with piles of rusty iron in front and a dense crop of weeds behind, the moment is alive. The electric hammer batters itself up and down, conversation is by inaudible yelling, grindstones whirr up from stationary to working revs, saws scream through metal, discarded iron is flung away with a doomsday clang. Collie sweats out his counter-lunch and hitches up his faded green trousers. The wind swirls grit into the welders' eyes. The Orbost train goes rolling past, a few paces behind the leaking toilet cistern. An old man, with white hair and a face dirtier than Wheely's, sneaks out the back, too shy to do the little chores Collie has given him while there are people about that he doesn't know.

Hours later, in conversation, the old man lets out that he's been overseas, he's been to Russia. Russia? Yes, he was one of the international force sent to Leningrad—Saint Petersburg—back in 1919 to quash the Bolshevik revolution. He also mentions going to the silent pictures in London with his first wife, when the First World War was finished. I am fascinated. I have been in Gippsland eleven years and begin to know it well. I am intrigued by it. I borrow Tim Hurley's viewpoint to see it, and Mr Borrow's, and scores of others'. This man is new to the town, reaches it near the end of his days. His life's journey seems to have been strangely charted; what is Gippsland to him? How did he come down this way? What does he think of it? And what was it like to stand, as no one in Gippsland does, on even the edge of the stage, even for a tiny part, in one of history's great actions?

His eyes are pained and watery. He says, 'I don't mind ya asking questions, that's alright, but nothin' personal, will ya, nothin' personal.' I have run up against the mysteries of another being, to which he has the right of privacy. Yet his presence gives a perspective on the region

to which he has at last made his way. Gippsland is a hideaway, an idyllic corner of a peaceful continent. There have been no wars, invasions, inquisitions, or purges. Not that the instincts are lacking. Old Clive Moore, the estate-agent, solemnly retracts his jaw into merino-like folds of chin as he tells you how he organised the plane-spotting and coast-watching rosters during the Japanese scare of the 'forties. The enthusiasm for the big bush-fire battle made it easier to answer the question, 'Why did they go?' posed by the war memorials in Main Street.

Of these, the more eloquent is the Boer War monument. The granite is finer, and the names of the dead call the point of life into question. Sgt D. H. Pruden, Newry; Sgt M. T. McDonald, Yinnar; Pte J. McLure, Won Wron; J. Jonson, Hospital Creek; more names of men who might never have lived, from Lindenow, Toora, Metung, Sale, Bullumwaal, Bairnsdale, Bindi ... Were they not married, these men, not fathers; or did the adventurism of war or some notions of loyalty to Empire call them off to die in South Africa's God-forsaken heat? The question would be pointless except that the tradition dies hard. In 1967, with the Vietnam war splitting the nation's conscience, the returned soldiers lined up for Anzac Day in two brigades. Heading the march was Michael Dooley—Jack's son, from the Terminus—just back from the Asian war, and leading the second contingent was Stewart Potts—Mrs Potts writes social notes for the Advertiser—who was about to go. Guy Gibson, the plumber from Paynesville, the RSL President, medals shining and ribbons pinned to the chest of his blue suit, kept the marchers a respectful three paces behind the young man in battle-dress and slouch hat. His chinstrap pulled his face into the attitude of uncompromising toughness which seemed part of the tradition the marchers wanted to keep alive.

Let it die. Turn to night, and the flowering of love. Where will it happen? Inside the heart, of course, but its setting, what is that? Little wooden farmhouses, where the daughters whisper and giggle beside empty roads as they wait for the High School bus, their glossy hair and young breasts singing 'time on my side' to the school uniforms they will wear just a little longer. Cars park in the main street—almost the only one—of Lindenow, and are there when we come back again, three hours later, passing through a town of four or five lights. One is the blue

one outside the police-station with its pantry-sized lockup; another bulb pokes out of the bakery facade, dimly illuminating the Peter's Ice Cream sign, and casting impenetrable shadow under the verandah, the bleak, hopeless darkness that chills the hearts of travellers through country towns. Another light shows in the farmhouse perched over the flats, the one where the fallen tree still lies on the roadside fence. One of the cars is a little blue Morris; that will be Kay Irwin's boy, it's outside her place. She has soft skin, and a fine head of dark hair which goes well with the white blouse and black cardigan and skirt she wears at Woolworth's, where she is smiling and agreeable. The darkness that envelops Lindenow shrouds the mysteries and privacy of her feelings, her loving, if it is that. She is soon, very soon, Mrs Nankervis. A second child follows, her man gives her cause to leave him; it is said that she is in Sydney.

Her sister Julie is as blonde by artifice as Kay is dark by nature. Her boy-friend drives a timber-jinker. He blocks off yards of space as he waits for her to finish work at the dry-cleaners, where she is an ornament and enticement at the counter. Five-fifteen comes, she appears at the doorway with a mauve-and-white-striped carrier-bag in her hand (shoes? cosmetics?), and glances up and down the street with innocent-looking eyes. With perfect assurance she steps over the gutter to the truck. The cabin door flings open, high over the road. She steps close behind it, shaded, stretches a cover-girl leg, takes hold of a silver handle and raises herself till—ah! her blonde hair and lithe shoulders are framed by the window. She slides in, takes the handle again in a wristy grip and the low-geared truck growls away as the door slams. It is not chivalrous, nor romantic, but there is something good there to smile with. The smile has only a fleeting validity because it is a man from Orbost that she marries and the timber-jinker, when I see it in other years, has a half-empty cabin.

Her brother Bernard—Barny—is soon married, too. Barny works for the Shire and plays football with Lindenow Seconds. I see him one night at a dance in the club-rooms at Lindenow South. The little band—piano, drums, sax—is giving out a hearty accompaniment to the singing and dancing. The singing is raucous but of tremendously good humour

because the songsters are a dozen—at least a dozen, though they are squeezed into the tiny shower-recess, and there is a niner of beer somewhere among all their legs—a dozen triumphant footballers, and the night is young, and alcohol is still lifting spirits high. It has poured with rain all day, there has been an upset premiership win in the wet, and the ground outside is sodden. The reedy swamps around Lindenow South are brimming, the Lindenow flats are saturated and the hills to the north are a network of trickling gullies. The dance-floor is as sodden as the shoes of those who have been outside for drinking or love. Tilley lamps burn and gum-tips brush the heads of the dancers, or touch the sleeves of couples moving to sit down. It is warm enough inside, ten gives way to eleven, no one leaves, and I see the purest love I see in Gippsland; Barny's girl is kneeling on the floor, head deep in his lap, hands on his thighs, fully aware of her man, deaf and blind to everything else, his, his, all his; and Barny sits, back straight and head fallen, his workman hands reverent as a bishop's, pressing her ears and hair, hers, quivering with certainty, hers, all hers. There is an exodus as eleven gives over to midnight; Barny goes, and his girl with him. I am glad they are not there when the door is bashed open by two wrestling drunks, pummelling at each other. One has blood in his hair from the scalp wounds made by a broken beer-glass. Their friends push them out, and start the lengthy process of separating the fighting animals. Inside, the band packs up, the drinking goes on, factions form and news is brought in of threats and encounters in the palely-lit world outside. The atmosphere is ugly, it is a relief to leave, yet the miracle of love was there.

Another night, another turn, a wool-shed barbecue; the couples stand around a huge fire, fallen red-gum logs dragged together by a tractor. The coals are yellow or white hot. Flames flicker up. Couples on the far side stand between a friendly fire and infinite, deathly darkness. We on our side seem the same to them, yet we drink up as they drink up, and look to each other as they do, and eat, and joke, and sing an occasional line of the tunes roaring out of the gramophone inside. Later, as the fire dies, most go in, and the night wears on. The inevitable self-proving wrestling starts up at one end of the shed, where the trestle-table of grog and glasses is hemmed in by sheep-pens. Two drunks, at

the point where playful intersects with violent, throw each other about until the trestle collapses, showering them with glasses and the takings. At the other end, where the gramophone is quite deafening, couples from fifteen to fifty sit around the walls, heads on necks, fingering each other, occasionally presenting a stupefied face to the glare of the tilley lamp as they look up to see the cause of the commotion.

It is Tom Larkin, clambering monkey-wise along a metal rod from which the lamp is suspended. Tom's type set the tone of a show like this. 'Yes,' he says, describing a similar function, I finally got her outside and I was two fingers up when some bastard shines his headlights on us. I got up, I was going to have him. I get over and there's this chap in a utility, he's got my missus in there.' The company roars laughing. I roar too, but I am in foreign territory. Call it rough, disgusting, peasant-like, healthy, earthy, call it what you will, but it is not the natural growth of my mind's garden that is held up for display by the raucously extrovert Tom. Yet the wind gets up outside, a warm wind from the infinite darkness, and sparks shower against the window of the wool-shed to die before they fall. The wind shifts a point or two and the sparks go rushing down the night, the scorching coals glow with a blue-white intensity, the wind lifts and more sparks fly out in billowing clouds like evanescent knights setting out to conquer death. It is a glorious night, because full of life and darkness, it is glorious to be alive and young, but the winds rush, and the bearish brawlers and rorty couples in the shed are not the company my heart hopes for. These countrymen of mine are not, not quite, my people.

Is it time to go? No, not quite time. I am still in love with Gippsland, drawn to it, and I do not know what it is. How can I find out? Who will show me the secret thing hidden in the endless folds of mountains? No voice speaks, I must listen in the silence broken only by the rustle of fern-tree fronds. All down a hillside, in rainy country, like a host of Japanese ladies with parasols stepping elegantly through the bracken fern, are tree ferns ringed by trees; the breeze on the ridges sends an eddy down, like a shiver, and drips of water fall off a million points of undulating frond. Rotting curtains of older fronds sink a little lower to

the humus, and brown curly bark pulls away from the manna gums with their grey-and-white trunks rising for light. At the bottom of the gully the river peppermints, with ribbon leaves flickering, signal back the sunlight. They at least are safe, not being good timber trees. The huge logs on the timber-jinkers will come from higher up, will be messmate, silvertop, stringybark, shining gum, cut tail or woollybutt. High-cabined diesels nose around forest corners, rolling their loads down to some mill settlement like Club Terrace or Cabbage Tree.

The isolation of these places before the postwar highway development and the rise of the timber industry can scarcely be imagined. Somewhere in the original creek-flat clearings will be the early farmhouse—small, sixty years old, or more, paint almost gone and every board looking damp. The mill cottages will be newer, simple, and painted pink, white, or a lifeless blue. Others will be as raw as their paling-fences. The forest surrounds all of them, hemming them in like endless lines of stakes. The township clearings are ragged with trees cut off at the knees in a tangle of axe chips, fresh wood and teased-out bark. Regrowth will be sprouting from earlier mutilated stumps just outside, or inside, the timbermen's gardens.

The mills themselves, like Club Terrace's 'Erinundera', have vast log-yards with chest-high trunks lined up for saw-fodder. The waste of the mill burns in an open fire-pit, and a blue haze hangs in the gullies. The sawdust is blown into a kiln-like burner of brick, and flames belch out the top, even at the height of summer, or send out wisps like pipe smoke if there has been rain. The bush presses in, moist underfoot. A neatly-dressed Aboriginal family stand on their verandah, the children wearing shoes. Two girls take a baby sister for a walk down the road. A lank-haired youth on a motorbike accelerates past them, leather jacket open at the front. He reaches the corrugated-iron shed overhung by a big pine tree, and there is an ugly noise. He gets off and pulls out tools. The girls walk on, though called at by a loose-haired woman whose face and apron are ruddy in colour. This is Sunday. On a weekday the saws scream to left and to right, behind us and further down the road. A group of men stand around a mobile crane, watching a blond, full-bellied man struggling with a broken part that refuses to budge. The swear-

ing is in undertones and things he needs are handed to him instantly, handle towards him, as if by nurses to a surgeon. Two men who have been greasing vehicles look on, blacker than stage minstrels. In the mill, the pullers-out walk backwards and forwards to a day-long rhythm; grasp the flitch and the log as they come through the saw, carry the weight backwards, throw the flitch away and put the log on the return rollers, rest; drop hands, loosen muscles, lower the eyes; pause a second, then concentrate and walk forward together to the bench, hands reaching for the pieces coming through, six-by-ones or four-by-four.

When the whistle ends the day the millhands sit around while someone comes over from the office with the two dozen cans that came out from Orbost with the mail. Earlier in the day there was an anxious phone call to see what was delaying the mail van, because it was Perce McLennan's seventieth birthday. He has been on holiday and has just come back. In Bairnsdale street gossip, Club Terrace is a kind of Dogpatch where nothing thrives but drinking and fornication. By local repute, swapping partners is as common as week-long booze-ups. It is all the more surprising then when the strains of 'For he's a jolly good fellow' drift out of the gloomy mill. The group at the mobile crane look up at the cheery volume of 'And so say all of us, hus, hus! Hippip, hooray, hippip, hooray, hippip, hooray!' followed by a quaky solo voice unsure whether to try for the tenor or the baritone range 'Why waz he-e born so beautiful . . .' capped by the famous rejoinder, spoken, 'Why waz he born at all?' Old Perce has stood up for this tribute. He still has a suit on and a hat in his hand. He faces the ring of millhands and thanks them. The single men in this group live in twelve-by-nine huts, or the fibro-cement guest-house, the married ones in mill houses. There are no brick buildings in the settlement. The hall is also of fibro-cement, and is built over a steep gully. The far end stands on stilts and long poles rest against it, staying the unfinished parts. Shopping is done from Orbost, or at the tiny store with its verandah peeping up on to the winding track which used to be the Princes Highway.

The main road has bypassed Club Terrace now and the deviation is taken only by local cars and trucks grinding out of the forest, their trailers stacked high with sawn timber. On the highway, tourists hang

out anxiously, wondering whether the chains holding the swaying loads will let go when they move up to pass.

Generally speaking, they have little to fear. The truckies are gentle knights of the road, working hard but not pushed to the extremes of the men on the Hume Highway run. One rarely hears talk of drugs or pep pills, though perhaps some are taken. They are courteous, excellent drivers, and their endless coming and going is a sort of roaring song to the roads of Gippsland. When meeting them on the highway at night, there is a glow in the distance, then the rising cabin puts a tiara of orange lights on the brow of the hill before the headlights burst on the eye. Lesser vehicles are buffeted by their wind as they pass. In the small hours of the morning Gregson's transports take the road and Lania and Calabro are back in Bairnsdale long after tea with fruit for the shop. It is good to see Coverdales of Bairnsdale on the road, or Hancocks of Lakes Entrance, with water dribbling out of the boxes of fish and crushed ice. Meeting them in Dandenong or one of the drab semi-cities 'down the line' there is a sense of verities from home. By the same token, the trucks from up-country, seen in the streets of Bairnsdale, exercise a powerful tug on the wanderlust of anyone watching them thunder through the street. McMullens come up from Orbost; their tankers have a set of showy drivers whose gear changes crash against the shop facades and warn pedestrians not to step out till they pass. Cattle sway in the back of Anderson's Stock Transport, Benambra, and the mind drifts after the rattling truck. There will be Bruthen, the Tambo Valley road, Swifts Creek, Tongio Gap, and the run out past Macmillan's Lookout before the engine cools that night. Other trucks pass—Grinter, Swifts Creek; Doolan's Transport, Omeo; and The Omeo Belle, run by W. E. Frost. There is White's big Mercedes of Bairnsdale, and Hansen's long red semi-trailers, labelled Cann River on the driver's door. In fact, they end their run at Weeragua, halfway from the stop at Cann—CANN HOTEL, first-class ACCOMMODATION, hot and cold water, electric light throughout, sewered—up the Kings Highway to Bombala across the border. At night-time Hansen's place is likely to be the only light in thirty miles of winding forest driving, a reassurance that there are

humans about to own the odd horses and cattle straying on to the road when least expected.

Most evocative of the truck names is A. J. Nevin, Tubbut. The loveliest honey I ever tasted was a tin I bought at Purvis's, in Bairnsdale. It was not labelled and I had to ask to discover that it was brought down by 'some fellow Nevin, from Tubbut'. I got a second tin and kept a lookout for his truck, then I saw it at Bairnsdale railway-station, loaded with bags of fertiliser and drums of BP petrol, ready to go back up-country. The long trip home would be climaxed by the run down the fearsome Turnback, where drivers stop at the top and turn off their engines to listen for anyone coming up.

This pause would be Mr Nevin's only chance to let his eyes wander over the immense formations through which he, and the Snowy River, had to find a way. The stream's path is barred by boulders and exposed strata where the long ridges thrust their toes in the water. That anyone should find room there to farm is remarkable. Dry hillsides press down to the river and its tributaries, thinly covered with scrawny eucalypts—white box, grey box, long-leafed bundy. Seen from a distance, where the road scrapes around the edge of rocky slopes, the opposite side of the valley is a sombre olive, with patches of coloured rock if the sun is low, and a shimmering fuzz of glaucous blue foliage. 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 into 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 red-box leaves and tea-tree, hives that would be loaded on to trailers and moved away to wherever next the bush broke out in flowers. There were scores

of magazines in Mr Jones's 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.

It was not so very hard by bushwalking standards, and like many other tracks, it had its touch of tradition. The ridge dividing the north and south branches of Castleburn Creek was the one to follow, once you left the long-neglected jeep track; it was quickly apparent that some sort of footpad had been bashed through many years ago. In fact, this was the route followed by the stockmen of the Dargo country when they took their cattle up to the Moroka Plateau. There is more high-country grass to be had there, though not as plentiful as on the famous plains north of Dargo. The open flats—which bear mystifying names like Dairy Farm Flat and Racecourse Plain—are surrounded by belts of snow gum mingling with candlebark. For much of the year they are wet with melted snow and the run-off from gullies thick with moss and fern. Even in summer there are little mossy patches living on seepage from underground springs in the bed-rock which rears up Castle Hill.

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 foot-hills, people in Bairnsdale rub blue fingers and say, 'Sssswww, straight off the snow.' Around the Castle, whippy little snow-gum stems bend under

the weight, and wombats dig deeper in the soft earth at the bottom of the rock wall. Clouds drift by, and the Castle is an island, a table-top set between layers of grey. Everything is wet; wood, even dead leaves, will hardly burn. Old snow lies under bushes like dollops of granular ice. Leaves glisten, then mist sneaks in and there is nothing. The rocks at one's feet go hazy, bushes unreal; one is a mind, in a cloud, there is no identity. This is the temptation of the Castle. More than all the others, it is the mystical peak. Viewing it, whether from afar or from one of the little clearings close about, it seems no foolishness that the walkers on Bill Gallico's Skyline Tours were called 'the pilgrims'. Several of them had captured something of its presence in their excellent photos.

At other times they enjoyed the high country differently. One of the puzzling names was explained by Bill Gallico's tale of the race they ran. 'We got 'em all lined up on this bit of a flat, down one end, and they had to run down the other end. I was the judge. I give 'em the signal and down they come. Oh, they all went in it, just for the fun of it. Some of 'em wasn't what you'd call built for running and they had their trousers all rolled up, they were a sight, I tellya. A doctor fella won it; forget his name. They were all bettin' on each other, I dunno if it was rigged, I was just the judge.' They seemed to have great faith in Bill, more so than in his assistants, especially deCourcey O'Donovan, the quaint figure whose voice lingered on in Briagolong tales long after his death

DeCourcey was the son of a schoolmaster, part-Irish and part-French by descent, and he lived on in legend as the man who wanted all his life to fly like the birds. In nearly all the tales I heard, and there were a number, he occupied the position of the beloved fool. His words, when they were quoted, were pitched in a sing-song monotone, with every syllable stressed evenly. Bill Gallico mentioned that if his cattle went down a gully, deCourcey always dismounted, tied up his horse and went after them on foot. Mr Borrow's tale was of deCourcey driving home after doing his shopping. A mile out of town he took his horse from the shafts, tethered it to a post and walked back. He went into a shop and came out with some sugar. Asked why he had walked all the way, he said, 'I for-got thee sugar. It was not thee hor-se's fault.' I heard other tales from Clive Borrow and from Mountain Jack Golds-borough;

it was strange to hear the sing-song voice faithfully mimicked by people who had never known the man.

DeCourcey seemed to have been unlucky with fires. Once when there was a bush-fire sweeping down on his log-and-stringybark house, he decided, there being no men around to help him, that there was no way of stopping the blaze. So he clambered on to the roof with his violin and played 'The Wearing of the Green'. In Bill's tale—or rather, deCourcey's, for as Bill said, 'All we knew about him was what he told us himself—the fire swung away from the house. DeCourcey went off to see after a stack of wattlebark he had left in a clearing and when he came back he found that the fire had changed direction again and had come back and caught his cottage. Bill said, 'He woulda saved most of the stuff in the place, but his aunt and his sister—they were livin' with him—they got in a bit of a flap and they kept going in trying to save the stuff and deCourcey kept racin' in and pullin' 'em out. And they kept goin' back, so deCourcey grabbed his old aunt and raced off down the hill and stuck her under a big log where she couldn't get out. When he came back up he musta been in a flap, too, because he come at the house the side where the fowl coop was and he never went around it, he hauled all this wire off the posts with his fingers ... Another time he had another fire out there. He'd rebuilt the place by then, it had an iron roof and walls of stringy. Anyhow, a fire come along and deCourcey musta reckoned he wouldn't get caught. He shifted all the furniture out and put it in a big stack. Funny thing was, a spark got into the furniture and burnt it, left the house. How's that for luck?'

Bill said deCourcey could have been a great runner. 'He promised me he'd run in the four-forty at the sports in Sale, but he never turned up. Oh, he had terrific stamina when he was walkin'. Out in the hills once, his horses got away from him and he came to Andy Federman and me to see if we'd help him. We were just gettin' up and we said we'd have our breakfast and then we would. Anyhow, we had our breakfast, and we caught our horses and got 'em saddled up and went off after him. DeCourcey was walkin'. Well, I tellya what, we thought we'd missed him somewhere. I tellya what, we reckoned we'd done twelve miles by the time we caught up to him.' Mr Borrow also mentioned coming

on deCourcey far out in the bush near Valencia Creek, on the way out to the Moroka country. 'There he was striding along, oh, he did have tremendous strides. He was on his way back to Valency. Apparently he'd been leading the pilgrims and he'd got them bushed somewhere and he said [the high-pitched sing-song], "You all sit down here. I will find thee track. And I climbed a tree, and I found it. But they had no confidence in me. They wanted to see Willy." '

The flying tales were several, and existed in various versions, all of which made deCourcey seem a ludicrous figure. There was an attempted flight with home-made wings, and another time when some men were chopping down a tree to get a long pole. It looked probable that the tree would tumble into a gully, so deCourcey offered to stop it. He attached a rope to a spot high on the tree, tied it around his waist, and took the strain of guiding it. Despite the men's axemanship, the tree fell the wrong way and legend has it that it catapulted him through the air to land far down the gully. None of this made him ridiculous in Mr Borrow's eyes. 'You know,' he told me, 'I used to hear them call him a stupid so-and-so, but I never thought he was. I was about fourteen then and you know what you're like at that age, you won't hear anything said about someone you like. I didn't think there was anything silly about him. I tell you what, I saw him one day bringing some cattle through Briagolong. Well, he got to the corner there by the hotel, you know where the roads meet, and they went in all directions. They were going in people's gardens and up little lanes, oh goodness, he was in such a lot of bother. So I ran around and I did all I could and after a while we got them all straightened out. And, you know, when he got them down the road a couple of hundred yards, he turned round and rode right back to me. And he leaned out of his saddle—he was a big tall man—and he said, "Thank you. I would never have got them through, on-lee for you." And I watched him ride off and I thought, well, there's a gentleman. You know, you know what I thought of him?'

He asked this question out under the trees in front of his house. Mr Borrow had been a butcher by trade as a young man, and he was killing a sheep for meat. Mr Borrow's reminiscences were accompanied by the well-practised motions of skinning the carcase and slitting it from top

to bottom. He took the liver out and put it in an enamel dish on top of a fence-post. The stomach organs went on the ground for the dogs. 'You know,' he said, hand in the carcase preparing for another tug, 'you know what I thought of him? I thought he was away ahead of the rest of us, right over our heads. You know what, he was what I imagine a poet would be like.'

And so was Mr Borrow, and so were they all, these bushmen. Crude or sensitive, hearty or shy, they knew their way of life was living on past its time. They still had their place, in quiet corners of the country, but the tradition they represented was not going to be recreated, and they knew it. Farming life would go on, of course, but the tradition of bushmanship and frontier characters had almost had its day. Knowing this, they could see a lyrical strain, sometimes a wistful one, in the things they knew best, and they could let it come out in their tales. Mr Borrow even had his doubts about the future of farming. He wondered if he should let Lloyd, his third son, go on the land. He just didn't see that there was any future in it. But when he spoke of his sons who were already on the land, the smile in his eyes told a different tale. 'Oh, Evan and Clive were in the yards there the other day. My goodness, it was funny. Clive's mad on cattle, and Evan, of course, he likes sheep; it's got to be sheep. Well, Clive threw this calf and Evan was supposed to be holding it. Clive got the iron and he did a good job with the brand. And he blew the smoke away and he sat back and he said, "How's that?" And Evan was looking away up the hill. And Clive said, "Damn it, man, what's the good of you? Why don't you go home? You might as well!" '

Clive at one stage seemed to be the chosen heir of his bachelor uncle, Wendell. He went to live and work with his uncle, and endured his cooking for months, but to his surprise, and all Glenaladale's, the seventy-year-old bachelor announced his intention of getting married to the daughter of a neighbouring farmer, a woman in her twenties. Gossip put various interpretations on this, mostly unflattering to her motives, and also had plenty of ribald suggestions to explain her early pregnancy. Before very long, however, old Wendell and his wife dispelled all doubts by having their second child. It was odd to think of an heir being sired

by the stiff-backed, white-haired, quaintly formal old veteran of the First World War.

No such good fortune attended Bill Gallico. The grand old man was not enjoying good health. He said, 'Oh, some days I feel crook, I don't care if I go on with it or not. Other days I'm good as gold.' He mentioned how his one-time friend, deCourcey, whom he had outlasted by a third of a century, used to say that he wanted to live to be one hundred and twenty. In fact, cancer brought him low before he was much more than fifty. Bill eventually left the little cottage where he spoke of these things, and after a term in hospital in Maffra, he returned to live at the wooden hotel on the corner where deCourcey and the fourteen-year-old Mr Borrow chased the cattle.

Viewing it from the road, if the doors were open, it was possible to see through hallways of weatherboard and shiny linoleum to the backyard with its tiny out-buildings, caged cockatoos and covered walkway to the postwar-modernised toilet. Barrels stood on the verandah a pace or two from the road and often enough Bill himself sat out there, facing the northern sun, with his knobbly old hands capping his walking-stick. This was made of twisty menuka, as tough as the old bushman himself. In the days of the big fires, Bill made this spot his permanent station. He sat there watching the smoke and assessing all the reports that came back with the thirsty fire-fighters. When the blaze destroyed the mill a mile or so to the north, at the line where the foothills met the grassland, the order was given to evacuate. It seemed highly likely that the fire would come belting through the dry grass and take the town. Almost everything in it was weatherboard, dried out by half a century. Bill was called on to hop into a car, but preferred to stay where he was. He was quoted as saying, 'I'll back my judgement and reckon the fire will miss the town,' and also, nearer to the mark, 'If the town goes, I'll go with it.'

It was not a cranky stand to make. Briagolong, as a town, had stood still for almost fifty years. A film crew wanting to shoot a 1900-10 period story would have only to dismantle two or three signs and be ready to start. Bill belonged to it, and it to him. If it was destroyed, Bill could only be a useless spectator at whatever rebuilding was done. More than likely most people would not bother, but would let their cars take them

into Stratford, Sale or Maffra, In the event, Bill's judgement was right, the town survived and Bill gained two and a half more years of life. Most of this time he spent at the pub as its honoured star-boarder. 'When would you like your dinner, Mr Gallico?' 'I'm ready just whenever you are.' 'We've got the salad ready, we'll dish up the soup when you come. You just come when you're ready.' And Bill would finish his beer, put his glass on a ledge and hobble down the corridor to the dining-room. The whole building seemed to be sitting just an inch or two above the earth. Painting could prolong its life, but structurally it was beyond renovation. Sunday drinkers sat in a tiny lounge painted pink. There was a piano, and a cane chair for Bill. Cigarette company calendars adorned the walls, and a dart-board. If cigarettes were required, Russell Blythe, the publican, ducked through the bottom half of the stable-type door to the bar, a sort of ritual passing under the yoke of the licensing laws which went oddly with the free-and-easy drinking. Bill was honoured ('Don't sit there. That's my seat, I bought it years ago.') and most questions about the town and the high country were automatically referred to him. Most afternoons he lay down on his bed to rest, but was happy to bring out the old albums with their scenes of the country covered in the Skyline Tours, or to discourse about marriage—'Can she cook? Every young woman should learn how to cook.' He went to bed soon after tea, and his little cottage a few hundred yards away remained unvisited, the dog and pet sheep having been given away.

It could not last forever, and he died in hospital in early November of 1967. The death notice in The Sun appealed to all returned servicemen to turn out in honour of their old comrade. The funeral would leave from the Briagolong Presbyterian Church the following Tuesday, the service commencing at one-thirty.

A few minutes before the time, the hotel doors were shut. It was painful to round the corner and see the seat empty. A Land-Rover cruised along in third gear on its way to the church, going past the white paling fence of the Anzac Park. This was not very well kept. The grass indicated that a sheep or goat had been the last mowing instrument, and some time ago at that. The memorial took the form of three marble obelisks, two smaller ones flanking the central column. Inscriptions listed

'Our Immortal Dead' and the volunteer servicemen of two world wars, with 'W. Gallico' one of the names. A little further along was the white weatherboard Mechanics Institute, a rambling, much-extended building with pines and peppercorns planted behind it. There was no fence, just a stretch of open grass between the building—'established 1874'—and the corner where the funeral procession would turn. The church was another weatherboard building, with a little arched porch, also of wood. Someone had been busy mowing, very recently. The cut grass lay unraked on the lawn and the concrete path leading to the Presbyterian congregation's humble meeting-house. The smell of the lawn and the air from the yellowing paddocks behind the church was a good counter to the stilted hush of the group near the door and the unnaturally 'natural' laughter in two or three other groups further away.

Inside, the church was surprisingly austere, unwittingly beautiful. Dark panelling came chest-high on the walls, then there was white plaster. Dark strips ran up to the ceiling, covering the joins. Only two things were given a place on the wall. There was a cross of extreme simplicity, stained the same colour as the panelling, and there was a photo, also with a stained-wood frame. It showed the list of names cut in the monument in Anzac Park a few yards away, the list which included the dead man's name. He, W. Gallico, lay in his coffin at the front of the pews, on top of a chrome-plated steel stand and underneath an Australian flag. The congregation drifted in until almost all the seats were filled. There were a few seats empty at the front; with them, the church would hold perhaps a hundred. The tiny organ mused on hymn tunes, lingering on the notes, drawing the melodies out of shape. Once—perhaps the organist nodded for a moment—there was a reference to "The Scottish Soldier', which was fitting enough—'For these hills are not the highland hills,/Are not my land's hills,/Not the hills of home.' Well, Bill had lasted longer than most of those whose names were cut in the marble and he would soon lie at the feet of the great hills that belonged to him, if they belonged to anybody. Then the organist improvised away from her indiscretion, dropping to a pianissimo as the undertaker moved briskly past the ushers handing out hymn-books in the doorway. He went a few feet down the aisle, turned and bade the congregation stand. s

This was for the entry of the chief mourner, Bill Gallico's sister. She was of advanced years, and the undertaker and another man each took an elbow as they led her to the front pew. Her face was drawn and bony, her skin heavily powdered to almost white. A handful of much younger relatives took seats near her while the organ gave out more doleful and breathy music. Then the congregation stood again for the entry of the clergyman. This was Mr Quong, the Presbyterian minister from Stratford, a small man, father of eleven, and a full-blooded Chinese. He began the service with the customary prayers, and then a hymn was sung. The congregation sang up, as people used to the service and the hymn. Right from the first words—'Abide with me, fast falls the eventide'—one voice stood out. It was a full-bosomed contralto voice displaying chorister, almost oratorio, pretensions of vocal richness. Throughout the hymn, but particularly in the last lines—'Heaven's morning breaks, earth's vain shadows flee./Help of the helpless, O abide with me.'—this voice drew out the notes in the same vibrato-laden style as the organist's playing. With the echoes of the contralto voice still in the air, the congregation sat down, amid rustling of clothes and creaking of pews, for the minister's address. It was brief and uninspired. Bill's renowned bushmanship was referred to, his service for his country many years before, and the way in which Bill Gallico—the minister was quaintly stilted in pronouncing 'Bill'—was held in universal respect.

At the end of the service, Mr Quong came around to the coffin. It was time for the pall-bearers to rise. Six worn old men stood up, and the undertaker and his assistant also moved to the scene. They quickly swung the coffin stand around to face down the aisle. The stand had castor wheels. Down the aisle came the vanguard of the procession that would soon be taking Bill through Briagolong for the last time. The small, bespectacled minister led the way, hands clasped over Bible and prayer-book. The undertaker, a dandified man of considerable personal vanity but a matching feeling for decorum, moved beside the head of the coffin, guiding it, while his assistant pushed it from the foot. The six old men shuffled behind while the congregation turned to watch. Most were old, of Bill's generation, or a few years younger. A member of the Goldsborough family was one of the mourners; his well-cut suit was

the newest in the church; most were twenty years old, or more. Nearest the door was Bob Dinsmore, another man who had run cattle on the high country. His face was like a carven mask, bony, deeply-lined, as he watched the flag-hidden coffin wheeled past. As it passed through the door, Bill's sister moved out of her pew to follow. She, like her brother, moved down the aisle to the organ accompaniment of Handel's 'Largo'. She wore a white blouse, black-satin coat open at the front and a long skirt of the same material. It was chilling to watch her assisted progress; her own lease on life seemed all too short. The rest of the congregation followed, making way for each other with solemn deference.

Outside, the undertaker's hearse, a converted Chrysler Royal, was parked on the gentle slope down from the rise where the church had been placed. Drawn up behind it were the chief mourners' cars—a light green Chrysler Valiant, five years old, a 1949 Holden and a little grey Standard 10. Between the hearse and the gate two lines of men formed, the guard of ex-servicemen. Into the hearse went the coffin and the wreaths, and into the green Valiant went Bill's sister, looking every inch the Dowager Queen Mother in mourning. The assistant slid into the driving-seat, the engine purred at the first start and the undertaker led the procession away. He placed himself a few yards in front of the hearse and strutted between the lines of men. With the hearse following, he walked over the grass and turned down the gravel road, marching slowly with a toe-pointing movement, gloves clutched in the left hand, right hand out, black hat hanging in front of him from his finger-tips, frock-coat tails swinging behind. He led the way to the next corner, then he entered the hearse and the procession strung itself out behind the steady sixteen miles an hour of the leading vehicle. While the last cars edged into line, the front of the procession passed the Mechanics' Institute, the Anzac Park and the hotel on the corner. It travelled south, on bitumen, to another road junction a mile out of town. Two fingerboards pointed—west, tip; east, cemetery. A van was drawn up in the middle of the road, blinker-light indicating that it wanted to go with the procession. The driver's door named a television sales and service firm from Sale. What could they want? The van took up the rear of the cortege passing down a road, dirt again, between two paddocks of trees. These

were a Forest Commission reserve, protecting stands of forest red gum, the regrowth of trees cut out, the sign said, in the 1880s. The trees still looked very young.

The cars, slightly dusty now, swung over a ditch and parked in lines at the edge of the cemetery. This occupied the bottom comer of a sloping paddock and was wet for most of the year. There were patches of blackberry, and large tussocks of reedy grass. Sarsaparilla was flourishing in the disturbed soil and almost covered several graves. The hole for receiving Bill was at the far end of the cemetery which was laid out rather like a country town. Most graves lined themselves up along a central driveway; there was a second rank on either side, rather thinner, a few more in the third line, and then a handful more scattered further back in the paddock. The hearse drove to the end, and the green Valiant followed, carrying the frail old sister. The minister waited until everybody had found a place before beginning the service. Some stayed on the track, others pressed down the long grass in a wide semi-circle, and the ex-servicemen's guard moved right out to one side, deep in tussocks. Their lapels, many of them inches wide in the fashion of thirty years ago, now sported the linen-and-wire Flanders poppies that are sold on Anzac Day. There were prayers from the minister, 'Our Father' murmured in unison, then the body was lowered. More prayers ... 'ashes to ashes, dust to dust' ... then the minister stood aside. Somewhat encumbered by his black gown, he backed into the long grass and watched while one of the ex-servicemen came forward.

This was anti-climax. The man was the organiser-spokesman type, but he had not bothered to put a scrap of paper in the little service-book he produced from his pocket. He thumbed through it awkwardly for some time till he found the place, then read the oddly-phrased lines and prayers that had been thought fitting ceremony when the booklet was drawn up. Raising his voice to be heard, he read, 'As brother follows brother into the great beyond, let us sink our differences, and close the ranks to carry on the great RSL tradition of service ...' There were also the time-honoured lines of Laurence Binyon:

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:

Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.

The words were painfully incongruous. The ex-servicemen's guard was made up of small farmers, battlers, ex-labourers, all old, living at the end of their period. One or two nodded during the reading, assenting to the idealism of the warrior's glory as compensation for a life not lived. Did they know what they were doing? The youthful notion that those who mourned were somehow getting the worst of the deal, that an heroic, garlanded death might be preferable to the ravaging of time—this was an indulgence of youth at the expense of age which mocked the old soldiers who had once been young. One end of life jibed at the other. The spokesman read another famous verse:

O valiant hearts, who to your glory came
Through dust of conflict and through battle flame;
Tranquil you lie, your knightly virtue proved,
Your memory hallowed in the land you loved.

Then the old men of the guard went through another ritual, watched by the remaining mourners. One after another they approached the grave and threw in their red poppies. Some were overcome, others felt that they ought to be. Each felt the need for some gesture besides the flower. Several saluted. Two or three pressed a hand to the chest, while others were more restrained and simply stared down at the coffin. One short man approached the grave earnestly but quickly. He was very overweight, especially in the legs, but he seemed in no difficulty. Then he made a move as if to kneel by the opening at the same time as he threw the poppy. His throw was done with a weak-wristed overarm action, like a little girl throwing a cricket ball. He went within an ace of jerking himself in, and staggered away, taking several steps before he regained his balance. The undertaker rushed along the graveside to steady him, and remained at that end to grip the elbows and steady the balance of the others.

There were twenty of these men. It was too many, the thing was too drawn out. They all had to do the same thing and they tried to make it a personal gesture. At length the undertaker handed the last one away and then returned to the spot he had come from. The ceremony was almost over. The man who drove up in the television service van now stepped out into the long grass, wearing bandsman's uniform and carrying a bugle. Of course, the Last Post, that would end it. But the undertaker led Bill's sister forward and another man followed behind her, supporting her trailing right arm. It was at first a relief to see her after the ill-performed charade of the poppy throwing, then it was a pang to the heart. If the men had to throw linen flowers on an ideal they felt they had once shared with the dead man, then she had also to take the ritual look at her brother whose life had borne no fruit in family or children. The comments passed among the people walking up the drive to the waiting hearse had been surprisingly dispassionate. 'Yes, he just battled through life in his own way.' 'He was a bachelor, he just plugged along.' 'He was a good old feller, he just went his own way.' Well, all ways were the same in the end, all roads came to the same point, and the frail old sister trembled above it, forced by convention and perhaps a terrifying wish of her own to look into the yawning grave. She was led around a heap of clay and back to a cluster of relatives, then everyone looked to the bugler.

He sounded out the Last Post, the goodnight music Bill had heard in Australian camps, in England, in France, and back in his own country. Often enough, no doubt, he had heard it at Anzac ceremonies and at gravesides not unlike his own. His military and his bushman traditions had been most firmly intertwined just after the second of this century's great wars, when the Briagolong R.SL called on Bill to mastermind the building of their club-room in traditional bush style. He erected for them, with plenty of volunteer labour, a log hut, a simple rectangle with one extra gable to roof in the little annexe through which one entered. The logs were mortised where they crossed to make a tight fit, and squared off a little at top and bottom to make them sit flush. There was a big bushman's fireplace at one end, complete with the traditional hooks and bars for kettles and camp-ovens. The roof was malthoid

battened down by wooden strips. The fence for two panels on either side of the gateway was in mountain stockyard style and the gate itself incorporated an oddly-shaped red-gum branch as both upright and top rail. There must have been almost a hundred trees felled to get the logs for the club-room, and no doubt Bill picked every one for its condition, thickness, and comparative lack of taper.

He would have been flattered to have the task offered to him and it is easy to imagine him spending days in the bush searching and selecting with the same care he showed when he was buying horses for the Skyline Tours. It was said of him that he would spend days out in the bush looking for his cattle, sleeping anywhere, and then he would come back to Briagolong and play hard. Now there was no more of it. In his last years he still made occasional trips into the hills if the Forestry men invited him, and kept a good tab on their road-building, though it was typical of his modesty that he dodged questions about roads he hadn't seen for himself. 'Oh, they've got roads everywhere now, you wanta ask the Forestry.' Like Lochie McLellan, like many of the bushmen, he only spoke of things he knew personally. '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 git 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 nothin' much really. You git a good look out though. See jist about everything.'

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 a flick of a finger. Briagolong lies too close in under the foothills and can only be guessed at behind the deeper darkness of mountains. Open ground again—Traralgon set about by farm lights, Morwell a star cluster, the ugly Latrobe Valley transformed into linking constellations. Over one's shoulder there are hints of Dargo and a flicker in the south-east. Lakes

Entrance? Metung? A ship? On nights of heavy cloud the glow of Melbourne reflects like an aurora behind the bulk of Wellington. West and north are darkness, beyond Dargo darkness again, with Omeo and the townships on the Tambo deep out of sight behind Baldhead and his twenty-mile buttresses. Magic, mystical nightl 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 stay there forever ... but the mind must go on, seek further; I thought of the dead deCourcey and his wish to etherealise himself, to drift through the air of the planet, and of his down-to-earth mate. Bill said, 'I grew up with him. He was twelve years older than me and I just accepted whatever he did. I'd see him do something, and then I'd hear someone make a story out of it. It'd sound real funny when they told it, but when I saw it, I'd just accept it.' When I first asked him about deCourcey, he stared out the door for a long time and a large tear appeared on his cheek. I apologised, but he said, 'Eh? What for? Oh, that's alright, I was just thinkin'.' And later, 'He wasn't much of a horse-man, or bushman, really. He used to get funny ideas, sometimes.' Did he have many friends? 'Oh, he used to keep everyone amused, you know. Yeah, he had plenty of friends, like, he never did the wrong thing.'

It was a simple code which Bill himself had always honoured and usually obeyed. Bill was a democrat in emotion and spirit, the embodiment of a warm humanism that respected other people's claims without

them having to be made. For himself, he claimed little; he thought it right to stay within the rules and never bothered to differentiate too keenly between his own feelings and those of everyone around him. When war approached, years ago, he was in it; everyone was going, everyone was all stirred up, he was in it. The world's experience of the next half-century raised ideas of the United Nations Charter type—that there was a responsibility to the human race in general over and above national loyalties. This was the incoming tide. Bill was aware of it, but he had gone with the events of his own time which would soon be forgotten except for monuments and touches of ceremony, like the bugler playing the Last Post. And the Reveille, which would never waken Bill.

When I came away from Bill's funeral, I was glad that I was soon to leave Gippsland. I had explored thoroughly the unique thing about it, the way in which so many aspects of the nineteenth-century Australia still lingered in the region. I had seen the two wonderful men who most fully embodied this ethos lowered into their graves. As a special place, Gippsland had no more to offer; for the rest, it was a backwater, stirred only by eddies from the twentieth century, now rushing towards its last thirty years. It was time to go. Life had to be renewed, new currents swum in, new fountains sought. Youth was over, and exploration. The town whose ways, people and buildings had become as familiar as my own back garden had to be left. An effort of will was called for, and made. The town sits now, far away in the east, and I, quite unregretting, in the capital. But an image of it still lingers in my mind. Shall we walk through the streets once more, just once? Perhaps if we begin at the river, as the town did; make it Saturday morning, when the streets are at their liveliest, and summer—I think summer would be the appropriate season.

The river is low now, but it will come again. There will be rain in the hills, and snow, and the snow will melt. Upstream, the dairy-farmers will irrigate on the Hats and kids on bikes will head for the cut to swim, as they are doing at the moment, very likely. Over the bridge go the fishermen, heading for the Tambo. Their rods lie along the top of the

cabin with a string from the bumper-bar pulling the tips down, as they hope the bream will shortly do. A police car cruises by to do the Lakes road beat. It seems only yesterday, though it was four summers back, that it stood parked across the bridge as a road-block, and another one beside it to give chase. One constable sat behind the wheel of the pursuit car and the other flagged down the traffic, with a rifle against the mudguard beside him. There were escapees out of prison and it was rumoured they might head for Sydney. Another month, there was an Aboriginal escapee, on the run with a white girl, described by the Melbourne papers as his 'companion' and by street gossip as his harlot. These were caught in the bush near Bruthen, spotted from afar by someone as they flitted from tree to tree as the dark man's forebears once did. Was there poetry in this, or the elements of a chase film? How did the police put it? Ron Daglas, the detective, said, 'Oh, we caught up with him. He was just a buck. There wasn't anything big about it. Just a buck.'

There is no big crime in Bairnsdale, nothing organised. There are traffic offenders, a Peeping Tom to be caught, shop-breaking, often by a metropolitan gang doing over the eastern towns one after the other... but one of the major roles of the force is to act as curbers of the young. Much of the inevitable friction between the generations is acted out in scenes like a hostile confrontation outside the Capri Cafe when the police are called in. The blue patrol van is double-parked wide of the Mini Minor and FJ Holden just back from the Lucknow dance; the sobering plate of steak hasn't worked, angry voices have been raised, soup has gone everywhere, the corpulent Italian goes for the phone, down come the cops, the bulls, the fuzz, the police. 'Why'n't ya take the trouble to find out what really happened? Les'll tellya, he seen it all, he's not pissed, he never had a drop since supper.' 'Come on, that's enough of that, in you get.' 'You never bloody listen to me, wouldya, you jist believe that fat Dago bastard ...'

There is more argument and the compromise is that the most vocal is allowed to drive his red Mini to the station with the blue van close behind. Someone says, 'Piss off on 'em, Richy, you'd do 'em easy.' But Richy goes to the station. Nothing comes of it, it is just an event of Saturday night, but Richy is now labelled a 'trouble-maker' and is

let go with, 'We'll be keeping an eye on you. You want to watch yourself.' Thereafter his friends will look sidelong at passing police cars and every word said at the station that night will be gone over in Housing Commission kitchens to form an estimate of the men in blue. 'I've always got on alright with Jack, say goodday to him, but I tell you what, I wouldn't trust him, what he done to young Hoola Whitney. He's a bash artist, if he's got a few in,' Walking through the streets at night you will sooner or later hear a savagely accelerated engine on the other side of the placid town. It is a pained scream of defiance, the town is so settled. In the morning, the desperate emotions of two a.m. will be recorded by the skid marks where someone has done a slalom through the trees in the centre of Wallace Street. Somewhere in the town there will be a king-sized hangover and a mudguard scratched by the tree-guard now lying on its side in the gutter. And nothing will change. The awkward, the unsettled, the rebellious will grow up and be replaced by new ones, who will in their turn snarl at passing blue vans and skirmish with the police who mark the fringes of the socially permissible with their threats to hand out a good thumping down at the station.

But we are still on the bridge, and the traffic is increasing. Now the trucks go through to New South Wales, stock-crates rattling and tail-lights covered with dust—W. E. Jeffs, Bombala; Filmer Brothers, Candelo. Over the rise they go, past the Exchange House, past the black skid-marks where the Omeo and Princes Highways join, past Bernie Gaitskell's service-station and off to the east. I stare after them, thinking of the tiny settlements on their way, the deep cuttings where the highway carves through the terrain and the pole-straight silvertops wave grandly over wattles and their own red-stemmed progeny. Then a car comes over the hill with a wheel on the double lines and the gateway to the east is a nasty spot on the road, especially when the mob all burn away from the drive-in on Saturday night. Cyclists often creep along the edge of the narrow road, their tail-lamps lost in the glare of headlights. There are accidents there. The boy Dixon was knocked off his bike and killed, and a head-on collision killed young Alan Morris. As was so often the case, it was Tim Hurley who told me. 'He'd just started going out a bit. He'd been a real quiet boy, mostly they kept him at home. Then he

got a few games with Bairnsdale and he just started to go around with the others, and then it happened. Bang. He never would've had a clue. A whole car load and he come off worst. They pulled 'em out of the mess and there he was, head gone, right off his shoulders. It was terrible. He was just eighteen. Poor young feller, he never knew what life was.'

The police were in disrepute after that accident because a photo was taken of the body and Sergeant Arnold Baxter used it as a part of a Road Safety display at the next Bairnsdale Show. Many people wandering among the flower arrangements, knitwear and amateurish oil-paintings got a severe shock on being reminded of the dismembered corpse, particularly since many knew the victim. Sergeant Baxter justified himself with, 'Alright, it's controversial, but we've got to bring home to people what really happens. We're the ones that see 'em.'

Bodies ... yes, they see them. They brought Emil Schreiter's body back over this bridge a year ago, after someone found him lying on a dam bank a few yards from the Bruthen road. Beside him was the .22 rifle that had been his suicide weapon. He had wandered down the gully from Granite Rock early the previous night and had sat on the mound of clay all night. Early morning fatigue must have deepened his misery, and he got the muzzle against himself and pulled the trigger. The attempt failed, wounding him in the arm, so he tried again, with more care and more success.

While he was sitting by the water in the pale moonlight, the two men he had been staying with were sitting in their weatherboard cottage wondering whether to go out looking for him or not. Emil came from the Western District and had a criminal record. He had been staying with Eric Mance and his brother Garnie at Eric's little cottage at Granite Rock. He had had a fight with Garnie and had been ordered out. He stayed away for six months, then he landed in one day in a state of extreme depression, voicing a strong feeling of guilt and talking about 'the cops, the cops, they'll be here, when're they coming?' He stayed for a day, during which the Mance brothers waited apprehensively. After tea he took the rifle and went out. Eric, sensing what might be coming, asked him what he was going to do with the gun. 'Shoot some rabbits.' It came dark and the two brothers sat in the cottage wondering what

to do. Should one of them go looking? Neither mentioned it, but each knew the other felt unwilling to stay in the lighted cottage in case Emil went berserk and shot at the lantern-lit hut. Should both go? No. Emil might return and barricade himself inside. Should they ring the police in Bairnsdale, nine miles away? No. Emil might come back and the arrival of the police, in his present frame of mind, could make him turn murderous. So they waited, not voicing their fears, until Eric eventually decided to wander down the gully a way. He called out, but got no answer. He returned to the cottage in a state of doubt which continued until the discovery the following morning.

It is easy to imagine his confusion as he wandered about the gullies and slopes searching for Emil. Clearing is still going on at Granite Rock and there are plenty of patches of bush. At night-time it is easy for anyone who wants to remain hidden to do so. Jack Pirrie and Dipper Treacy took advantage of this fact, several years before Emil's suicide. They were shearing contractors who felt aggrieved with the Gough family, who had, apparently, neglected to pay them for a small extra lot of sheep they had shorn. They used to cruise out from Bairnsdale on a moonlight night and park their utility in a patch of bush well away from the Goughs' place. Then they would set off down a gully which led to Goughs' with their well-trained dog. They used to send it around the sheep in Goughs' paddock and the dog, without any barking, would answer their faint whistles by herding the sheep into a corner, where they would grab a likely one. According to the tale which circulated in Bairnsdale at the time, Dipper used to give a triumphant chuckle and say to Jack, 'Of course, you know the penalty for rustling is still Death!' and the sheep's throat would be slit. Dipper was well practised with a knife and before long the skin and entrails were buried and the meat was in sugar-bags on its way back to their waiting refrigerator. It was rumoured that they completed their menu with a few well-timed raids on vegetable gardens in the area as well.

In Granite Rock, petty crime of this sort is, regrettably, not abnormal. Granite Rock, an area of settlement, no shops, is Gippsland's Tobacco Road. The farms are small and clearing is still going on. Further out, at Waterholes and Clifton Creek, the farms are smaller still and the

proportion still to be cleared is greater. A number of the farmers have other jobs to supplement their incomes—painters, pulpwood cutters, shire employees, or perhaps a few days' work at the quarry. Here the Public Works Department blasts into the feature that gives the settlement its name, a monolithic mound bristly with stringybark and tea-tree. It too has its touch of grandeur, commanding a view of Bairnsdale and the lakes, but the human scene is less wholesome. Glancing down, it may be just possible to see smoke rising from the chimney of the cottage where Bart Miller lived with his wife and six children. Bart went away for three weeks, but came back after a fortnight. The front gate was still tied up, but the Bradleys' cows were in his yard eating the vegetables; Bart turned them out and had a good deal to say about it. He found his dog shot a few days later.

Half a mile west is another cottage, the one that used to belong to Foster Merritt, homosexual, alcoholic and drug-taker at twenty-four. Foster lived his queer life there, with frequent excursions into Bairnsdale where he might often be seen pushing through the doorway of one of the hotels, usually in the company of a six-foot beanpole who was a divinely apt characterisation of Sir Andrew Aguecheek. Foster might also be seen walking into Bairnsdale, stiff-shouldered, neck taut, eyes glazed and mouth open, conscious of being hated and looking ready to jeer back, or giggle. Foster sold the house to Denis Pitman, but this didn't stop him from taking some friends out there, telling them that he was going away for a while and that they could have anything, anything they wanted. They took pictures, filthy carpet, furniture, lamps ... and the kitchen sink. Hearing about this, the police were undisturbed, probably amused. The goods were recovered and no charges laid. In the mind of authority a clear line is ruled and Granite Rock is below it. They don't threaten Bairnsdale and what they do to each other, short of major crime, is not very important, really.

This didn't apply, however, when Doctor Rees was called in to treat a baby said to be suffering from malnutrition. Bruises and broken bones told a terrible tale of parental cruelty and the food supply of the young couple's crude dwelling—a few potatoes and some soggy vegetables—was an almost equally damning indictment of their inadequacy as

human beings. They lost the child. Thus Granite Rock; what else can we see? Halfway between the Mance cottage and the Merritt-Miller house is another simple cottage. Now the Gouldings live there, a hard-working church-going non-swearing family. Very good, but before them, by a few years, were the people Bart Miller had for neighbours; they slept three in a bed—man, de facto, her daughter; they took Bart for a drive in the family car. There was a gurgling in the back seat, Bart turned. Behold the adolescent daughter helping a simpleton from down the road to masturbate. Ah, no more; no, no, no more of Granite Rock. Yet the dawn there is as breathless as anywhere in Gippsland, the wind raises a smoke of pollen off the summer-dried grasses, and sun-up is a miracle of magpie calls, brazen as trumpeters practising.

Still early, hours before the powerful timber-trucks come swirling down the rise with their brown-barked loads, there is the noise of John Vernon's bull exhorting a paddockful of cows to help him through the barbed-wire fence. There is also John Vernon shouting at his dog, and the dog barking at the sheep. Another two hours and his cows will be finished milking, and they will string themselves out on their way to the grass paddock, dung on the bitumen and children idling along with the animals. Later, John's son will drive the tractor up the road, unaware that one day it is to tip over on him, damage his back and send him to hospital in Melbourne. Later still, when the Rock casts a shadow over the little hut where Fergie Pearson, the quarry boss, left his note and suicided, to be found, decay having taken its course, eight days later ... in the late afternoon, when the sun brings the heath in the hill paddock to its richest pink, the Vernon cows will drift back to be milked again. The children will be with them, singing and playing. One is on horseback. This is the son of Fred Woollacott, whose TPI pension keeps him while he watches a flock of Granite Rock's unattached males hang around the house for a place within the strong feminine aura shed by his wife, May. She is said to be simple, but she knows enough to keep them all doing jobs and running her messages. Each believes he enjoys a 'special' relationship with her. They eye each other jealously, all willing to drink Fred's grog, but none able to say he has made love to her. Simple, forty, with a weather-beaten backwoods-type of beauty, she is surrounded by

her children, her pigs and her ill-assorted admirers, their heads full of fantasy romance.

This is Granite Rock; squalid, nothing more romantic than assignations at the haystack, meetings at the pig-yard; leave it, it is over the bridge and behind us now, and it is time we were moving. One last look then, at some shapely old cottages in East Bairnsdale overlooking the river and off we go up the highway with the far east behind us, the town in front and the city far away in the distance. On the right is the tannery, shutters open today and sheep-skins strung out on poles. On the left is the co-operative butter factory, its office looking on to the wharf where the lakes steamers used to tie up—the Gippy, the JCD, the Burrabogie—names that live on in the talk of the older generation.

Today we may see the Tambo Princess, a large white touring vessel owned by Gilbert Reid. He has a clearly marked place in the town's gallery of personalities. He is said to be a millionaire. Village talk divides his time between boat and hotel and makes plenty of comment, most of it unfounded, on his shipboard parties. There was great local interest in his exchange of telegrams with the former captain of the Queen Elizabeth. When the master of this famous liner retired, Gilbert Reid sent him a cable offering him a job as skipper of the Tambo Princess. The ex-captain declined. To me, this gesture typified the enormous vulgarity of the nouveau riche. Village gossip explained that he had made his fortune post-war in sanitary ceramics. It was, in fact, the making of bath tubs and a fair measure of shrewd dealing which brought him his money, but the distortion of fact by attitudes is a nice example of the way in which a country town allots people their place in its estimation.

The man himself, when I saw him, seemed worth a more sympathetic estimation. There had been a crisis at the hotel. Gilbert Reid had affronted Alan Bentleigh, his manager; Alan walked out to take over the Metung Hotel, the licensing court was angry, Gilbert Reid took over the hotel, even the cooking. He was a pathetic figure in white cook's trousers, apron and hat. He came out nervously inquiring of his guests at the table with the lipstick-pink cloth. His waiter poked a finger in the soup, said, 'Will youse have something to drink? Like a beer?' and thought the apple pie might not be hot because he thought the boss'd knocked off.

The boss had knocked off. He was standing by the lounge bar, one of a group drinking liqueurs, red-faced, still in his whites except for the hat. This was wealth? Of a sort, of a sort.

We notice a man peering into a box structure at the end of the bridge. He is Rupe Lording, the town's water-supply engineer. Despite a heart condition, he is constantly up and down between his house on the slope and the pumping-station at the river, right up the far end of the town. Though well over retiring age, he is worth two men to the Bairnsdale Water Trust. He is one of the town's faithful men, now for the Water Trust, once for J. C. Deakin. This is one of the very few surviving three-generation names of Bairnsdale's business centre. There is Fisher's, the most up-to-date shop in town (self-styled 'A Shopper's World', having mannequin parades and On-The-Hour specials); there is Holroyd's Hardware, which is past its centenary, and there is J. C. Deakin Pty Ltd, established 1877. This is the biggest shop in town, the emporium where anyone can get a job. It stands in Nicholson Street, one block back from the highway, and from its front doors you can see the Mechanics' Institute, Deakin's Autoport (first and least successful of the modem service-stations), the Post Office and the Albion, Lambert's, the florists, and the rear view of those Main Street facades.

Overhead, over the cantilever which replaced verandah and poles, a blue flag flutters out to show three white letters, JCD. The old man's name lives on, his sons and his grandsons are connected with the business, but none have striven for a reputation to match the founder's. Even his is dwindling now. Rupe Lording's generation, and perhaps those who came to maturity between the wars, still mention him respectfully, but for the newer arrivals the Deakin name is a hollow build-up. The existing members of the family are generally well-liked, but the store has an air as if someone more memorable has departed. The founder, in his day, was bricklayer, builder, shipwright, store-owner and sawmiller. The Dargo, the Gippsland and the JCD were his boats, he built a dock at Paynesville, and one of the first mills in the mountain bush was started by him. This was at Seldom Seen, out near Baldhead, where alpine ash and mountain grey gum were cut. And seven miles on, where the Wentworth rises on the side of Baldhead, at the white bridge where

Nick Hurley was dismayed by the tumbledown hut, there was another Deakin mill. At the edge of the clearing there are remnants of the three-foot gauge railway line, with wooden rails, which ran through the wattle scrub between logging site and mill.

Deakin made his name when Gippslanders had Gippsland's making in their hands, or acted as if they did. Now, when nominations are announced for Bairnsdale's first-ever Town Council elections, people notice that the candidates include a butcher, two schoolteachers, a shire employee, and the man that runs the disposals shop. Someone says, 'Good on 'em, at least they're going to have a go, not leave it all to the Deakins and Holroyds and Fishers.' But this is tilting at a snob enemy that no longer exists, if it ever did. The three name families make no attempt to hold the initiative in the town. They command a little more respect than they have earned, but that is mainly among families in their second or third Bairnsdale generation. Rupe Lording's wife, Lottie, for instance, was pleased when her son Neville married a Deakin girl. Lottie was a Worthington and the Worthingtons are another family of long standing—Methodist, nurserymen. Away on our left now is a shed bearing their name, close to the disused branch-line from the station to the wharf, a link no longer necessary. It passed out of use at the time when the daily ritual of jinkers and buggies going down to meet the Burrabogie or the Deakin boats was passing into memory.

Now the highway rides through on a levee flanked by poplars and six feet above the dirt roads at the side. These, like the camping-park and the Imperial Hotel they serve, are subject to flood, though it is many years since the big floods celebrated in photos and oldtimers' recall. Another levee, much higher, carries the Orbost railway-line. It is one of the sights of Bairnsdale to see the Orbost train come through. It heralds itself with a blast from the diesel-engine hooter at the East Bairnsdale crossing, noses through the smoke of the tip rubbish on fire, and crosses the river on the red steel bridge. It rolls along the embankment, driver waving to school children and timber-wagons rattling, just up from Orbost. Behind it are a string of tiny deserted stations— Nicholson, Bumberrah, Colquhoun, Waygara, Tostaree—deep gullies spanned by

high log bridges, miles of forest and the mile-long stretch of jetty-like construction where the line runs above the flats at Orbost.

The railway never crossed the Snowy, so Orbost people must come to it, though it is thirty-odd years since any passengers were carried. Mostly it is timber, and cattle by road, which come out of Orbost. The train goes down almost empty, apart from a few shop goods. If Bairnsdale is still a frontier-town in character, Orbost is an outpost. As in Bairnsdale, the shopping-centre ranges itself along the old track down to the flat and the river crossing. Hardly any shop fronts are modernised. The Greek's cafe has a juke-box, yellow walls and a red ceiling, and gas brackets. Its refrigerated section has fish, crayfish and scallops, in a profusion of doubtful age. An enormous queue of coke bottles trails around the walls. The shelves are full of Cherry Ripe, Kool Mints, Life Savers and boxes of Black Cat chocolates, repeating themselves in lines and stacks. The chairs are painted. Outside, the taxis wait for a call. As likely as not, they will be asked to go down to Cabbage Tree, or even as far as Cann River, fifty-four miles away, at the call of a group of Aborigines who have finished their shopping, visiting or drinking for the weekend. Watch them get out at Club Terrace. There is the road, a log-yard, the mill itself, a sodden gully; up the other side is a row of unpainted dwellings, their paling fences weathering as dark as the stringybarks just outside them. Out get the Aborigines, without paying; they go into the first house, where all the noise is coming from; there is a fleeing of children from this house, then half the party emerges and goes into the second. A long wait, and the group rushes into the third house, looking for more grog, money to pay, who knows? The taxi-driver waits. Presumably he gets his money, while the dark people show that hallmark of the rock-bottom poor—careless of clothing, careless of diet, but able to find money for grog and taxis.

In Bairnsdale, they leave their house near the Lucknow brickworks in trousers and thin cotton shirts, it starts to rain so they ring from the Exchange House and ride half a mile by cab. Certainly their chances of hitching a ride are slim. Tourists won't touch them and most locals have seen them reeling on the Lakes Entrance road, too drunk to know their own danger. It is a pitiful sight to return home at sunset and see the

same men, still coatless, still swaying on the road and thumbing the traffic a few yards from the spot where they stood at midday. Their situation is sadder than failure because most of them have never been organised enough to make a try in life. Main Street takes for granted the unfortunates with legs like an inverted U whose heaving gait is the legacy of childhood illness. They are sadly shown up at bean-picking time when the New South Wales Aborigines drive in. The visiting dark people have old model cars, but they do go, and their owners are well-dressed, pay their way and have their pride, personal and communal.

The white man's pride shows itself on our left. The once cow-paddock and arena for visiting circuses has been improved for the Technical School's oval. The rent paid by Bullen's and Sole's was a brace of complimentary tickets for Mr and Mrs Eldridge. Jerrold G. Eldridge, former principal of the Technical School and sometime president of Rotary, is commemorated by the ugly stone-faced gates set at a point where no one enters the oddly-shaped and oddly-graded oval. Here schoolboys and weekend baseballers play inside the white fence donated, as was the gate, by Rotary. The club is window-dressing, of course, as they are with their sign a few hundred yards before the bridge. It presents a sort of community lapel to the traveller—the badges of Rotary, Apex and JCI, the three service clubs. These dangle from a sign saying WELCOME, a glad-handing businessmen's greeting. The reverse, with equal sententiousness, offers FAREWELL, farewell to the traveller, the always-stranger who must be made to feel somewhat at home, which is to say, satisfied to use the town's camping-park, cafes and motels.

Of these, the park is behind us, on our right; for the rest, we must plod up the slope in front of the Technical School, once School of Mines. Both names can still be read on the 1930s icing which is its facade. Walking up this rise, the old town and the current one are both strong in their presence. Looking down Park Street, and how ironically this was named in the days of beasts pasturing and the Mitchell flooding, we see the gasometer, empty now. Porta gas is in, with silver cylinders outside kitchens, but the town likes to recollect the lamp-lighter going his rounds on his bike, just about dark, lighting up each shapely beacon. These, of which none now exist, were cast at the foundry of Messrs

Pepperill and Winton, who gave as their address the area just below us—Punt Flat. The earliest buildings of substance were built on the slope where we stand, Armstrong's Criterion Store, Gingell's Club Hotel, and several dwellings, all weatherboard and low, dwarfed by the towering red gums. The early newspaper carrying the advertisements of these establishments was printed on cloth. Now the signs clamour at the motorist—Studebaker, Mazda, BP Super, BP Energol, Victoria Bitter, Counter Lunch, Four and Twenty Pies, Mandie's Orient Hotel. The highway divides for the Main Street gardens, and though one slow driver sets a line of vehicles changing down, no one notices the low white wall with its three plaques:

In Memory of Archibald Macleod
Bairnsdale's First Citizen .
1843-1861

Macleod, in the strangely ambiguous way of country towns, has a street named after him, and the plate-glass and manganese-brick of a machinery firm extending and converting his home. Scant honour; yet he was first, and the town's journey through history begins with his footstep on the western bank of the river ...

In Memory of Agnes Mein
daughter of
William and Elizabeth Mein
First Colonist's Child born at Bairnsdale
26 October 1845

'Colonist' gives it: as with the wedding, so with the settlement; the child sealed it. The founders were committed.

First Wedding in Bairnsdale
In Memory of Thomas Jackson and Rosanna Kelly
Married by the Reverend E. C. Price, BA, of Cooma, NSW
28 April 1845
Witnesses, Alexander Arbuckle, MD, of Bairnsdale Ronald McDonald
of Lucknow

'First wedding' ... 'In Memory' ... joyful day now beyond recollection and merely honoured, all in less than two life-spans.

The first settlers, like the minister, came through from southern New South Wales, of which Gippsland was the offshoot—W. E. Jeffs, Bombala; Filmer Brothers, Candelo—and still linked. Elizabeth Mein was fortunate, with a minister to marry her and a doctor to deliver her child. The Cooma she came through is now engulfed by the building development of the Snowy Mountains Scheme, just as Bairnsdale hopes it will benefit from the oil discoveries offshore. People say, 'Oh, it's going to bring industry; it's going to make all the difference.' Perhaps it will, in time. We glance to the right, up Wood Street. The Club Hotel, on the corner, has been renovated. With the verandahs, ugly encrustation of the 'thirties, went the CTA sign with its claim to some sort of accommodation standard in the pre-motel days. The red brick stables, long detached from the hotel, are now the headquarters of International Divers Inc. Before them were Bairnsdale Battery Service, which took over from the weekly fowl market. Bidders stood on the roughly-paved floor, now concrete, examining the birds in their wire pens while Fred Barnes, estate-agent, hotel-broker, three times Shire President and now Mayor of the town, solicited their bids. The international divers, a very mixed group, potter around with their equipment, or stroll down to the Club. A long cylindrical decompression-chamber lies along one wall in case of a delayed attack of the bends. Out at the aerodrome there is a regular traffic of helicopters to and from the oil-rig. Little glamour is attached to this activity. Rumour quickly spreads the news when there has been a fatal accident at the rig, but for the rest, it is, 'The divers? They're down in the old chook market, aren't they?'

And that is where Carol Finnemore finds them, or she too goes down to the Club. Upstairs and opposite, in the office of Lakeland Ice and Butter Factory, Christine Braybrook—Tina—notes her movements and they are, of course, passed on to her friends. Now upon the accumulation of the past, and over the grid pattern of the streets, we sense other patterns—the network of talk and the quality of love. Tina is an ex-Lakes Entrance girl, now she lives in Allsopp Street, over behind the station. The news of Carol's affair will circulate in those two places and

with Tina's friends in other parts of the town. It may reach that never-closed rialto of gossip, the nurses' home, to enter the network of small talk and phone call. Outside the West End Store on Sunday night it will be a titbit snapped up by two girls crammed into the public phone, with a younger sister trying to squeeze in, too. Tina's reporting will be unmalicious, for hers is a bird-like beauty and after two years of marriage she still has an innocent virginal air about her.

Her man is Leslie, reputed the slackest, coarsest and least intelligent of the Braybrooks; lo, by the time he married he was changed, was ruddy, warm, hard-working, with a fund of good nature always available. Tina's sweetness, which helped him centre his character, is without self-consciousness. She swims in better-class Lakes ways as fish do in water. In cooking, dress, decorating and speech she knows the code. The church is as vast as it says it is and its local representatives are attached to the whole. The Monsignor is important and Father O'Loughlin, who sometimes celebrates Mass at Lakes, is a real character, full of brogue and baggy-pants charm. Like many good Catholics, Tina is so much a part of it that she can pick and choose, skittering about easily between dogmas and bazaars. But she is childless so far and it worries her, so she has a heart for Carol who follows down to the Club with her hoydenish walk. Carol used to be plump, round-faced and moved easily at the hips. She held office in a number of organizations, actively pursuing speakers and debate adjudicators with pushing coyness. Then came the change. She became involved with David Toomey, and sat by the hour in his car outside the Finnemore house. This was set on prosperous grazing country to the sou'west of Bairnsdale. Her parents wear some of culture's less ornate clothing with ease. They have coloured slides of their trips to out-of-the-way places, a grevillea garden (eighty-seven species!) and a host of Australian prints on their walls. These, taken from National Bank calendars, have been neatly framed by Mr Finnemore. His wife likes music, goes to concerts and discusses the results of the Sale Eisteddfod. She is vivacious, active on committees and knows her mind. So does Mr Finnemore, who has represented the local Country Party branch at State Conference. Of their other children, Edward was nearest in age to Carol. He grew up in this commonsense culture, donned it easily, took a

couple of honours at Matric. and went to the Uni., where he toyed with an Arts course. In Gippsland he spoke of barefoot friends and continental films; in Melbourne, no doubt, he mentioned his mountain-climbing and fondness for alpine flowers.

Carol's path of the heart in all this? David Toomey's glamour was provincial-pop from his place in the Astrals, a Traralgon-based group. Then there was an interlude with Don Green, a photographer with a metal plate in his head, a man of 'not very good moral character', as her brother priggishly put it. Then it was one of the 'international' divers. Thus Carol in the street, changed now, tightly-skirted, hair swept up and back, thinner in the face. She is aware of opinion, there is contumacy in her walk, she is aware of this, too. Now what is wrong? The romance? We know nothing of that. The opinion? There is no caste system, but the expectation is that one will marry among one's own. If a girl marries out of her group, someone will say, 'Well, good on her, anyway,' an uneasy blend of values: All For Love moderated to an acceptance of strong feeling, if there are no tragic overtones, plus the recognition of the social groups within which village life takes place. That public opinion is ever-present, knowing too much, never allowing one to blossom into a presentation form of oneself—well, there are the assumed accents at the Library and the Film Society—always putting a conscious edge on the emotions, as of a stance. So Carol's heels bang on the pavement and tonight is Saturday night.

Saturday night is Exodus born of Afternoon filled with swimming, gardening, lazing or cricket in summer, dreariness, excursion or football in winter. A blue haze settles in before dark, lines of cars nudge for the oval gate, the pubs fill, the street-lights go on, fish and chips and hamburgers are in demand. In the Albion, Jock Tolley expertly pours beers at top speed while cocking an ear to the radio for VFL results. As they come through, he takes the counter-lunch blackboard, still wet from the bar rag, and chalks up the League scores, Coll v Rich, Ess'don v Foots, South and Fitz. The noise mounts, someone has won the TAB double, another log goes on the fire amid a flurry of 'Mind your bloody trousers,' and 'What're you doin', Pottsy?' In the six o'clock closing days there was a fine old crescendo peaking at six-twenty. It is more leisurely now, but it

is still afternoon ending. There is a lull of two hours before night begins, then most cars head out. It will be over to Lucknow for the dance or the drive-in, perhaps down to Lakes or Swan Reach; out to Bruthen, Lindenow, or the smaller communities like Flaggy Creek, Wy Yung or Johnsonville. Bairnsdale has little. Main Street is a throughway, the RSL has a crowded, well-supervised dance for young people each month, sometimes there is a rock dance in St John's hall; the Mechanics' dances never seern to pay. The pictures are off because the theatre is sold to the Exclusive Brethren sect. With so little in walking distance, it's into the car and out, perhaps down to Paynesville.

Paynesville is Mosquitoville, a little fishing village padded out with holiday shacks and weekenders. Windows are useless without wire mesh. The few stores front the lake and Raymond Island. Nothing very substantial backs them until you reach one row of split-level houses overlooking Newlands Backwater. It is a town full of fibro-cement, garishly painted weatherboard, and bungalows at the side. But it has a yacht club, and the Gippsland Lakes Hotel Motel, opened by the Premier, to draw Bairnsdale people down on Saturday night and Sunday. The Hotel Motel was designed as a hybrid of Expense Account Carefree and Country Club, but it is off the beaten track and Gippsland is not so very wealthy. Tonight's dinner-dance is a young people's night. The high-roofed octagon is dense with smoke and amplified sound from the Zodiacs, a post-Beatles guitars-and-drum group. The singer's mouth almost engulfs the microphone, his voice takes on an electronic character, words are lost and the rhythm thunders out. Tables are dragged back on to the carpet and cloths are stained with ash and beer. The amber light on the singer snaps off as the bracket of numbers ends and the talking continues at bar-shouting level. These are the young married, the engaged and the seriously courting, no wild ones here. Here are bank-clerks, insurance-agents, young people in business and the sensible wedge of the mechanic and tradesman group. This will cost them a fair slice of the weekly pay-packet, especially if their girls try out the liqueurs. When the band packs up and Michael Dennis says goodnight to the last to leave, it will be home saying, 'Well that was a good night,' or 'All back to Rod's place!'

Then the cars will slew through the curves and on to the Bairnsdale road, nine miles of beauty.

Nature is a benediction nowhere more than here. Night after summer night a serene blue darkness settles on Lake King. The moon increases from a gilt filament to a medal flattened on one side as by a careless goldsmith, then she comes to the full and earlier nights are shown as attempts at perfection now realised. All is dark blue or steel. Swans honk away down among the paperbarks. Direction poles for the vanished steamers are five knobs at the edge of moon-glitter. Reflected light travels around with the cars, aiming at the eye. Bonnets glisten and windows reflect moon, cloud and tree canopies. Young red gums arch overhead, tunnelling the road, then the cars are in the open again. They turn to the lakeside. Brackish and shallow, the waters shake in the heavenly spotlight. Somewhere in the darkness they lap invisible shores, then there is the light of a farmhouse. Bairnsdale could be the capital of some far-off island if it were not for the red tail-lights moving up the river road. Dimly present behind it are the foothill masses—Mount Alfred, Lookout, Taylor. Night wipes out the solemn eminence of Baldhead and the exquisite line of the horizon by Castle Hill. Drivers stop, groups huddle in one car, there is talking, kissing, drinking, skylarking. A bottle goes in the river. A radio goes on and the pop songs jangle out—'She Loves You', 'I Wanna Hold Your Hand', 'A Taste of Honey', and more, transient like the bottle glinting among the reeds a hundred yards downstream. Time, pluck it out of the river, hold it a while! Water, turn to wine, make him drunk; make the old thief take his hands off the moment. But stillness and bliss are an aura disappearing if looked at; start the engine, lovers, and cruise back to town.

Their road is one of all seasons and all winds. Thrice a year the hot northerly blows out of the inland and Macleod's Morass starts to dry up. Snakes slither in the tussocks and water-birds go elsewhere. In autumn the leaves fall in a golden patter on the river if the sou'westerly catches them, or scamper between the cars if there is a wind from the east, which is uncommon; more often, when the weather is from the Gabo Island side, a steady drizzle seeps out of a leaden sky, hanging around for days till the clearing wind gets up. The big blows come out of the sou'west,

bringing rain, thunder, or the glorious dapple of alternating cloud and sunshine in paddocks wide of the town. Of a summer afternoon its buildings are like a stage-set with the mountain backdrop looming behind. Loveliest is morning in winter. Driving up from Paynesville one sees the town with all its dark colours hidden, sunlight penetrating the mist for the white walls only; travellers come upon it as on some vision of Mediterranean villas.

Inside the vision, the Saturday morning excitement rises. The roar of a motor-mower comes from Mitchell's Sports Store, where Fred the repairman is at work. The shop has a mower on the verandah and a penny-farthing cycle atop the facade. Young boys look at cricket-bats and guns in the window. Perhaps they will ride out the far side of town this afternoon, where the red flag will show at the sign 'Bairnsdale Rifle Range. Trespassers prosecuted.' The sound of .303 rifles will carry back into the west-end streets, alarming one or two of the drivers cruising around to have a look at 'all the new houses up that end of town'. There will be rather more of these inspection drives on Sunday, when the impetus of the weekend is almost spent. Now it is just welling up. There is no slack first hour this morning. Shops have opened without the ritual sweeping of the footpath outside. This is a custom not observed by city-based firms like Coles, Woolworths or Clauscens, but Ben Mathers, Rotarian, does it outside his shoe-store, and the Greeks do it. Indeed, it is Zampattis, the Italian fruiterers, who are the only ones to have pine branches outside their shop at Christmas these days. About the only other things on the footpath are the Jumbo elephant at Woolworths (six-pence in the slot for a one-minute ride) and the Ugly Man Competition outside Price's Newsagency. This is a tall board featuring a comic-strip ugly face, with pink slobber lips, sharkish leer and sick-green clothes. A strip of blackboard runs underneath. You pay fifty cents for the right to erase the name there and substitute another. This is Rotary again, working for charity, and the joke usually remains within a certain age- and income-group. Ted Kavanagh, the manager of GP Motors, is the Ugly Man just at present, but later in the morning it will be Kevin Brady,

the powerful-looking Catholic who is local head of the SEC, or weak-voiced Lindsay Munro, who keeps the Victoria. Occasionally, the CRB move in to name Bill Harper or Normie Hollings, but the Roads men are more likely to make their fun around at Jock Tolley's Albion, where hundreds of dollars in cheques are cashed each pay-day.

On Saturday the Albion and Post Office mark as clearly as a claim-peg one corner of the morning parade, which occupies four streets, one block. With a little spill-over, everything that matters is contained between this intersection, the one at Deakin's, the State Savings Bank in Main Street and Purvis's. This is where we find the old-stagers, lingering on like their name 'Cook's Corner' for the spot where they sit. The brims of their hats curl over a shade as the dismantled verandahs once did. Their brown waist-coats and pin-stripe trousers are a gallery of all the suitings since King George the Fifth. A block away and a lifetime apart, adolescent boys also sit on a bike-rack, or balance on their seat, fingers trembling nervously on the handle-bars. Women scarcely notice them, but girls of fourteen hurry past, or come up in twos or threes. The corner group tries to embarrass any of their age driving past with parents by waving or singing out, but if a friend has been picked up for a cruise around by one of the town's young blades with a noisy car, they only manage a set jaw and a tight little nod.

This is one thing of which there is no end and it is quite, quite obligatory. Nod to the butcher's wife, nod to the postie who caught you looking at him, nod to the girl in the window who stared out as you stared in. Nod to the milkman, the neighbour whose name you forget, and the woman from Enquiries at the Shire Office. Nod, or snub. Someone said, 'I find myself nodding to people I don't know. Their faces are just part of my day.' It heightens one's sense of life to know all these people, and yet in a way it dulls it, since each is seen in a village context. I recall that Delius wrote an opera, *A Village Romeo and Juliet*, and the implied contrast between grand passion and village ways is certainly observed in Bairnsdale, where public life admits no need for intense emotion. Listen to the band, for instance. Pudgy brass chords wash around the shoppers crossing the Main Street gardens, joining with the sunshine to give an air of contented bonhomie. The band's rendering of

march tunes is reminiscent rather than stirring, with martial trombones restrained to a part in the warm harmonies. Rhythm is slack and final cadences sprawl out until cut off by a flick of Col Foley's fingers. Col and some of the other bandsmen—Reg Lawrence, the electrician, and Bill Rutherford, the senior assistant at the High School—are often to be seen in a corner at the Albion. Bill says the band is a good bunch of blokes, they have fun, yon don't want to take things too seriously. Besides, if there was a really rigorous training program you wouldn't get anybody to join. One asks why not; doesn't the band give prestige to its members? If so, the solid men of middle age don't seem to look for it. And young lads are more envious of David Everest, just back from a spell of playing in a 'group' at one of the Melbourne discotheques, than of the two adolescents looking very small-headed in their bandsmen's caps. Bill says, 'The away trips you get, up to Bendigo for a festival, they're a lot of good fun, a bit of drinking, of course. I tell you what, the fellows play really well though, when they get to the competition. No, they're fair dinkum then. Good bunch of blokes.' If this is disappointing to those outside the bandsmen's circle, the explanation perhaps lies a few blocks away, where bulldozers are excavating a large hole in the Botanic Gardens.

The Tannies—as those who grew up in Bairnsdale call them—were allotted two blocks in the original layout of the town. The aspiration expressed by this gesture was typical of the nineteenth century, but Botanical Gardens in the proper sense were never developed. As the years went by without a local Baron von Mueller materialising, first the Bowling and Tennis Clubs, and then the Kindergarten, were allowed to take corners of the reserve, then the girls' hockey competition made a fourth intrusion. The town band, once an important expression of communal pride, has fared better than the Botanical Gardens notion, but it no longer carries the required prestige for a status symbol. It is an Olympic swimming-pool now that the town must have, and despite the Council's lukewarm attitude, the Swimming Club has raised enough money to force a start. Will it be used? In swimming, as in music, talent is spread very thinly in eight thousand people to justify an expensive pool. The Club says the river isn't as hygienic as it might be —that ugly little pool—and it's a bad place to learn. Will a chlorinated pool seem better

than the river to the bike-riding swarms who flock there after school on summer days? Only the future knows, but there will be a pool, which means that there will be one more committee holding barbecues, dances, raffles and street-stalls to meet their expenses.

The stalls will probably be set up against the band rotunda, though sometimes they stand at the most wind-exposed part of Service Street, where they are placed to catch pedestrians cutting the comer via Deakin's Autoport. There are flowers, cakes, jars of jam, ash-trays and comics for sale, celery, silver-beet and perhaps some baby clothes. The donors are often the buyers, women for whom family has broadened into Mothers' Club or Auxiliary, in the age range from young-married of a decade ago to grand old stalwarts of charity. Now we see Mrs Fetter picking over the wares and chattering about the Nescafe jar of plum jam she's bought. She has a large family and some of them will ride in the tray of the utility when they go back to Metung.

Some have been through the Technical School, where I taught for twelve years. But what have I learned? That Hugo Fetter has the sort of mind that conceived legends and fairy-tales, that Hugo is now working for the Victorian Railways and wishes to be remembered to me. That George at thirteen had delusions of being a great football coach and went around for days with 'Coach' chalked over the back of his grey jumper. That George at sixteen was almost bearded but showed not the slightest self-consciousness about his unshaven state. That George at fourteen blurted out in a school-bus as it passed the Bairnsdale Hospital, 'Gee, I've never been past here before.' The whole bus had it straight away. 'Whaffor's never been past th'ospital in his life! Haven't y'ever been to Sale, Whaffor?' No. 'Stratford?' No. 'Lindenow?' No. 'Ya been to Fernbank, Whaffor?' Someone else butted in, 'Who'd want to go to Fernbank, there's nothing there!' and the heat was taken off poor Whaffor. Twelve years, and what have I learned? That the Fetter boys grow up, and their mother's hair grows a little greyer and stragglier. That the Victorian Railways, which I have always taken for granted, accommodates a Fetter, and Geoff Flannagan, and half a dozen others with off-beat personalities which will be displayed, or half-hidden, in Melbourne, or Wycheproof, or somewhere.

I have learned that twelve years brings an enormous rag-bag of fact and fiction about people. What can be done with it? Gain a little wisdom, perhaps, and share in the general gossip in the street. Is this enough? Well, well, avoid the question, the talk is beguiling. Someone says Geoff Flannagan's left the Railways and someone says, 'No, he's just been transferred.' Someone says there were thirteen children in the Flannagan family, and someone else thinks it's eleven. Since no one is sure about Geoff, the talk slides on to George, best-known of the Flannagans, a legend living among us here and now.

George, they say, is not the full shillin'; they reckon, someone says, that he was dropped on his head as a child. It is said that kids jeer and throw stones to frighten his horse. His name is mentioned with that tone of voice that says, everyone knows about George. Yet there is something wonderful about George and the town's handling of him. He is an institution. About five of an afternoon his horse can be seen tied up in the railway yard just opposite the Terminus. If George wants you to know there's a job to be done, he stands at the bar with feet apart, hat on, stock-whip dangling from an elbow and still wearing his waterproof. He throws down a coin with all the authority of fifty thousand acres, quaffs two beers and moves out in deliberate silence. On other nights he drinks in sports coat, riding jodhpurs and, of course, the hat with the curling brim which sets the seal on his assumed character of the Lone Rider of the American West blended with the Silent Stockman of the Australian Outback. Among the motor traffic, he is a complete anachronism as his horse clips along the sealed roads. George rarely crosses Main Street and when he does so, it is an event. He watches the traffic while pretending to be oblivious of anything which might diminish the importance of his role. The town's real drovers, like Charlie Gerrard and Harry Carr, are rarely seen on horseback, except at the sale-yards. If you do come on them crossing the Mitchell bridge with a mob of cattle from Omeo, and George is in attendance, you see straight away the difference between the pose and the real thing. Yet George's estimation of himself is most carefully protected by everyone who knows him. He has found a part to play which parodies something from the town's past, the town is vastly amused and George lives it to the full. He does not read or write and

he is very easily scared. He is shy. Much of the time he camps at Ernie Austin's squalid house set on enormously valuable land just across the river. If he's ever short of a few bob, they say, Maurie Brownlow slips him a quid. Mr Brownlow is the living partner of Worthington and Brownlow, and his ruddy face usually bears a smile when you see him at the sale-yards or outside the Main Street office. Sliding behind the wheel of his big Chevrolet, he shows a silhouette of stock-agent's hat, but George's is wider by a good two inches. In fact, you rarely see him bare-headed, unless you catch him shaving in the bull-ring. This is where horses and stud cattle are sold and in a perfectly unassuming way it is probably Bairnsdale's best building. George often camps there if stock have to be moved early in the morning. There are sheds nearby, used as offices on sale-days, but apparently George prefers to sleep where the air is heavy with the smell of animals. It fits the part. And the part, so carefully responded to, gives him his sanity. He has chosen his place, the town has allotted it to him, and he is safe.

Sometimes, in a country town, it is hard to develop. People respond to you as they have known you. Often it is easier to behave consistently with one's public persona than to force a change. It was praise when someone said of Bryce Finnemore, 'Never changes. He's always the same, Bryce.' Discussions of people get to sound like a sort of thumbing through the collection—'You know Alan, do you?' 'Oh yes, I know Alan, and Beryl.' 'Do you know Doug?' 'Oh yes, I know Doug. Well, I've known Elsie longer, really. I knew her before they were married ... oh, yes, I know Doug!'

Rigid as this placing of people can be, it makes for security and balance. It is doubtful whether Bairnsdale's most prized characters could exist in an urban environment without the sense of identity conferred by the almost tangible public opinion. Take Timmy Bock. He is well into his twenties now, stands about four feet high, and has a mature, pugnacious look about him. He is thickset and you think he may be aggressive, but he never is. He often attends the school for retarded children, but is said to be much happier when on a farm up at Omeo. Timmy has an acutely developed feeling for excitement and always manages to be where it is highest. He is down the street on Saturday mornings, some-

where near Woolworths or Coles. Should there be a fire alarm, he will run down the street to see the volunteer firemen dashing into the fire-station. Miraculously he will turn up at the fire, pointing at the flames. When the hose connection slips, he will be there watching the sweating fireman working at full pressure to put it together. As the firemen drag new lengths into the shop's yard, Timmy will scamper along with them, keeping an eye on any rough stones or pieces of metal that might cut the hose. He is there when the first swoosh of steam goes up in the air, and when it is all over he will be out the front of the shop telling how it was saved.

In the days when Bairnsdale had nightly pictures, Timmy would stand with the crowd who were smoking and talking on the foot-paths. When the bells rang, he went in, backwards. The obvious explanation was that he was trying to act out the corny joke, 'If you walk in backwards, they think you're coming out.' So Timmy was simple, really simple; so they let him in. People saw this and decided that Timmy was pretty shrewd. The door-keeper saved his reputation by dropping bystanders a wink. Another trick of Timmy's was to wait until butchers put a note in their windows offering to buy old newspapers. He would spend fourpence on a Herald and take it to a butcher. Standard practice was to thank him and give him a shilling. Timmy bought another paper and went to the next butcher. The victims took this in good part, but others said, 'He's not as silly as he looks. People reckon he's stupid, but he can look after himself.' Perhaps he can. It is said that he backs more winners at the local race-meetings than anyone else. He wanders into the saddling-ring, listening to jockeys and trainers talking. If he gets any clue as to which horse is going and which ones aren't, he runs under the rails and places his bet just as the race is starting. 'No one takes any notice of him, they just think he's an idiot wandering around, but I tell you, he's not as big a fool as they reckon,' Pointing this out, and we all delight in doing so, shows that we're not simple ourselves, we're not taken in. And so Timmy has his way, and so it goes on.

At the football he listens to the coach's pep-talk and then manages to get out the door to be first to greet the players on to the field. When an army recruiting team parks its vans in the middle of Main Street, he

is first to inspect the weapons and to find out when they are screening a film. He pops up at accidents, at cattle-sales, or when the RACV is giving free tests on cars. I only once heard him spoken to rudely, but Timmy had his answer. The Grenadier brand of cigarettes was being launched on the town by a promotion stunt. A tall man marched slowly about the streets for hour after hour, wearing the red coat and high black busby of a Grenadier Guardsman. He was an arresting sight, with his buttons glittering, and people everywhere turned to look at him. Then cigarettes were distributed from a panel-van in the Main Street. When it was all over, Timmy stood by the van, the centre of an admiring crowd of children. He jabbered away and pointed to the picture of a guardsman which was painted on the side of the van. One thirteen-year-old walked off, scoffing. 'Oh, why didn't you follow him around, you stupid nong.' 'I did,' Timmy called after him, 'I did, all day.'

So Timmy can be taken as a pointer to the most exciting thing in town on any day. At the same level of society, old Bozy—'they call him Bozy, he's a Chapman really'—knows exactly where the town's discarded bottles are to be found. He has an unerring sense of where the drinkers go, and which weed-patches to beat through. So successful is he that the big Carlton & United truck makes a special stop outside the Housing Commission home where Bozy has his base. The stooped, grubby, unshaven figure is always there to watch his crates loaded on and stare after the rattling truckload of empties grinding up the hospital hill on its way back to the capital.

Bozy, Timmy Bock, George; each points to some dimension of the town's life as surely as do the people who protect or tolerate them. Their roles, being extraordinary, are easier to define; more normal lives are harder to single out for examination. They web, interleave, criss-cross. Take Stan, who runs the wine-and-spirit section of Purvis's store on the corner. He stands there in his white apron, hundreds of bottles behind him, all lying in their bins or standing between partitions. If there is any doubt about prices, he goes to the drawer where he keeps the wholesalers' price-lists. If asked for an opinion, he says, 'I believe it's very nice. We sell quite a bit of it.' If pressed further, he says, 'I'm a straight beer man. I don't go much on all this stuff myself.' He rides a bike. This seems to

make him easy to classify, but then we see him at the Paynesville Yacht Club. He joins in the post-mortems on the day's racing and tends his chop on the barbecue like everybody else. Why not? Because other pictures superimpose. The same day John Godfrey leaves the Club to go home. His wife Liza shepherds her three gorgeous children into the black Fiat to drive them to the hundred-year-old house on 'Pine Hills', four generations in the family. John strides down the jetty to his power-boat, sets the water thrashing and speeds out of Macmillan Strait. The late afternoon light catches the spray and the foam at the bow as he drives for home with all the panache of a gun-runner. Before the next bottle is emptied at the barbecue, his boat will be one of the select few tied up at Holland's Landing and he will be getting into his Land-Rover for the last couple of miles to his property. Silver candlesticks, tall-stemmed wine-glasses, Regency wallpaper in the study, little son booked in to Xavier . . .

Or again, on New Year's Eve, while the general run make furore at Lakes Entrance, the Yacht Club dance is attended by all those whose presence is thought to add cachet to a gathering—professional men like Ian Langdon, the dentist, a first-class man, a couple more of the property owners down by the lakeside, Chris Moore, the estate-agent, and his wife, Stephanie—she was a Gove—Ron Daglas, the detective, and his wife, Nancy, with her hair back and curled and, yes, Dick and Margo Campbell, who were once hosts to Lewis, the architecture student. Dick talks nervously, putting answers in people's mouths. Someone says a history of the region should be written. Dick thinks this is good, if it's about Macmillan and what the pioneers did, but not so hot if it means digging up things about people, uncovering stuff and all that sort of thing. Anyhow, Matt Newcombe's more or less got the first part of it covered, he knows everything about Macmillan, he's really been into it. You know Matt, round at the CRB office, of course you know Matt. The eyebrows raise at all this, but he goes on, 'Matt's been asked to write the entry on Macmillan in the Australian Encyclopaedia.'

So things are mixed and we do have experts among us. There is also Joe Pollard at Metung, famous for his gardening, and Clarrie Pyke, also at Metung, famous for his boat-building ... Griff Purdue mentions

this name because he is starting to make boats himself, does it excellently, but defers to the local master ... Griff did much of the building of his own house, with fan-shaped living area, balcony and glass aplenty to take advantage of Bairnsdale's finest vista of the Mitchell Valley and the distant ranges. Griff speaks to everyone at the Yacht Club in his measured watchful way, but only a few of them make the scene at his house. Margo Campbell does; the Advertiser recently wrote up the Musical Society's evening when Margo accompanied a soprano in brackets of French songs by Hahn and Fauré, interspersed by nocturnes of Chopin, caressingly played by Margo. She stands listening to the outrageous flattery of Graham Wanless, the doctor, who is enjoying himself as the veteran critic compelled against all his years of concert hardening to do nothing less than gush over the experience Margo has conveyed. He breaks off to top up, endangering glasses and claret flagons as he fumbles around. Margo stands motionless beneath the light, head bowed as if before waves of deafening applause. Someone breaks in, Graham is interrupted, Margo has to stir herself back to the company at Griff's. Where now is Stan, the chain-store employee? Not so far away. On Monday morning when the delivery trucks roll in and Speedy Morrison and the rest of the Purvis's crew with red lapels on their grey dust-coats are unloading the van, they will probably block Griff Purdue's way out of the lane he shares with them, and with Price's Newsagency, but this will be alright because nine-to-five is one thing and socially is another, for all parties.

Which is not to say there is no rankling. Take Dick Ewell, who is driving the Purvis's truck. 'Hello, Mr Purdue,' he will say, or 'Hello, Mr Dowling,' to the school headmaster he sometimes drinks with. His tone is the respectful old retainer, but the ironical undertone hints at his many years in the town and his way of seeing that all feet, including his own, are clay. In the store, he will stand at the foot of the chute from the store loft, putting the cartons to one side as they come down to him. An acquaintance hesitates at the deep-freeze, so he goes up solicitously and has a little gossip, eyes roaming as he talks. A stranger enters just as one of the storemen idles past with a light armful. Dick whispers without altering the line of his lips, 'Norm Quirk.' A girl makes her way to the vacant checkout-point and Dick raises his eyes to the acquaintance but mur-

murs to her, 'Quirk. Ridgy-didge. Quirk,' then continues, as the senior partner of Purvis's comes nearer, 'They make a very good marmalade, too. We have it, and we're not people who go much on marmalade.' He is a master of inter-class skirmishing, carried on more vigorously when the other side is only there symbolically.

Look now at Dick sweeping out the Mechanics Institute on a public holiday. He pauses with his hands clasped over the broom handle as if prayerfully reversing arms, and laments the state of the country, 'Bloody politicians, what good are they? They're just in it to make big fellers of themselves. The country could go to the dogs and they couldn't care less so long as they got all their trips. Aaarrrch.' He sets to sweeping, still denouncing. 'That bloody Menzics ... arrogant bastard!' Swoosh, down the polished floor goes a chair. 'That bloody Holt. Look at the last budget. What did he give the pensioners? Sweet [lip movement] all!' Swoosh, another chair goes flying. 'That little pipsqueak McMahon, what'd they make him a minister for?' Away goes Mr McMahon in a cloud of dust, and finishes up on his side about seven yards away.

Dick at the bar of the Commercial—thongs, fashionably-striped shirt, whisky glass and jug beside him—has sophistication, even a Confucian air, but his wit only lightens the disillusion which seems to be endemic with cleaners. Tom Fisher, cleaner at the Tech., keeps the young graduates and diplomates at a disadvantage by calling them Mister and never sitting down in their presence. If he wants to talk, he too clasps hands on broom-top, giving a ritual swish between anecdotes. Of these there are plenty, many of them about Ben Damman, retired farmer and three times Shire President. 'Oh, Ben, known 'im all m'life. He started off in Omeo, same as I did. Oh yeah, I used to run teams up there, horses. When he come up there, oh, tellya, he had the arse out of his pants. He was a Pom.' Tom watched Ben court his first wife. 'She left him though, couldn't live with him. She was a lovely girl, but, ooohh, he was a mean old so-and-so.' More details flow out, then, 'Ooohh, of course, he's a big feller now,' managing to convey that it's only in his own estimation; success is a hollow thing.

Another preoccupation is failure. Tom Fisher walks up the Tech. school slope with his offsider, George Enderby. 'No good now, Geordie?'

he asks. The other man, with grizzled smile and silvering hair, says, 'No, not what I used to be.' Tom offers a face-saver. 'You know what they say, good as ever I was, only once a month.' Geordie, father of five, declines it. 'Nuh, no good now, finished.' It is a winter evening and Tom leads George across to the Orient; 'None of us as young as we used to be, I suppose.'

Laurie Hooper was caught on the same hook. At about the time when he and the century reached the late-fifties, his exuberant manner changed. He became nervous and apologetic; if another drinker put some glasses down at the bar while he was waiting to be served, he would back off a pace and say, 'Go on, I'm not in a hurry,' or 'Mick! Better serve this bloke first.' In the Main one night I heard one of the men from Collie's ask, 'What are you going on with all that for?' and the big welder said, a little later, 'What the bloody hell do you ask that for? You know as well as I do.' Another night, in the Hooper's living-room, it came out. While the group sat over a Sunday-night beer, there was the toot of a car horn outside. Everyone looked up. Sue, daughter of Laurie and Paula, came out of another room. She said, 'I'm going out. I'll see you later.' Her mother asked, 'Where are you off to?' Sue said petulantly, 'For a bit of a drive,' and to her mother's, 'Where to? The drive-in?' she offered only, 'Might.' Her father said, 'If you're going to the drive-in, you'll need more on than that. Have you got a rug?' But Sue was already down the passage and out the door. She was in her mid-twenties and had the same buxom figure and soft flesh that Paula must once have enjoyed. She had a way of putting her hands on her neck and throwing her long hair back, and her lithe way of walking created attention in the street. Laurie said, 'Who's that fellow she's going around with?' Paula said, 'I don't know, she never tells me anything. I don't know if she's going around with him.' Laurie said, 'Kennedy, that was who he was. Kevin Kennedy it was. Who's he? Wliich lot of Kennedys would he be?' No one offered anything. Kevin Kennedy was a bare eighteen, could have his father's car when he wanted it and his father would expect him to use it for getting a girl one way or another. Paula spoke into the silence. 'He never came in or said hello or kiss me foot or anything, just sits out there and toots.' Laurie said, 'He wouldn't be much of a feller if he

doesn't come in and meet the family, not in my book, anyway.' There was that prickly silence which comes when someone has left a group with the intention of making love. Laurie broke it. 'I wish I could toot away all night, anyway.'

Laurie, like Dick Ewell, drives a delivery truck, and he sees to it that his call at the old people's home is made as early in the day as possible. 'The joint gives me the willies,' he says, 'I get it over as early as I can. I don't want to be thinkin' of those old buggers when I go to bed.' The institution in question, once the Benevolent Home, is now euphemistically called the Gippsland Home and Hospital. This is where wrecked and worn-out human beings grope around with sticks or get themselves pushed about in chairs, hulks left in the sun for an hour's comfort. An armless man sits with his head on a pillow in front of him and has to be woken for spoon-feeding. One inmate says, 'Next step's the boneyard, that's what this place is.' His fingers fumble to extinguish a long-flamed cigarette-lighter while a nurse watches. Some of these are young and interested in the plumber's apprentices working on the new building. Their tales are full of unexpected pregnancies and sneaking out for an hour at night to meet their boy-friends. It has to be naughty to be nice, so villain and villainess in these stories are the Matron and Mr Gaitskell, Director of the Home. These are the guardians of the gate; in defying their authority the nurses take the stance which allows them to forget their responsibility to their human, just human, charges. A wrong against charity, but is it finally wrong? Age and death inspire life to defy them, and sex is life, is it not?

The nurses at the old people's home are of lower class than their opposite numbers at the hospital, but these have similar tales to tell. Here is the nurse who rings up her boy-friend to take her out, straight off duty, quickly go for a drive, she wants to make love because she has just watched a child die, despite all their efforts. Here are young blades in black jumpers and orange or aqua shirts outside the Mechanics' dance; they say they'll go up to the hospital and pick up something, nurse in their vocabulary meaning a sure thing. Here are more young bucks outside the nurses' home, not sure who or how you approach, nervously but merrily jangling beer-bottles, hoping that someone will be lured.

Down come girls, months pass, people marry ... shop-girls from Coles or Pannam's go out with apprentices in their first dark suits and dance cheek to cheek while saxophones ooze 'Moon River' ... the endless dance, the eternal turnabout goes on; life wells up and floods away the little coops and crates that were the notions I brought to Bairnsdale from the University of Melbourne. 'Hello, Mr Eagle,' says Dick Ewell, and regards me with his Mandarin air, 'and how are you today?' meaning, you have your place, your virtues and faults, and one day succeeds another. Dick sits high in the van as he drives around town, like the captain on the bridge surveying a well-known sea. After work he walks home through the familiar streets, knees bowed out and feet touching ground as though his soles are tender. Weariness, or is it knowledge, has him bending forward. He knows the village and his quizzical eyes seem to say what he would never put in words, that he who knows the village knows the world. Now is it so?

Mrs Ewell knows the ways of the village, how they are used and how diverted. See, in the Bairnsdale Library where she works at the counter. Little children peep nervously at her and older people are also wary of her snapping at overdue returns or books presented the wrong side up. But here comes a woman of Mrs Ewell's own age. She has been murmuring by the corner bookshelf to a man who works at the cordial factory. They have agreed that certain books are just filth, they don't know how people can read them, or why they're printed, even. Mrs Ewell looks up as the complaint is made, fingers still in the box of cards and silver hair contrasting with the light-mauve rinse of the borrower. She takes the book and smiles knowingly as she hands it back with a light but definite movement, 'Aaah, yes, it's a translation of course. A French book, a lot of them are like that. It makes you wonder, doesn't it.'

So much for the self-appointed guardians of public morality. The professionals are more circumspect, since they are judged more by their civic, than their doctrinal, style. See the Reverend Neil Clayton, cheerily giving a wave to a mother wheeling a pusher as he hops into one of the two cars parked by the house overlooking the river. See him at the sports meeting, chatting away about baton-changing while he squeezes volume

one of Manning Clark's History of Australia under his arm. A year later and he is referee, a dapper figure in white shirt and XOS white shorts grinning broadly as he calls, 'Judges ready? Who've you got in this race, Charlie?' On Saturdays he goes to the wicket for West End, or fields in slips. If he enters a school on religious instruction morning with another member of the Ministers' Fraternal, it will be Neil who has the slide-projector or tape-recorder. His predecessor in the Presbyterian Church used to stick faithfully to the prescribed non-controversial prayers that might begin, 'Oh God, we give thanks to Thee for the Heroes of other Ages ...' Not so Neil, who will be found behind the projector talking cheerily about the Israelites as 'a funny sort of mob, but they had their points, if you look at them the right way.' He represents the Ministers in Rotary and takes his turn as President.

His predecessor, the Reverend Donald Delbridge, divided town opinion by refusing to bury a popular young man, not of his congregation, who had been killed in a car accident, but redeemed himself in many eyes by getting a new church hall built in brick through Bairnsdale's first experience of the Wells scheme of fund-raising.

In this he was like his Anglican counterpart, Canon White, who was discussed respectfully as 'not like a minister at all. He'd have made a really first-class businessman, that fella.' The Canon initiated such projects as the Clifton Waters Village for old people and the St John's hostel for boys from remote areas attending secondary school in Bairnsdale. He also practised his priesthood with a distinct flair, annually blessing the fishing fleet at Lakes (the Lakes Entrance Chamber of Commerce hoped this might-.become a tourist attraction) or blessing the first fleece of the season at McKinnon's big wool-shed.

The town also has its Salvos; rattling their boxes in the pubs on Friday ('War Cry, sir?' 'No.' 'God bless you.') or raising plaintive hymns near the War Memorial as Sunday afternoon cools into night. There are the Seventh Day Adventists with their Conventions and their door-knocking, placing themselves wide open to be snubbed, or exuding that disconcerting brand of unconfessed but unsublimated sex. Grimmest by far are the Exclusive Brethren, probably the only ones still truly scared of their God's power. By a choice irony their headquarters is the for-

mer Prince Regent Theatre, now closed, locked, bolted, foyer windows painted white. 'The Word of God' says a sign—which has replaced the lurid posters that heralded *The Wild Ones*, *Gunfight at OK Corral*, *Return of Frankenstein*, *Ben Hur* and *Appointment with Death*—'Will Be Preached Here Each Lord's Day at 3 p.m., God Willing.' Their Lindenow meeting-house is now at the west end of town, with a similar sign, and rumour has it that the American headquarters of the sect has ordered all members to sell up their farms and move into Bairnsdale. Popular discussion confuses their move with a Doomsday notion of awaiting the end of the world. But theirs are fringe mores and no one bothers to check.

Nor do they listen to Mr Simpson, the street-corner preacher. It is said that he was a carpenter and received a legacy to keep him on condition that he give up his work and preach. Mr Simpson spruiking against the Saturday morning traffic noise was a pathetic sight. Once as I was walking near him there was a lull just long enough to catch the words '... for look it is written, a prophet is not without honour, save in his own country.'

Sad, sad; yet there are houses that honour the faith, some by inviting the clergyman to dinner with liqueurs, some by crucifixes over the bed, and some by text. A friend and I came upon one of the latter sort when we called for permission to cut firewood on a property near Lindenow South. Here we met Mrs Virgo and her daughters. On her doorway was a card, 'Christ is the head of this house, the unseen guest at every meal, the silent listener to every conversation.'

Our companion with the chain-saw, Mrs Virgo's brother, took us inside. The group by the stove showed no sign of expecting us. At first it was hard to see them as anything but a massive grouping of figures. This was more than the poor light. Few of their clothes varied far from the much-washed yellow of the mother's dress, hanging hugely on her. One girl sat by her mother's left leg, another pressed against her mother's arm and her seated sister. A third obscured her mother's breast and the fourth of the young women stood touching the bare arm of her sister. They ranged from early teens to twenty. One had a fiance, a thin lad who was somewhere in the house. Their stares were surprised but took us in well enough, and the massed presence of mature and rapidly-rising

womanhood was almost overwhelming. Mrs Virgo closely resembled her brother Bill, who worked for the Country Roads Board, and her hands and legs reflected her days spent picking up sticks and branches for a farmer who was clearing his land. She and a daughter did this, and sometimes her son, Dan. Despite the hardening this had given her, she was a sculptor's dream of a mother, and her daughters contained an enormous potential of desire. The fiance's presence in the house, which had so long been without a man, must have intensified the awareness which poured out of them at our entry. I had no certain knowledge whether or not their state belied their name, but it occurred to me that the words on the door saying Warning! Steady! and No! must have hovered like guilt about their wishes, desires and fantasies. Outside the poor cottage were the remnants of a blacksmith's forge improvised from an old chimney, and Dan's well-oiled saddle. There was something affirmative about these well-worn things, and Mrs Virgo's struggle to keep her family had given the big woman a monumental quality. Seeing her surrounded by her daughters, each of them ardent for a man, the text on the door seemed prurient and negative. Life should be sung, glorified and celebrated, but religion offered no avenue to do it.

Once, briefly, the Church of England gave opportunity for a moment that went close. The occasion was a morning wedding, Saturday at eleven-thirty. The Reverend Jamie Chanter was officiating and the moment for joining the couple was at hand. 'Who giveth this woman ...?' Ceremony, ceremony, the Church of England, church of our fathers! The Chievers were sitting on the left of the aisle, the Searles on the right. The Searle men mostly had round bony skulls, and in their eyes plenty of that pioneering-photo firmness. The Chievers, men and women, were milder, had softer flesh, unaggressive eyes. Fred, father of the bride, and his brothers looked conservative, unexcitable men who saw no point in change. Who was being wed? Helen Chievers and Julian Searle. And who were they? Well, Fred Chievers originally came from Orbost, then farmed for a time at Tostaree, where there was a railway-siding, a derelict mill and a few farmhouses, one of which incorporated rooms from the old Tyldesley Hotel. At the bottom of the gully flowed Hospital Creek, called Tyldesley River in more pretentious times. And

Fred moved, brought his wife, daughter and son to live on a point looking over the Lindenow flats. And the Searles? They were mostly farmers around Lindenow and Lindenow South, though Bob lived over in East Bairnsdale, got firewood, carted hay, spread super, did most things.

Julian's father was ageing and the young groom and his wife would be moving into the farmhouse to carry on the property, out in red-gum country between Lindenow South and the Highway. And the ceremony was carried out properly? Yes, and the reception passed off formally at the Gippsland Lakes Motel. Tables were arranged around a circle, cloths were white, telegrams were read, no one drank too much. People announced that they had known Julian and Helen for so many years, there were place-cards, the blue lakes winkled in the sunshine and the newly-weds drove off to the music of beer-cans on the bitumen.

Nothing to it then? No, except for the father's gesture. See the young couple about to take up the work of the old, lovely Helen, really quite decided when she looks sweetly flustered, and handsome Julian, rather like some of the Chievers, with soft lips, young eyes and face smooth all over. There they stand at the steps between nave and sanctuary, dark suit and bridal veil under a tall Gothic arch. Look, illuminated Gothic letters follow the arch, the words rising over Helen to the zenith: 'This is none other but the House of God,' and following down Julian's side: 'and this the Gate of Heaven.' The cards have gone out and brought us here, the ring is ready, the families are happy. The air of sanctity is right, so right; the candlesticks glitter and the stained-glass is rich. 'Who giveth this woman ...?' Mr Chievers, Frederick, father, does a ritual touch of his daughter's arm and turns his back on daughter, groom and cleric while the minister puts Helen's hand in Julian's. He returns to his pew, looking just below eye level. Soft-eyed Mr Chievers sees no point in change, but life changes us, and what is there to do but work the land, bring up one's children and when the time comes, hand the farm to one's son and one's daughter to a man?

Mr Chievers' gesture, made in fully conscious acceptance, had great beauty, but it was an incident involving his son which more clearly

brought home my situation in Gippsland to me. The occasion was a variety concert at the Lindenow Hall. Jack Howard from the West End Store was the compere, dressed in his dinner-suit. While young parents hustled children to their seats or parents allowed teenage sons and daughters to detach themselves from the family in favour of their age group, Jack kept up a flow of cheery patter. Then the lights above the rows of chairs and benches went off with a click and the show started. There was a lame guitarist, a tap-dancer, a mimic, three singers, and someone on the piano accordion.

Then came the hit of the night—the Beatles! This was 1964, when the Liverpool group were on the crest of their wave. Jack Howard made great play about the 'momentous occasion' and 'special appearance, for one night only, here in Lindenow!' In answer to his beckoning, out came four lads of eighteen, all sons of farmers in the district. Each wore a tight suit with thin lapels and his hair in the mop-top style. Each carried a cardboard cut-out of a guitar. When the laughter died down, Jack announced their first number and slipped into the wings. The quartet grinned sheepishly and stood still, looking offstage. There came a loud crackle of surface noise, then a click and the same pattern of surface noise repeated, all highly amplified. The out-of-sight operator nudged the needle across the run-in grooves, sending a searing rasp through the hall, then the wooden building shook to the Beatles' 'Twist and Shout'. The quartet on stage gyrated wildly, thrashing their fingers through the absent strings, waggling the guitar neck at the audience in the suggestive way of pop singers and offering us a pelvic frenzy of body shakes. Their hair leapt as if electrified, then fell across their faces. When the number ended, the Lindenow audience clapped and voiced great enthusiasm. The lads stood limply, flashing smiles at everybody. Then there was another amplified scratch and the youths got ready. Out came 'You Make Me Dizzy, Missy Lizzy', another hoarse-voiced rock-and-roll number. The Liverpool boys sang and the four farmers' sons sprang into patternless animation. When the song ended they stopped like broken toys. They were wildly applauded. All through interval they were feted. Boys and girls called out, 'There's a Beatle!' or 'Hello Beatles!' Later in the program they were recalled to give another performance. At that time the Beatles

were the world's idols and anything connected with them had glamour, but this was altogether too slavish and secondhand.

Another night at a concert in Bairnsdale a mixed group with slightly more dancing talent mimed and mouthed while the amplifier poured a flood of Charleston song into the Prince Regent. They also went over very well. I heard one of the dancers commended, 'You know, I thought that was you people singing. I didn't know it was a record.'

Between Mr Chievers and his son's Beatle act there were presumably an infinite number of paths, but none seemed open to me. If one could blend the young man's public exultation in what he knew of life with the father's humility ... but I had grown disappointed with all Gippsland's public expression of itself; when they spoke, it was with borrowed voices, or with vulgarity. The pusillanimous Advertiser urged unidentified public authorities to make unspecified 'bold' decisions, and edited out all contributed comment that could possibly 'give offence'. The Town Council, even at its installation, was raw. The setting for this function was the High School's new hall. Official chairs sat around a table in the centre of the hall, the town band played from the stage, and visiting dignitaries were there by the score. Hundreds of schoolboys and girls were ranged around in a hollow square to see history consciously made.

Dead on half-past-two the twelve elected councillors were led in by a Scottish piper, Doug Peters, from the tyre service. They were duly sworn in, repeating the drably-worded oaths and borrowing the Acting Town Clerk's biro for the signature. They sat for the election of the town's first Mayor. There had been a great deal of interest in the election and now the contest was to be taken to its final stage. A hush fell with the announcement of the impending election, then came let-down. A motion was moved, seconded and carried unanimously, that Councillor Fred Barnes should be Mayor. It had been arranged beforehand. Then the Minister for Local Government spoke; he regretted that Mrs Barnes was away with her daughter in Malaysia and couldn't be there to share her husband's great moment. He asked Councillor Barnes to stand for the investment and placed the mayoral robes on his shoulders. Councillor Barnes, Mayor Barnes ... the Minister's jest was, 'The early pioneers

said there were so many children in the place it should be called Bairns-Dale, but today I think we should call it Barnes-Dale ...' Fred Barnes told the hundreds gathered in the hall, 'Actually it was a bit of a rush. We had to borrow these robes from Sale. They asked us if we wanted the Chain as well, but I said, "No, I'm off the chain for a few weeks, we won't have that." '

Speaker after speaker attempted to fix the occasion in history, all avoiding the rift between Town and Shire Council which had kept the town speculating for weeks. The doors of the hall were open. It was a cool, sunlit day and the mountains to the north were low and prussian blue. Traffic stirred no dust in the nearby streets. Neither landscape nor town offered inspiration to the speakers who fumbled, in their anecdotes and rhetoric, for the poetry that seemed to be needed. The day ended with a fresh titbit. The Council declared that they would next meet the following night, without specifying the place. Obviously they hoped to get into the lushly-appointed chamber of the Shire Council from which they had broken away amid a good deal of ill-feeling. After all, Fred Barnes still had a key to the Shire office! But, aha, the Shire Councillors knew this, and they had changed the locks to keep him out. Aha!

So, jaundiced with public life, envious of Mr Chievers and his one simple gesture, basically disappointed with twelve years in Bairnsdale, but deeply in love with it; clinging fondly to every experience, friend, acquaintance, quiet day or noisy night it gave me ... to the Highway, listening all the while for the inner voices, if any can be heard.

Voices silent and voices importunate are there right enough. A solemn-looking mother calls out, 'Mile of pennies, mile of pennies, add an inch to the mile of pennies.' She looks with satisfaction on the pennies laid around a tracing of the Australian coastline, quietly calculating the money taken while her two little daughters gaze in wonder at so many coins. Taped music pipes out from Griff Purdue's shop while young people adopt with-it poses to listen, or thumb through a bin of records. The leftovers from the huge sale of *My Fair Lady* lean against a white album of *The Marriage of Figaro* still unsold ten years after being injudiciously ordered by Griff's first shop-girl. The latest is Linda; "This is the one you sleep with,' says young Bruce Gibson, echoing the blanket ad;

young Bruce, halfway from being the shyest child in Bairnsdale to having the attitudes of the men in the repair-room with their Men Only calendars on the wall. Bruce nervously puts his arm on Linda's shoulder while Linda doesn't know what to say; Gina, who has been there for months, slides down the counter saying, 'Now?' to someone who doesn't need attention.

Less pressing are the women at the card-table outside the CBA bank. They are sitting hunched over raffle-tickets to aid the Noweyung School for Retarded Children. The need for this money, or something to be done for their children, shows out in the bleakness of their expressions. They do not call out, and do little business until Mal O'Donnell, the Health Inspector—O'D they call him at the Shire Office—takes a hand. For him it is not personal, just a good cause, so he spruiks at everyone passing by and soon gets a few tickets sold. The gateway to the lane by the bank opens and out comes a High School boy, hair wet and half-combed. He hurries into Price's and comes out transported by the latest issue of a Beatles fan-magazine. Across the road a small boy looks in Mr Ralph's window at a set of drums, with silver speckle and gilding. They promise a world of glamour and abandon belied by the pecking of someone taking a guitar lesson at the back of the shop. A fat man pushes through the plastic tapes of the Capri and stares down the road like Garibaldi's uncle, as if awaiting news of great deeds elsewhere. The rotissomat in the cafe window has been still for hours and the 'chickens' are cold and fatty. Estate-agents make a hurried agreement in the Prouse & Moore doorway, leap into cars and speed into the traffic.

People pass, people pass, some down the road and some through the time I seem to have stood here watching. Success and failure show themselves. There goes Charlie Lawson, would-be transvestite, caught trying on women's briefs. There goes Peter Guiney, endlessly prowling the street on his bicycle, Peeping Tom. There goes Jerrold Eldridge, former Principal, groping down corridors like a blind phantom, acting out Captain Queeg in his last days, suspecting plots against his foolscap. There goes Ben Damman, Shire President, who said over the late Principal, 'He was a good man. Never forget that, he was a good man.' There goes Don Armitage, who never quite got to represent Gippsland,

but delighted Mr Bolte with his polished, urbane delivery from the Mechanics' stage, fertile of ideas. Off he goes to Queensland, selling out an impoverished farm and leaving debts. There passes Bruce Evans, the man who won the seat; lantern-jawed but humble, looking the part in his black government car, but anxious to listen, perhaps the ideal man for a country electorate. See also in the procession, marching endlessly through streets and years, Melanie Friedman, de facto to a bank-robber, caught at Stratford, left their baby in a motel with a note, 'If we don't come back, take him to my mother,' with an address. Child, child! See Mrs Milburn, who once employed Melanie, standing in the Blue Dragon Chinese restaurant, sniffy-nosed, most at home with people who have English-type attitudes. See car-loads of women in white, black bands on their cream hats as they go off to the flat smooth green of bowls. See Jan Temby, large and ashamed of it, in bed with the nurse she flatted with, and her mother who came on them, distraught with misery.

See Mrs Traynor out on the lake with her husband Guy, miles away in the east. The slow-combustion stove at home smoulders away quietly, milk-jugs and cake-tins are full, pots and spoons are polished, the toasting-fork is on its hook. Today is Sunday and Guy's father will milk the cows while the family go for a drive to the glorious headlands near Cape Everard. Guy discovers a boat, his son tries it out and it floats. Mrs Traynor loves Guy and her son with an all-embracing matronhood; is President of the Countrywomen's, knows the very moment when the visiting Queen of England will fly over Victoria's coastline, says 'now' when the clock tells her the monarch is touching down at Essendon. See her in the stern of a rowing-boat, upright and solid, twenty yards out from shore. Guy's paddling barely breaks the surface. The paper-barks lean over and it only needs a parasol to complete a Japanese print. See her sitting with the matrons at the Cann River dance discussing the young girls' frocks, approving tasteful restraint, while her son is outside drinking brandy. Cars are there from Orbost, one an early Holden. Lads try and squeeze into the back seat but are laughed at by a girl with black skirt short, glossy white blouse and a red flower at the breast. She has an arm around an insignificant youth, laughs with the songs on the radio and swings a leg to the open doorway. She is Carmen via Carmen Jones,

via the tired old Orbost theatre. Soon enough, perhaps, she will be, in Orbost, as Julie Leyden is here in Bairnsdale, coming down the street with her pram, two years out of school. Julie Kingston, that is, for she married Richy, and people say it has been the making of her.

Mrs Kingston, Richy's mother, is proud of her grandson, but says, 'Course I wouldn't be skiting, would I.' Now there goes Barry Kingston, this morning, every morning, with Lorraine who works at Woolworths, and his mother wonders how long it'll be before it's Barry's turn, 'but he's too young yet, too young to get married, anyway,' she says with a smile, separated from her husband and proud of her sons. She goes about with David, the ineffectual plumber, and sometimes they talk about her divorce, but more likely they will go down to the Albion to drink with Peter Reeves and Nora, or Stan from Purvis's and his wife, Marjorie. Jock Tolley's door swings open, another couple are hailed and two more chairs are drawn up to the table ... What to say? There seems no end to the infinite variety within a narrow compass, or, to the restless would-be-gone, the overpowering sameness. Those who live in the town without considering its limits move in an endless sea of people and attitudes; they could submit, if called before some celestial court of progress, their fascination with every word and person as an elaboration or variant of the pattern well-known. Now, moving out, the hand reaches out to touch these familiar things once more.

In Main Street are what? Jacaranda, flower-beds, garden-seats and lawn. On the north side, shade; on the south, white buildings that shine unforgettably in the white light of the winter sun. In summer, heat-smitten, they suffer, or lower canvas blinds. Hammonds do this to protect their bakery. Hammonds, Hammonds... the sign on the window says G. & R. A. Black, and I didn't know Hammonds had sold. Yet come to think of it, there have been some changes. Mrs Foley still gets sandwiches from the galvanised-metal tin with the damp tea-towel over the top, but the bench where they're cut is a new built-in job. The huge old cupboard with shelves loaded with cream-buns, Swiss-roll, and apple-slices, has given way to wire-mesh racks like the ones at Pannams', though the buns and slices seem just the same. It is good to see Mrs Foley count half a dozen lamingtons on to a little half-carton of grey cardboard. Where

do they get those boxes from? They've had them for years and they never run out. Time present, past and future make a smiling merger when she counts out those cakes, or when she slides in two pies, gives the bag a twirl and offers you one of the little ears of brown paper to grip your lunch. There's an endless lunch-time air in Hammonds'—Black's—with highly capable women dispensing food. No matter how thick the twelve o'clock rush, they're soon all served and sent on their way by Mrs Foley's efficient team ... which is not the same as it used to be.

Sis Brody's gone, and the little wizened one, and the thin one who had the air of an officer in the WRANS. Those eyes with the wrinkles had a court-martial sternness as they took in the money you tendered. She's not there any more, but the new ones are just as efficient. There's the big girl who looks so comic on the little blue motor-scooter, with her white crash-helmet like a skull-cap on her big head of black hair, and there's the warm smiling girl with the olive skin who sometimes has a ring on the engagement finger, and sometimes doesn't. Mrs Foley gives the continuity, with her white hair, grey-green uniform and way of picking up the most jumbled orders from a line of talking people. If all the world did their jobs as well as Mrs Foley ... but she moves in a small field. Down to the sandwiches, up to the window with all the cakes, across to the pie heater, back to the counter, occasionally a brisk walk to the back of the shop.

The customers give continuity, too. The wooden tables are gone and laminex tops are in, but the little groups waiting patiently are just the same. There's a stock-agent with a farmer, an old man with braces over a pale-green shirt, and his hat beside his chair. There's another farmer, with his white hairs wisping out of his pink pate. He and his wife, having said nothing while they waited, accept their pies and tea without a word. There's one of those fringe families. The woman has grey hair everywhere, an old grey-and-white floral print dress, and a permanently anxious expression on her face. There are two normal-looking girls of State-school age, and a sub-normal male child. He might be of any age from twenty to forty, has big swollen cheeks and skin like a child's. Even inside he wears his man's hat pulled hard down like a bonnet, and a dun-coloured gabardine raincoat which describes his shapeless bulk. He

mooches away with his chin deep in his chest, but we can see a little Chaplin mo and dark eyelashes. Sometimes he stands outside the shop saying hello to anyone who catches his eye.

The sitting-down customers seem quite at home. There is no fidgeting, or conversation between tables. There is no menu. They can have pies, pasties, or sandwiches with tea, black or white. Wooden louvre doors with a batwing action separate bakehouse and shop, and when the girl in her blue dress and apron comes out to serve, her light-ginger hair grows paler as she moves beneath the skylight in the ceiling. One looks for a propeller-type fan to move the air above the customers, but there is none. Was there ever one? Perhaps it went in an earlier renovation. One decade slides into another without any fuss. There used to be a sign in the window, 'All goods in this window made on the premises.' When did they take that out? I didn't notice, but it's gone now. I half fancy that the canvas blind outside used to say HAMMOND'S BAKERY; now it says MAIN BAKERY. Did they change it? Who knows? It still goes on to read TEA ROOMS and the link with the past is kept. Tea rooms; rooms, tea; foil-lined chests with leaves from Ceylon, India and what other parts of the Empire? The fare, like the name, plain, uncontinental. One thinks of the ignorant innocence of our nineteenth century, linked to Great Britain, so heedless of the foreign parts where traders, missionaries, and governors went.

There were birthdays even then, with icing roses supporting two-inch pink and blue candles. The Santa Claus figures and bridal couples have scarcely changed their dress this century. They stand in the glass-top case among golfers with baggy brown pants and footballers whose black knicks are too long by thirty years, each on his little island of icing. The past is gentle here in Hammonds'—Black's—though the door bangs hard and the lino where you step inside is quite, quite worn away.

The bread parcels here have their names also ... SOUTHEY ... taunting the policeman that night on the Bruthen road when the Aborigine was hit by a car ... LEYLAND ... working around at Collie's ... MORRIS ... of Tambo Upper, and Buchan, big powerful Archie down to see his sons in hospital ... RAWLINGS ... there she is, behind the counter now ... names, names, contact and half-aware-

ness... STRINGER ... was going to be married so Collie and his friends gave him a bucks' party the night before. Well and truly primed, after midnight, they chained an anvil around his leg and Collie soldered two links together so it wouldn't come off; they only took it off half an hour before the service ... BULMER ... how many of them? Minister founded Lake Tyers, early Bairnsdale photographer, director of Fishers, gift-shop across the road ... LIND ... Sir Albert used to be the Minister for Forests, family at Mount Taylor, Hazel Dell and Sunny Dell, Oliver Stanley Theophilus Lind ... HILL ... pretty blonde Betty singing in *The Mikado*, married Harvey West, lost him in a car accident at Trafalgar, early morning, big Pontiac, hit a truck ... so tears then for Betty and her child and her man. Great roistering for Collie and company with their anvil beautifully poised in symbolism between holding him single and showing him, in bachelor eyes, married; the drunken groom mauled in gentle initiation by the married and cast off by the single. Amazement at so small a world that a Richmond policeman coming near Bruthen has to be shown he can't throw around orders away from his home ground. For Sir Albert? Bernard Shaw's maxim that the least incapable general in a nation is its Caesar, the least imbecile statesman its Solon. And for all the names not shown, those who do not buy bread at Black's?

For you, friends and strangers, goodbye. Like the monument in the street, I say Hail and Farewell! You have spent from the purse of years where I did, for more or less return. Permit me then the intimacy of slipping between you as I move away, out of sight and mind.

Trevor Johnson says, 'Terrible thing they did to Kennedy, wasn't it?' That was 1963. Pat O'Byrne says, 'It's a tie! It's a tie!' That was with the West Indies, in 1961. Dick Home says, 'Look, I was wishing he'd do it, but the Irishman had them covered.' That was Landy at the Melbourne Olympics, 1956. Fred Whitworth says, aboard a boat on the lakes, 'Hey, they reckon they can't find Mr Holt. He's gone in swimming, or something.' That was 1967. Sid Dennis says, 'Who are these fellows saying what we think? I don't go all the way with bloody LBJ.' That was 1966. Mr Pemberton-Jones says, 'They ought to move right in and help them. Hang it, they want to be free, don't they?' That was the Hungarian rebels,

in 1956. His wife Beryl says, 'No, you've got to give it to him, Larry's a wizard.' That was Olivier's *Richard III*, in 1959.

Other friends and strangers fill the street. Parking is hard and two attendants move along, marking tyres. There is constant movement and every few paces brings a change of atmosphere. Tourists stare at the street-map, their car wrongly parked. Their children try to get water from the Drevermann drinking-fountain which hasn't worked for years. Colin Linley flourishes a sheep-drench outfit outside Australian Estates, waving to someone who backed him when he stood for Council. Behind him, the street goes down to Hinkleys' hardware, the vet's office, the Toyota garage, Wheeldon's panel-beating and the muddy morass. His friend calls him and they disappear through the Victoria's corner door. Fat Doug Clayton, taxation adviser, enters the Twentieth Century Cafe. They are clients, and he hopes for a free cup of tea. Two Greek girls with heavy eye make-up glance at each other as he comes in. One takes the Hot Chiko Rolls sign outside and the other busies herself with a milkshake. A buzz of static comes through the radio till she finishes.

Next door, a Coles trainee executive, aged nineteen, directs a shop-girl in the street, sees that she is smiling, the young man frowns, then looks at the legs of the friend as she walks away. Coles have their specials up at the front counter; check shirts, plastic bins, photo-frames and tie and socks combinations in plastic packaging. A Ford Cortina, repainted red, is parked outside. Around the gear-stick are the ring-grips from zip-top beer-cans. The driver wears nothing but shorts and his companions have their shirts open to the waist. They send one of their number to see if he can get the leggy girl in Bannister's pharmacy to go out with them that night. But the worlds do not meet. Once he enters the carpeted shop with its talc powders, Modess packs and baby scales, he falters. She hands him the Band-Aids he asks for and quickly turns to another customer. Her blonde hair moves over her pale-mauve shop-coat as she approaches the new client with her flashing smile. The Cortina revs into the traffic and circles the block.

Happier carloads start to move out as mixed groups head away to Lake Tyers for a day's swimming, lolling on the sand and perhaps a beach party at night. Cricketers start to group outside George L. Symonds'

shop, waiting for their ride. A dense crowd is gathered near Pannam's and it is hard to thread through. Village gossip is exchanged. Molly Lord and Mary Burnett discuss arrangements for their catering at a function next week. Italian women in black stand in the narrow opening between cases of bananas and oranges and a child catches her coat on a nail trying to squeeze past them. They fail to notice, despite her desperation. Monty's van moves through with announcements, followed by a truck carrying bales of hay. Bits of straw fall on the road unheeded by parents hurrying their children through the traffic. The in-between generation roars past in a square Willys wagon. These are the surfies, whose worship is the sun, the sea and their own bodies. Expensive surf-boards lie flat along the roof, the little keels at the back cutting the air like shark-fins. They draw the mind after them to the world they have claimed as theirs, the sun-flecked waters that pour on the sands of Gippsland; the salt spray misting distant headlands; liners floating by half-sunken behind the curve of the world; dotterels skittering across the beach in a panic to match the ecstasy of gulls, riding in a high world of cumulus and sunshine. Oh, the sea and the world that lies about the town!

Quickly then, past Woolworth's and its Jumbo elephant, past Gooch's drab little news-agency, past the concrete-floored, laminex-tabled shop where Mrs Galtz presides over the hamburgers like a Red Indian squaw, ignoring a tantrum-throwing son. Hurry past the water-tower, the Catholic block of buildings, the Main, the Prince Regent. Past the fire-station where they drive out the gleaming fire-engines if the brigade hall has been booked for a wedding reception. Only a glance for Birrell's, nearest milk-bar to State School 754. Ignore the Volkswagen agency where three successive agents sold up, and move through the long blocks of rural-suburban houses. No time for the West End Cash and Carry, nor Howard & O'Rourke's West End Store. No time to stop for the little track leading across an empty block to the Housing Commission homes, a place of intimacies and pre-arranged meetings. Bozy pedals past it now with a cart-load of bottles, we see him dismount, then it's up the hospital hill. Ancient red gums wave their tattered foliage over accelerating traffic, Doctor Jellicoe's Mercedes comes down the hill,

cars swing into motels and the road is clear. We are out on the level plain and the world is glorious as far as the eye can see.

This is the lowland. The time of hay-cutting is over and the paddocks are dry. Distance flattens the great hills to a low blue rim. Cockatoos wheel around an old dead tree. There are thousands of these, poking weird shapes at the sky^ In the aerodrome paddocks frisky calves chase anyone who goes walking. Helicopters buzz in from the oil-rig and crop-duster planes do a paddock beyond a belt of trees.

Now clouds roll in from the south-west and shadows disappear, then the sun breaks through and the dark patch moves away to the forests in the east. Branches of the old trees glint in the sun and the dried-out timber is full of strange patterns. Up comes a clear patch of sky, stretching out to cover all the broadening lowlands, away, away to Sale and Longford, Seaspray and Port Albert, which the first explorers wanted so much to reach. The blue lakes lie gorged with light. Nature indulges Gippsland, the much-favoured child. Into the distance stretch post-and-rail, or paling-fence remnants, or five strands of wire, with wisps of wool where sheep tried to get through. Magpies lift their wings like heraldic birds as they alight on the grass. Casuarina nuts roll in the wind, opening elfin mouths to spill red seed. Tiny orchids quiver on the rises under a canopy of stringybark. Cars speed down dusty lanes, adding to the haze from a fire in the foothills. Summer opens his heart to the full, a distant chain-saw stresses the quiet of farmhouses, wool-sheds and branding-yards. At Goon Nure the cricketers change ends and the ladies make afternoon-tea. A car horn honks at the new bowler and the batsman wriggles fingers in his batting-glove. Children run around the outbuildings trying to find something to fill an infinite afternoon. Summer, summer, always summer; wide paddocks lying out bare in the light. Now endless day takes on a sound; metal carriages crawl low across the landscape and a distant blast signals an approach to the BRC level-crossing. Motionless day, rattling train; silent sky, faint siren ... and what reason to leave perfection, once having known it?

Landscape and people; the first complete, the second limited. The train passengers enter a town where the imaginative world is small; post-pioneering; rural and small retail in its occupations; where every

organisation, from the Bruthen cricket-team to the cast of *Lady Precious Stream*, contains two or three talents supplemented by make-weights; a static society prepared to whistle new tunes but not wanting new ways of life; essentially derivative in its modes of thought. It is easy to make judgements of this sort, and unnecessary to continue with them, since my experience of twelve years within this world allowed me to discern a larger outline. My exploration of Gippsland was, although I scarcely realised it, an exploration of life by one who made a most imperfect separation between imaginative and romantic ideals on the one hand, and more normal human relations and feelings on the other. Take, for instance, the BRC level-crossing, where the flashing red lights and urgent ding-ding halt the traffic for the one-thirty train.

This was my first sight of Bairnsdale. The old hotel, now vanished, sat no more than two inches above the ground, had creepers along the verandah and a well and hand-pump in the back garden. Traffic taking the fork to Lindenow went within a few feet of the front door. I came out here often to enjoy the uniquely relaxed atmosphere of the little pub. When Nick Hurley worked here, I drove him home many times after an evening at Tim's. It was a hundred yards down the Lindenow road that Tim told me about young Alan Morris's accident: 'Poor young feller, he never knew what life was.' Just so, Tim; just so. And a few yards further on we looked between Mount Taylor and Mount Lookout for the solemn Baldhead that symbolised something for us, just as Bill Gallico did for Mr Borrow and I.

I discovered this lordly mountain during my second winter in Bairnsdale, and two years later, something of the history of the area surrounding it. My first trip along the forest track around Baldhead was such a heart-in-mouth venture that it was amazing to discover, later, that this route had once been mooted as the main road to Omeo. This was in 1891, when the tannery was young and the dated buildings in Main Street were new. Carriers' freight to Omeo was expensive, and the road in the Tambo Valley was sometimes impassable for weeks, coaches being unable to ford the Tambo or slither up the muddy gullies. The mountain way was not so isolated then, with miners at Brookville, the Nicholson and the Haunted Stream, and Bairnsdale traders employed a

Mr O'Grady and a Mr Andrews to leave Bairnsdale railway-station at the same time as the coach, Mr O'Grady vowing that he would beat the coach to Omeo by seven hours.

In fact he did even better, arriving for morning-tea instead of lunch, with the coach due at seven that night. He said, 'I spent a very trying time in endeavouring to get through to time in such virgin country in the dead of night and I would have been in Omeo for breakfast but for the difficulty I had in overcoming one or two obstacles met with passing Mount Baldhead ... I was surprised at the mushroom rapidity with which buildings of all descriptions have sprung up in Omeo in the last six months, including a fine new post-and-telegraph office. My companion and I rode right over the top of Mount Baldhead. In fact we were in two minds whether to camp there or to push on to Mount Delusion. We chose the latter in order that I might have Omeo well in hand at daybreak. We stopped there for three hours and Mr Andrews lit a fire and boiled a billy of coffee.' The two horsemen must have passed within a mile of the upland flat where Giles Wainwright was soon to settle, their fire in the night like a presentiment of the blaze at the tree-house, half a lifetime later.

When the Hurley brothers took me to the site, they knew the tree-house would not be there. Nick said, 'They burnt it, they come back and burnt it.' In answer to my queries, he explained, 'Well, as soon's the old feller went missin', they all cleared out, just walked out and left it. They even left the door open. It just stayed there for years and years, and then they opened up that mill at the White Bridge. The fellers at the mill used to go down to Wainwright's and have a poke around, reckoned it was a bit of a joke, this place they had. Dick and Chris and them got to hear of it, they mustn'ta liked them laughin' at it, so they came out and burnt it.' Tim put in, 'It was Easter when they did it. They waited till the mill fellers were all away for a few days, then they snuck out and did the job. They must've got a lot of little stuff up against 'em and set alight to it. It would've gone for days. Huge, they were. The old fella didn't muck around, he got the biggest trees there were.'

Finding the old place was not easy. We had to chop a tree off the road and scores of little branches had to be dragged clear for the car to

pass. With every corner we turned there was discussion between Tim, Nick and Leo as to how they'd recognise the right gully. When the moment arrived there was no mistaking it. Six feet of mossy paling-fence leaned across the head of a gully and there were gooseberry bushes gone wild. There was some rusty wire in the bracken. Then we hurried down the gully, shoes getting wet from the sodden grass. The moisture became a trickle where little springs came in, and soon there was a tiny rivulet of purest water flowing over the grass. I almost ran to reach the clearing, with Nick beside me, Tim not far back and Leo lagging along, smiling quietly as he found a way around fallen branches. The Wainwright selection was just over a slight rise from our water-flow, and was in complete contrast. They had cleared a hundred and eighty acres and most of it was still bare, eaten right out by rabbits. The ringbarked trees were all on their sides, grey hulks on a fox-brown field. Out on the fringes the wattles were on the verge of blooming, but the one-time farm was quite barren.

Except for a plot of daffodils! Sixty years after the Wainwrights made their strange home, they were still in flower, sumptuous and golden. "That's where it was,' said Nick, 'right here. They were just behind the fireplace. Mhhh! They must be part of it.' 'They' were two burnt-out bits of log lying eight feet apart, small enough to throw in a trailer. Tim came up. "That's all that's left, eh? Unless the old feller's lurkin' around somewhere, eh?' The brothers laughed. 'Hoh, he was an old coot,' Tim said, 'A fair bugger to get on with. He never done anything for Mrs Wainwright or the kids. They were better off without him.' 'Never done 'em much good,' Nick said. 'Better'n livin' out here,' Tim argued. Nick capped it, 'Oh, they were half animals all their lives. What about Nelly?' By this time old Leo was struggling over the rise. Nick took a glance at Leo sitting on a log to rest, then said, 'Leo goes up to Nelly in Bairnsdale, after they all got away from here, just down by the Club it was. There's a few of 'em and they're all smokin' cigarettes. Leo says, "What about a fuck, Nelly?" and she reckons, "I haven't got one." Thought he meant a fag.'

Nelly was still an enigma. The first time I approached her lonely cottage, the stove door was open. A fresh piece of wood had been put

on the fire but had not yet caught. There was washing out on the verandah, half of it pegged up and half still in the basin. I concluded that the owner was shy, and left, having time only to notice how the dirt floor was worn where most used—around the table and in front of the stove. When Nick and I went there, Nelly was again too quick and we found nobody. Nick said, 'She's a funny thing, I tellya. The fellers from Ireland's mill see her sometimes. They're drivin' the jinker down and they'll see a bit of a skirt peepin' out behind a tree, and that's all they see. As they go past she'll edge around to keep out of sight. There's one of 'em she'll talk to, he brings out her bread and stuff. Only the one though, the rest can't get near her. She was married, actually, at one stage. He went off to the war and he never came back, I dunno if he was killed, or maybe he'd just had enough. He never come back, anyway.' Tim listened to our account of the fruitless call at Nelly's. 'She'd come out for me. I was older, she knew me better. I'll give 'er a call, she'd come out for me alright.'

We turned off the engine a mile before the cottage and rolled down to the flat, touching the brake occasionally. We stopped behind a clump of blackberries, then Tim got out quietly and went to the verandah. We watched him knocking on the wall and listening for an answer. After two or three minutes he came back to the car. 'She's in there,' he said, 'but she won't come out. She had the radio on, but soon's I stepped on the verandah I heard a little noise. I sung out, I said, "Nelly, Nelly! It's Tim Hurley. You remember me. You remember Leo, and Stephen, and Colin and Tom. It's Tim Hurley. You remember, Mum used to have the post-office." And she never made another sound, so I peeped in and there's nobody in the kitchen, she's in the bedroom. The radio's still goin', so I sung out, "We wouldn't be goin' to hurt you, or anything. I thought you might like to have a bit of a talk." But no, no good. Then there's a click, the radio goes off. She'd be squattin' in there like a poor frightened rabbit, so I give it away. I said, "Goodbye, Nelly, all the best."' We won't be seein' her today.'

But we did. Tim got in and we slammed the door. I started the engine and revved it up, paused as if changing gears, let it slowly die back to idling, then switched off. A moment later Nelly appeared in the doorway. She was tall, wearing a dark dress and a washed-out pink

apron. She stared in our direction, spotted the car, and made off. For a split second we could see her scuttling along the verandah. She had a long bony face and straw-ginger hair and her hands were tucked up to her chin like a wallaby's forepaws. Then she was gone, deep into the bush behind her house. 'Poor old Nelly,' Tim said, 'you might as well start up now.' And Rosa added, 'It's a shame, isn't it?'

It was, and more; more inflexible and heart-chilling than tragedy because she was the living proof that a life could be misshapen before it was properly begun. Nelly, like her mother, was the victim of an extreme example of a masculine type much praised in speeches and writings about the opening up of Australia. This was a more stable and tenacious man, this legendary Wainwright, than the ones remembered on the Main Street monument. For them, energy had to be aimed outwards, and destructively; they sought relief in action, looking for causes in which to submerge the nagging, nervous questions of self-awareness. Wainwright, in his mean and rudimentary way, had the vision of a dynast, with one element missing. Seeing himself as the source and fountain of his children's life—and how blind this shows him to the equal marvel of his partner—he tried to make meaning within one life-span only. His children repaid him with hatred and resentment. One could only speculate about his fate, and the strange tree-house he had built, but the two charred logs the Hurleys had shown me made it plain that his children meant to destroy all trace of their origins. 'And there wouldn't be any wonder about that, either, hard old bugger he was,' Tim argued; but it was a true contest Wainwright fought, perhaps the ultimate one. Rather than admit that human life always suffers defeat in the end—as Mr Chievers well knew—he turned to his stubborn will; to enforce it, to cling to it, and fight for it. And he was defeated.

I was fortunate to learn this story early in my stay in Gippsland, thus gaining several years to reflect on it and consider the events in their setting. The enormity of Wainwright's egotism and the desperation of his children were more than matched by the brooding presence of the mountains where they worked out their lives. The great basin in front of Mount Baldhead is like an ocean of silence disturbed only by the haunting bird cry, Currawong, Currawong, Currawong. The sound seems far

more ancient than the Aboriginal name. The famous call of the dark people, if tried against the solemn ranges, goes singing into the distance, meets its own echoes in distant valleys and quivers back in barely audible discord, *Coooeeeeeeeeeeeee, Coooooooeeeee* …

Hemming in this valley, in which an army or an island could be lost, are severe-sided ranges, ragged at the ridges with trees tossing in the wind. Deeper down are the gun-barrel manna gums and messmate, ferns, creepers and skinny wattles all treading on each other's toes for the light. Seldom Seen is only a bump in a ridge compared with Valentine's Knob, and behind this dominant peak is the cloud-obscured eminence of Baldy himself; such a footman, such a king! 'There's his majesty,' Tim once said, and truly the bald old dome is a haunting majesty, lording it over his minion foothills rolled out in front of him. There is no beginning nor end to him; ranges rise to him and roll away; waters drip off his shoulders to begin streams trailing out in lakes far to the south. For endless time it has been the perfect vantage-point. 'If I had not been delayed after making a fresh start,' said Mr O'Grady, 'I would have reached Omeo at eight o'clock. I met large numbers of kangaroo and wallaby and a few wild dogs. The town of Bairnsdale could be seen lit up on Thursday night from Mount Baldhead ...' As O'Grady rides off to Mount Delusion and the fire that boiled his billy, let us move up for the view he speaks of.

Breezes stir the snow-grass at our feet. We are cut off, irrevocably, from the life going on where lights spangle the darkness, thirty miles away. Yet voices seem to rise like sparks from a fire, thousands of them, foolish and wise, passionate and cold, tender and assertive. I consider myself—and twelve years. The beginning seems to be in a large hall, peopled by my own creations, at which I talk; slowly the real people find their way in, one by one, the carefully erected structure fades to an awareness and I want only to look and listen for the infinite ways of life with people.

Hear now one says, 'When can you get a booking, darling?' He is talking by phone to his wife in England, asking when she will rejoin him, wondering if. Another voice says, 'I had complete abandonment with her, more than ever I've had with my wife.' Now a young man, back after two years in the city, 'The college was closed, so I went and

got into a warmer bed than my own.' A woman's voice says to her lover, 'Don't you even know my name?' A divorced father says, 'Ron's planted it;' his son has led a girl off to bed at a party and father has rationalised his jealousy into a conviction that the girl is pregnant and must be married. A doctor knocks on a door at 4 a.m. and says, 'Congratulations, it's all over and you've got a son. They're doing well, and I'm off to bed.' A boy writes in an essay, 'Parents, your task for us is almost done.' Two voices rise from the same spot, only minutes apart; one says, "They were in the back seat when I took my girl up to her door and I was carrying on there for a while and when I came back I didn't look, I just opened the door and there's a bare bum. I just went to sleep on the grass, I don't know when they stopped;' the other says, 'I've just come from the hospital, not long now, poor dad!' Another voice says impatiently, 'I don't know how he's getting on, ask his mother, he never tells me anything.' The one-legged ticket-writer, sniffy with grog, looks at the footballers' team photo, 'They're my boys, every one of them.' Two voices, one silent; 'Oh, Frank and I are quite free, we've sorted all this sort of thing out.' Voices, how many of them; 'I think I'm pregnant,' and other voices butting in, 'I suppose you'll do the right thing?' A marvellously forbearing voice, 'We knew it would be this term, but we sent her back to school. We would rather she think she was having a normal life than sit around at home waiting for the end.' Now a doleful question, 'Areya coming in, Elizabeth?' The figure is in pyjamas, dressing-gown and slippers, looking over the gate at his daughter sitting in a car with a man he doesn't want her to marry. He adds lamely, 'It's getting late.' Elizabeth's friend says, 'I don't think mother wants me to get married yet. I think she still wants me at home.' The doleful voice again, 'Poor Jack, I think he was more upset than she was. Oh, he was cut up. She was always his favourite.'

Another voice, well-known and deeply-loved, speaks again from down on the Highway, 'Poor young feller, he never knew what life was.' Just so, Tim; just so. Voices, voices; one says, 'Well, good lucktoya,' a frothy moustache crowning a wide grin, 'I tellya, I'd like to be starting again, nice trim little figure instead of the broad old thing I put me hands around at night,' and a much fainter one, a blend of all the rest, humming away like a discreet bass continuo: 'Death is dark, life short;

families die out, but new life springs; all waters reach the sea and each new experiment of life has to make his own journey. Hey la, hey la.' Now he whistles, this murmuring man, and says no more.

So I stand without advice on the road where Tim's apt words fell on my ears, the road I travelled when I took my wife to be married and my son to see his family. If life can be represented by a single day, it is full noon; the awesome peak so much admired by Tim and I is distinct upon the horizon and Bairnsdale, despite my early scoffing at Marie E. J. Pitt, is, and must forever remain, my morning city still.

Bairnsdale October 1967-January 1968
Ivanhoe January 1968-August 1968

Hail and Farewell

Gippsland is an area unique in Australia; backed by mountains, bounded by the sea, cut off from the main Sydney-Melbourne axis of Australian history, it lacks those starker elements of the Australian mainland which have captivated our artists and the eyes of visitors. Yet, in many ways, Gippsland still embodies the nineteenth-century Australia celebrated by those who search our past and present for a national ethos. It seems to have a rare capacity to absorb change without altering its basic nature.

In 1956, Chester Eagle was sent to Gippsland, to Bairnsdale—a town the existence of which he was only dimly aware—as a Victorian Education Department appointee to the local technical school. On arrival, following initial dislike, he felt challenged, stayed twelve years, and 'fell in love' with the place'.

In *Hail and Farewell! An Evocation of Gippsland* he has brought to life Gippsland and its people. History, main-street gossip, bar talk and daily incident are combined with affectionate portrayals of local identities and reverential descriptions of the divine landscape. The place and its people live and breathe in its pages—the lean-to scoreboards, stump carvings, salmon trawlers and towering trees; the post-pioneering villages and their inhabitants—earthy, insular, and all acutely aware of each other. All are set down by an author who is deeply committed to his subject, yet has the necessary detachment to see it clearly and portray it with a sympathetic but wholly objective eye.