



Of his Place and Time

Chester Eagle

Books by Chester Eagle

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

Who could love the nightingale? (novel, 1974)

Four faces, wobbly mirror (novel, 1976)

At the window (novella, 1984)

The garden gate (novel, 1984)

Mapping the paddocks (non-fiction, 1985)

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

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

Victoria Challis (novel, 1991)

House of music (stories, 1996)

Wainwrights' mountain (novel, 1997)

Waking into dream (novel, 1998)

didgeridoo (stories, 1999)

Janus (travel pieces, 2001)

The Centre & other essays (essays, 2002)

Love in the Age of Wings & other operas (librettos, 2003)

Melba: an Australian city (essays, 2004)

The Wainwright Operas (librettos, 2005)

Oztralia (essays, 2005)

Cloud of knowing (novel, 2006)

Benedictus (essays, 2006)

Central Station Sydney & other operas (librettos, 2006)

The Sun King & other operas (librettos, 2007)

The Well in the Shadow (literary essays, 2008)

All the Way to Z (memoir/essay, 2009)

This Enchanted World & other operas (librettos, 2009)

Running The Race (novel, 2010)

A Mob Of Galahs & other operas (librettos, 2011)

The Pilgrims (novel, 2012)

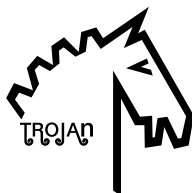
Swinging Doors (novel, 2013)

the roar of existence (novel, 2015)

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

Of his Place and Time

Chester Eagle



Of his Place and Time is published by Chester Eagle, 23 Langs Road Ivanhoe 3079 Australia, operating as Trojan Press. Phone is 61 3 9497 1018 and email address is cae@netspace.net.au Copyright is held by Chester Eagle. DTP by Karen Wilson. Printed by Chris Giacomi of Design To Print Solutions, Somerville Vic. 3912. Cover shows Finley cricket team, 1946-47 premiers, Numurkah-Cobram Association, with Norman Eagle, club president, on the right.

Mini-mags

Escape (story, 2004)

Hallucination before

departure (memoir, 2006)

Mozart (memoir, 2007)

Travers (memoir, 2007)

The Saints In Glory

(story, 1991/2009)

So Bitter Was My Heart

(memoir, 2008)

Keep Going! (memoir, 2008)

Who? (memoir, 2008)

At Baldy's Feet (memoir, 2008)

Othello's Rage (memoir, 2009)

One Small Step (memoir, 2011)

Castle Hill (memoir, 2011)

Chartres (memoir, 2011)

The Plains (memoir, 2011)

Four Last Songs (memoir, 2011)

The Camera Sees ... (memoir, 2011)

Freedom (a reflection, 2011)

Men In White (a reflection, 2011)

An Airline Suite (story, 1989/2013)

Cooper's Creek (reflection, 2013)

An Opera Suite (story, 1990/2013)

A Short History of

Australia (reflection, 2014)

Gippsland's first great book

(essay, 2015)

Emily at Preston (memoir, 2015)

These fields are mine!

(reflection, 2015)

Mother's question (memoir, 2016)

An answer (memoir, 2016)

Of his Place and Time

(memoir, 2016)

As my parents grew old, I found myself looking after them as they had once looked after me. I listened to them grumbling about things they could no longer do. I remembered how capable they had been. Old age was like water washing soil away to reveal the underlying rock. I could see not only what they were but what they had always been. This had the unnerving effect of revealing myself to me. When I visited Mother I had the feeling that I not only resembled her but that I *was* her in at least half my being. (There was much of Father in me too.) When I visited Father I had the same feeling the other way around: I *was* Father, or an incarnation thereof, with balancing bits of Mother completing whatever I had come to be.

When they died, this feeling of being their reincarnation slowly faded and I began to see, in myself, other components too. I resumed, eventually, the amalgamation, the self, which added up to me. Writers need to recognise the variety within themselves so that they know whereabouts to move. (I'm thinking of chess pieces that lose or acquire strength insofar as they are placed in relation to the strengths and weaknesses of pieces on the other side.) I wrote about my childhood thirty years ago in *Mapping the Paddocks* (McPhee-Gribble, Melbourne, 1984) and more recently I returned to look further into the lasting role that Mother played in my life (see *Mother's question* and *An Answer*, both Trojan Press 2016). Now I wish to

complete that review of myself entering old age by doing the same for Father, and it's clear that showing him as he was requires a different approach from the one I used for Mother. They saw themselves in completely different ways.

Let me begin with a journey. The parents I grew up with were running a farm near Finley, in the Riverina district of New South Wales. Mother had grown up in Long Gully, on the northern edge of Bendigo, a Victorian gold-mining city once described by Alan Marshall as a city full of country people. Father's people, the Eagles, had started out in Melbourne but had moved north and by the time he was born were settled in numbers in and around Barham, a tiny town on the Murray River, with an even tinier settlement called Koondrook on the Victorian side, joined by a bridge with a span that could be raised, allowing paddle steamers to pass. Travelling from Finley to Barham, as we did fairly frequently, meant driving for ninety miles. Even as a child, I couldn't help noticing that the country changed more than once as we made our way to Father's people. Small farms like ours (six hundred and forty acres cut out of what had once been Tuppal Station) gave way, after we passed through Deniliquin, to sheep stations with vast paddocks. Cars followed dirt tracks from fence to fence, at each of which there was a gate, or a ramp which could be crossed, cautiously enough, without anyone having to open and shut the

gate. Mother and Father, so much older than me, could remember when there had been more gates and fewer ramps and the journey had taken longer.

The approaching end was signalled by various creeks, lined with red gums, replacing the black box plains: we were near the Murray River. Another signal came from sandhills, once covered in native pines (*Callitris*) which had often been replaced by groves of orange trees, and sometimes lemon or grapefruit. Father's brother Teddy (Edward Joseph Leonard Eagle) operated a packing shed where the oranges of the district were boxed before being sent to market in Bendigo, Melbourne, or further afield. It was country clearly differentiated from the land of our farm, and if I ask myself about the differences, I find that my strongest feeling was that it was in some way further back than Finley.

Further back: what do I mean by that?

I mean, to begin with, that it gave me a sense that there had been a time, before I was born, when Father had been a child, a boy and then a young man, and it had been here: the houses were still standing to prove it. He had grown up in the house that was now Uncle Teddy's, with a tall, mature garden that Granma Eagle had established before she and Granpa Eagle (who died before I was born) built the house she now lived in, about a hundred yards away but equally close to the river. Granma always welcomed her son and his family,

giving us the same beds every time, and humouring her grandson who liked to eat rice bubbles three times a day. ‘Kids have cravings,’ she said, and always had a bowl of fruit on her table, available for anyone who felt like it. It was a town with water flowing past and there were fruit trees in most gardens, as well as patches where vegetables grew; even city people made attempts to feed themselves in those pre-consumer times when recipes and cooking hints were passed between friends and down one’s family line. Although our Finley home and farm were managed with dedication by both my parents, I always felt, as we entered Barham, and took up the links that joined us to the other Eagles, that Father had access to a dimension which I could only half understand but valued highly. There was more to him than there was at Finley, though that was where he’d settled with Mother, and by their own choice.

I felt it keenly when we drove about the district, Father at the wheel, Mother and his sister Olly in the front (bench seats in those days) and me in the back, listening hard. Father, with a casual flick of a finger toward a house set in trees clinging to the river, or one of the creeks that led into it, would ask who had that place now. Olly would name somebody, and Father would name someone else, possibly one of the Eagles, and say, ‘X used to own it, if you remember.’ There would follow a discussion of dates, and where X and his family had farmed in the intervening years. These

discussions led to other memories of properties and their owners, and then there were the – haunting, for me – names of the properties and the creeks they sat on: there was even an Eagle Creek running along the edge of *Sunnyside*, the property where Aunt Olly and Uncle Vern lived with their son and daughter, Frank and Mary Lilford. Everything had a past and the Eagles were everywhere, interwoven with that past which Father knew about and I could at least distantly access through being his son. I have written elsewhere (see *Mother's question* and *An Answer*, both Trojan Press 2016) about Mother's influence on me throughout my life and it seems to me, as I write about my father, that, huge as Mother's influences were, the ones I received from Father were at least as important.

The Eagles had owned, farmed, used and worked the land. They were still doing so. When they looked at land they appraised it. I have never forgotten a conversation with Aunt Olly soon after I finished my second year at university. She was visiting my parents on our Finley farm, and she noticed that Mother had given me the job of stoking the fire under the copper in which she was boiling clothes. (Yes, we were still boiling clothes in an outside copper.) Olly, curious about her nephew who was one of the few family members to go to university (this was 1953), came out to talk to me. Was I enjoying university? I was. What was I interested in? I told her I was interested in history, especially

the French Revolution which I'd studied that year; in literature – I rattled off a few names, with Shakespeare leading the list; the French language; and music, the most recent and perhaps most passionate addition. She took this in with the patient acceptance which was part of our family's style, and it seemed to me that courtesy demanded that I ask her a question in return. What was she interested in?

Her answer was short. 'I like looking at country. Just driving around, seeing what the country's like and what people are doing with it.'

I was amazed. Nothing on earth could be more boring! But she meant it. A year or so later I was sitting with Father at our dining table, looking at a map of New South Wales. He'd been away with a stock and station agent, looking for sheep to buy, and they'd travelled far. Father named the towns, but it was his fingers that told the tale. Father, who did most things firmly and decisively, trailed his fingers along the lines representing roads. Narrabri. Coonabarabran, Gilgandra. 'We stopped and had lunch there.' His finger stilled. 'Not bad sheep, but too pricey.' His fingers trailed to the west, to settle on a place called Ivanhoe. 'Hacker (as the agent was known; he'd previously been a shop assistant in Finley's general store) reckoned there were good stock to be had out there. Well, New Zealand Loan were paying for the petrol, so we went out there. One pub town. Good long drive, though.'

Country again! Father was looking at the map beneath his fingers. He'd seen lots of new country, and wished he was back there, travelling. 'We had a beer at the pub. And dinner. Food was terrible.' Father laughed. 'My bed wasn't bad. But Hacker ...'

Hacker had been told he'd have to share a double bed with a man who was already asleep. There was nowhere else, so he agreed. But when Father came out in the morning, Hacker was lying across the front seat of their car, complaining bitterly that the other man in the bed was a *coon* (aborigine). Hacker wasn't having that, and had removed himself to the car. At what stage of the night this happened was never made clear. Nor did it emerge how it was Father rather than Hacker who got the bed on his own, though, looking back, it fits with how I remember him. Father looked for quality, just as he was ready to rough it. Rural life at the time of Father's childhood was very rough, yet family life, and family homes, still held to the standards of respectability which had produced many of our settlers from the British Isles. Any household with such claims might possess, and guard fiercely, a handful of items which were prized, treasured, and brought out for display. To this day I have in my house a set of silver-plated serviette rings with what purports to be the Eagle family crest engraved on them. How did I get them? They were part of the pile of household goods divided between five families (Teddy; Aston;

Norman; Olly; Stanley) the day after Granma Eagle's funeral. The goods were carried across from the home that Granma and Granpa Eagle had built in the 1920s to the home they'd put behind them, now occupied by Teddy and his family. The five 'children' divided a pack of cards to establish the order in which they would choose, and they chose. Having chosen, they waited until their turn came round again. Then another item was added to one of the five piles, or collections, which their choices were building. At a certain stage nobody wanted anything else, so they and their marital partners took the items to their cars, as a step on the way to taking them home. If I look back to the half hour or so that this division of an estate required (the house was sold separately and the proceeds shared), I find myself groping for the reasons, or perhaps I should say the understandings, embedded in this simple process.

It was so good-humoured, though Granma was dead. They trusted each other. The children of the five families were in the same room, looking through the things that were to be chosen. The children were quiet, knowing they could look but not interfere. The adults occasionally asked of each other, 'Where did Mother get that?' though for the most part they knew, because the items thought of as valuable had been talked about for years when Granma's children and grandchildren visited her. Households had taken items in those days, representing the thin sliver of opportunity to purchase

items of class from style-setting shops in faraway Melbourne or Sydney; such items might make their way to rural homesteads or country towns enjoying a momentary flash of prosperity. Life in the country was rough, sparse, austere, but if you were successful, however briefly, things could be bought which lifted their owners out of the ruck. Olly's first choice in this division of Granma's goods was a kettle, silver-plated on the sides and top, which hung, suspended, above a tiny wick floating in a container of kerosene; the kettle was filled with boiling water from the stove, then brought to the table on its elaborate stand, making hot water available for topping up cups or filling an emptied teapot to the brim again. Olly kept this ungainly but polished item on display for years, and after the death of her son (cancer, in a Melbourne hospital) and daughter (in America) she was besieged by people of her own generation or younger wanting to know who she was going to leave it to. Electric jugs and modern gas stoves had rendered the kettle obsolete but Olly seemed unaware of its loss of status. Her mother had valued it so it was an item of value forever.

Father and Mother returned to Finley with Granma's clock. She had wound it up, using a key, at the end of every day, and Father did the same for years. I never watched him do it without thinking of Granma and her house at Barham, with its aspidistra in a pot near the front door, which opened onto a wide

verandah rarely used except for formal arrivals and departures, while its contrasting back door opened directly onto a gravel path used by family, friends, tradesmen or anyone else whose business brought them to the house. Granma's five children were scornful of class divisions – the rough and the refined were thrown too closely together in country life to sustain those! – but they had absorbed them nonetheless, having used them to build in themselves, not snobbery – unsustainable and unpardonable – but personal and family pride.

Though I grew up with this family pride, I was not conscious of it until I went away to school at Melbourne Grammar, and encountered the enormous pride that institution felt about itself. It may seem strange to say that the school's assertiveness had little effect on me. I was already carrying a pride of almost equal power, though scarcely visible, handed me by my family. Yet the strength of the family was taken for granted. Its branches gathered easily at Christmas, with my parents being focal because they travelled to join the others. Family news was new to them as it was everyday to the others. In later years, when my brother's death and the sale of our farm released Father and Mother to live in Melbourne, they welcomed their Barham relatives as they passed through or visited the city. I have already referred to Olly's son Frank, a lad two or three years older than me who was always that much closer to

being a man. He became engaged to a local girl called Marj Storm. When they married they took over *Sunnyside* and Olly moved into Barham. Frank worked the property with tremendous energy until he noticed inexplicable bleeding: he was diagnosed with cancer and a long struggle began. He was moved to a hospital in East Melbourne and my parents' Caulfield home became Marj's base for visiting him. I was teaching in Gippsland at the time but on two occasions I went to the hospital with Marj, and heard her desperate husband, my cousin Frank, whom I'd looked up to all my life, saying that he thought he was getting better. He pulled back the sheet to show her, and she could see, as could I, that beneath the skin his stomach was dark.

There was no hope. Eventually the hospital began dosing him with morphine, to block out pain. When next Marj came down from New South Wales, he was brought back to consciousness one last time so he and his life's partner could say goodbye. A couple of weeks later Frank's body was returned to Barham to join the Eagles and related families in the cemetery next to the golf course on the edge of town. I found this tremendously moving, partly because I was by then deeply engaged with my teaching in another area which had powerful traditions of its own, so that I could to some extent see the practices, and the inevitabilities facing the Eagles, as something connected to me but not altogether binding ...

... as they were for Father. This was his sister's son, and he'd been making a success of his property, as Father had hoped would happen with Travers, his own son who was killed in a car accident a few years earlier. Father saw land as continuity, as his sister Olly had done when she told me she liked looking at country and what people had done with it. Father said he couldn't see why people said they admired the way the black people of Australia had lived. 'They had the land,' Father told me, 'but they didn't do anything with it!' We may see this matter differently today, but Father was a man of another time and a place hardly to be compared with the centres of modern, urban life. Do not for one moment imagine that this was a matter of inferiority. Father enjoyed visiting cities – more of that later – but he was in no doubt about whose shoulders carried the weight. 'People living in the city,' he told me on numerous occasions, 'depend on people living in the bush. Someone's got to grow the crops and breed the stock, or there wouldn't be anything to eat, and there wouldn't be any wool or cotton to make clothes!' It was simple. Cities depended on country people to support them, and, attractive as city life might be in many of its aspects, the country was the place where fundamentals were managed.

Indeed Father had grown up in a period when city and country were not quite as separate as we think of them today. The memories and the enthusiasms of

Australia's first white settlers were very much alive when Father was born. Settling the country was extremely hard work but it was not only rewarding – occasionally at least – but was an opportunity to be seized. Australia was huge and, as the settlers saw it, capable of being made productive in a way that the British Isles could never be. The explorer Thomas Mitchell, surveyor-general of New South Wales, had called Victoria's western district *Australia Felix* – fortunate, felicitous, even blessed – and New South Welsh station owners found that the Riverina, with its saltbush country, was perhaps even more suitable for sheep. The wool industry gave the country its first fortunes, even before gold handed out some more. Wheat followed. Grapes, fruit and vegetables came after, when people began to draw water from the Murray. Father, as a young man, together with his father, installed a pump and delved channels in an area downstream of Barham called Koraleigh, putting them among the early irrigators to use the middle Murray for agriculture. Those sandhills, those rows of glistening orange trees! There was no way to get wealthy without work but the generations that were young in this period of confidence, having no thought of sustainability or the possible side effects of changing nature's courses, were ready to pump their energy into the projects their minds conceived. The Snowy Mountains hydro-electric scheme of dams, tunnels and power stations, was the greatest, and

possibly the last project conceived of by people who thought in this way.

Father was one of them. He hadn't detached himself from his times. When Australia joined England in a war against Germany in 1914, his brothers Teddy and Aston volunteered. Father thought he should too. His parents told him that two boys at war was enough and he was needed at home. He stayed. His brothers came home again and, as was the way of returned men, spoke of the war only to those who had been in it. Father showed no sign that he had taken a lesser, lower, path. He loved to repeat one of Aston's stories (see *Mapping the Paddocks* page 117) about the confrontation of Australian troops and one of England's premier regiments, the Guards. This story amused him greatly and it did more, by localising the hostilities and rivalries that Australians felt about people back 'home' who were inclined to think themselves superior when they were nothing of the sort.

This feeling showed itself most clearly when the mother country and the colony played cricket, a tradition which had begun, surprisingly enough, with the visit of an aboriginal team to play 47 matches in England in 1868, and in the many Test series that have continued until today. The tradition of the Ashes was born at Sir (*Sir!*) William Clarke's mansion at Sunbury, north-west of Melbourne, and has never been lost sight of since. Father located himself in this

tradition. He played cricket for Finley, captained his team for some years, then graduated to being president of the club. During World War 2, when Test cricket was in abeyance, he looked forward to the day when, Germany and Japan having surrendered, cricket could start up again. In the early days of irrigation on our farm, I remember following him around a paddock he was watering, shovel on his shoulder, and telling me about Bradman, whom he hoped I would one day see. Bradman had been batting against South Africa at the MCG, and Father had been there. 'He was belting the ball to every part of the ground and the mob in the outer was cheering like a football crowd. I've never heard anything like it, before or since.' Father didn't say what it took me some years to realise, that the crowd found in the exploits of Bradman, and sometimes in the racehorse Phar Lap, something they could cheer about in those Depression years. Everyone was poor. Everyone suffered. Father, who voted Country Party (Nationals these days) all his life, would say, 'It mustn't happen again. People wouldn't stand it. They'd go Communist.' This didn't mean that he was considering communism; quite the reverse. He meant that a return of suffering of the Depression sort was unthinkable, and those who were managing the country, and England - (he had a certain amount of sympathy with Jack Lang) - had better not put its people through anything like it again. Father was, we might say, a critical, shrewdly

demanding optimist. Unlike Mother, he had little sense of the tragic as something inherent in mankind. Mankind was stupid much of the time, but could sort itself out if it used its brains. The Japanese, however, were beyond the pale. They were little sub-human creatures, and whatever cleverness they might possess, they lacked ...

I am searching for the word which Father would most have valued, something he would have allowed the Germans to have, or at least their soldiers, even if they'd fallen into the hands of leaders who were maniacs, and I think the word is *dignity*. Father could cut the throat of sheep if meat was needed, cut the sheep open, skin it, do all the cutting and carving that butchers do, but it would never occur to him to treat, or talk about, anyone else without the consideration and courtesy that came naturally to his family. I have already referred to their pride. Proud as they were, the Eagles had a sense of humour to balance them. The funny side of things, not to mention the silly, was never far away. Father's brother Stanley had made money and had married well. When new cars became available after World War 2, he bought an expensive American car and drove it to Sydney. He'd never driven in that city before and he pushed into a one-way street in the wrong direction. A policeman pulled him up and called him a b___ b___ fool. Where the b___ hell had he come from? Didn't he know ...

Father found the policeman's anger most amusing, and Stanley's predicament too. I asked him what Stanley had done to get out of the one-way street. Father didn't know. 'Turned around, I suppose. If he could. Maybe he asked the copper to help him!' He laughed some more. The predicament was delicious. If I think about it now I see the incident as being like a *Smith's Weekly* cartoon, and I think that was how Father saw it too. Humour is frequently, perhaps almost always, about a loss of dignity, and I think that Father saw the whole incident that way: the policeman, Stanley, and the city of Sydney were all see-able in the same light.

Dignity, then, was innate, but it was vulnerable to anyone who felt like a laugh, and that was most of us. Father had an appendix operation at the Finley Hospital, such as it was. When I visited him before riding my bike back to the farm, he told me with obvious satisfaction that the nurses had told him that the last thing he said before succumbing to the anaesthetic was, 'If a man hasn't got a sense of humour, he might as well be dead.' As he told me this I could smell the anaesthetic being applied to someone else in the 'operating theatre' (a former bedroom in a weatherboard Federation period home), and I felt, not exactly scared, but uncomfortable: life was riskier than Father's cheerful observations suggested. (I didn't say anything of this to Mother when I got home.) Father also said that when he was young he'd done a couple

of weeks fruit-picking with some medical students, and listening to them talk cheerfully about things that crippled patients or killed them made him sceptical about what doctors could and couldn't do. You might have to put yourself in their hands because there was no-one else to turn to, but ...

For a year or two in my teens, Father took me to see Doctor Middleton when I was back in Finley on school holidays. Doctor Middleton practised in nearby Deniliquin but rented rooms in our town one day a week and Father wanted to be sure that I moved satisfactorily through the changes of physical maturity. Doctor Middleton's two practices had given him enough money to buy a property, and I think he found our visits very useful; he spent a couple of minutes listening to my heart, looking at my tongue, and such-like medical gestures, and then, after patting me on the shoulder he would sit down and discuss agricultural problems with Father for half an hour while the waiting room waited. I never watched Father pay for these visits as we left without thinking that the flow of money should have been the other way; I was in no doubt as to the imbalance of expertise that I had witnessed.

My parents' move to Melbourne after my brother died changed the balance between them in Mother's favour; she was better adapted to urban life, which offered Father little beyond the Melbourne Cricket Ground, where he was a member, and his friend

Ray Hutchinson's Glenroy flour mill, where he was always welcome. Then he got a job with an insurance company, checking claims for crop damage by rain or hail, which involved travelling around the state, finding the relevant farms, looking at the crops and talking to farmers. This fitted ideally with his past, and when, a year or two later, Ray Hutchinson asked him to play the role of global salesman for the mill's products – flour and gluten, Father was reborn. For years he travelled to nations great and small, and through the islands of the Pacific, meeting, chatting, getting to know the traders and the things they traded, and selling what his friend had for sale. He enjoyed what he was doing and he believed in it. When he spoke of farmers in those years he used the pronoun 'they', not the pronoun 'we'. This meant that although what he was doing was connected with his earlier years, it was also a reflection on what he'd been. He enjoyed travelling and he enjoyed having visitors at home. He might well have said in those years, 'I wasn't like this, up on the farm', because he was more worldly, more curious about people who lived in other ways. He once said to me of farmers, that 'their greatest strength is their individuality and it's also their greatest weakness.' I was curious to know what had led him to this observation, but also knew that he wouldn't provide the analysis I was hoping for. Father wasn't interested in ideas per se. An idea wasn't important in

itself, but only for what you could do with it, and for that, one would have to wait and see.

It's twenty-five years now since Father died and many of the things that made his world are slipping back in time. If I'm travelling through the Mallee or the Wimmera, and I see huge wheat silos towering over the sprawling eucalypts of those regions, and the modest, simple railway devices to be found at their feet, I think of Father. Country sporting grounds, with spindly goal posts or flimsy scoreboards and corrugated iron pavilions, make me think of Father. Somewhere in his forties he was asked to stand for council, but declined, though his brother Teddy had been president of the Moulamein Shire Council for several terms. In later years Father was active in the woolgrowers and the irrigators associations of New South Wales, and meetings took him to Narrandera and occasionally Sydney. Mother would have liked to develop a tennis court in our garden on the farm, so she could host occasions for friendly tennis, but Father never picked up her idea, not wanting, I suspect, anyone near him that he couldn't respect. His whole farm was near him, and in a more refined, more abstract sort of way, the whole Riverina was near him: close, that is, to his heart, and I use that word to refer to the way of life that he understood. For all that he welcomed the irrigation water that flowed across our land he had something in common with the stock he managed in that he was able

to thrive in dry country, confidently facing the modern world because he'd emerged from the years when bullock-wagons carried wool bales across black soil plains, and those other plains, further south, of sandy-loam soil, with meandering watercourses endlessly separating and rejoining, full of Murray cod and redfin. Time had sprawled, in that period further back that I became aware of in my childhood, and it was in that spreading, sprawling time that Father belonged. I didn't want it to end, I wish it had never ended, but it did, of course. It's easy to say that it ran out as Father grew old, and ended when he died, but it began to end much earlier than that. If I go searching for that moment I recall that Father was fifty-nine when my brother Travers was killed, and that could be taken as the moment when he became ready to leave the land ... except that something calls on me to step further back, to the time when I was preparing for my year 12 exams. Our classes ended a week before the exams, leaving us free to study. Boys in the boarding house were sent home for the week. I was very confident in those days, and I'd been studying hard all year. I took nothing home with me. I would relax, and tackle the exams with a fresh mind. I did this, that's to say I went home and did nothing. I'd pass the exams all right!

Father asked me one morning in that week if I'd like to come with him to McGill's shearing shed, a couple of miles away. He had the horse and cart ready. I hopped

in. I got out to open the front gate, which displayed *Nairana* as the property name by then (no longer *Sunnyside*). I got back on the cart and, as we turned onto the Deniliquin road, Father said to me, ‘What are you going to do next year, Ches? Back on the farm?’

The young are often unsuitably cheerful, too cheerful. Perhaps it’s because they are deaf to what’s rushing past: time, opportunity, the feelings of others. I said, with the confidence of my youth, ‘No Father, I’m going to Melbourne University. I’m going to study Arts. I’m going to be a teacher.’ I didn’t say ‘I know I can do it’, I didn’t say ‘It’s what I want to do’, I simply made my announcement. Father flicked the reins of Ginger, our horse, and we moved off to the shearing shed, to do whatever business had taken us there. Father didn’t *expect* me to be a farmer, he didn’t try to persuade me, he had, in that simple, direct, undemanding way of his family, *asked*, and he’d been told. I went to university, I became a teacher, and then a writer, and when, thirty-eight years later, I published *Mapping the Paddocks*, the book of my childhood, he was pleased. He made only one comment. ‘Right at the start, you talk about the Chevrolet. It was actually a Chrysler.’ That was all, but when I heard Mother’s and Father’s friends refer to the book I could infer the pleasure they’d sensed in my parents’ reception of their lives handed back to them. That was gratifying, but even more gratifying, I think, was something else Father did for me, many years

before. Travers was still alive, and Father was going to America. While he was there, he'd be in New York. He asked Travers and me what we'd like him to bring home for us. He'd heard that Macy's was the best store in the world. You could get anything there. Travers wanted a handbag for his girlfriend of the time. I'd read about, and I asked for, a complete recording (eleven LPs!) of the Beethoven string quartets. I wrote the name of the players and the recording company on a piece of paper and gave it to him. He left. Many weeks later, he returned to Melbourne. He gave Travers the handbag and pulled out the discs for me. 'The man in the shop didn't have them, but he told me he could order them. They'd come in one or two at a time, not all at once. I said that was okay. I gave him your order and then every day for a week I went to Macy's. They came in dribs and drabs but after a few days they gave me the last one.' Father was proud, and happy. He would never listen to a note of this music but it was what I had asked for and he'd brought it home for me. I took the Beethoven discs back to Trinity College and began to play them, night after night. I took them to my friend Vans Ovenden's place in East Melbourne and we listened to them there, then Vans got out his home-made recording apparatus and copied them for himself. I listened to the music for hour after hour, learning to follow Beethoven into parts of the mind where music had never been before. It would be untrue to say that I

took Father with me: I didn't. What Father gave me was his understanding of the land, something I've never lost. The Vegh Quartet and various writers about Beethoven gave me an understanding of the music, and that too is with me today. Father never saw any need to put these things together. That wasn't any part of the business of his life, but it's seriously entered my life to think of how to put the two together. Modern Australians have quite a problem in our minds. We have to deal with our classical European legacy, a grave and rich inheritance if ever there was one; with American pop culture, saturating our eyes and ears; with all the muddlesome amalgamations of a multicultural population; with the long-denied aboriginal basis of Australian life; we have to understand the countries to our north, especially China, the rising power: and, underneath those things, we have to deal with, and learn to understand the *land*, the basis of it all. No easy task. Father never had any doubts about the last and greatest of these. Like the rest of his family, he had owned, farmed, used and worked the land. Much of that early agriculture was, we now see, environmentally disastrous, but it's easy to say such things when you are born into the new knowledge which condemns the old. Others had to *use* the old knowledge, as they did. Father was in that tradition. I may think I've separated from it, but since it gave birth to me, I can't declare independence. I may call for adaptation, new approaches, et cetera, but these

are calls for continuity. This is inescapable, and I find, when I look back at the continuity of my life coming on from Father's, that I don't want to escape, I want to improve, of course, but, finally, it's the continuity that I value most.

This memoir makes numerous references to things already described in *Mapping The Paddocks*, McPhee-Gribble/Penguin, Melbourne, 1985, and readers are invited to visit my website, **trojanpress.com.au**, to access this book, or the mini-mags also mentioned in this memoir: *Mother's question* and *An answer*, both 2016.



This memoir, along with all other books and mini-mags listed inside, is available for reading on screen or for downloading, free of charge, to anyone who visits **trojanpress.com.au**