



The Don

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)

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Waking into dream (novel, 1998)

didgeridoo (stories, 1999)

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Swinging Doors (novel, 2013)

the roar of existence (novel, 2015)

Grassy Hill (novel, 2017)

The tree at our front gate (memoir, 2020)

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

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Mini-mags

Escape (story, 2004)

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Mozart (memoir, 2007)

Travers (memoir, 2007)

The Saints In Glory (story, 1991/2009)

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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)

There's His Majesty! (memoir, 2016)

The Laughter of Her Heart
(reflection, 2017)

Illawarra Flame Trees (reflection, 2018)

The Armour (essay, 2018)

David, George & Vane (memoir, 2018)

Narrabri, Coonabarabran,
Gilgandra (essay, 2018)

The Wars Were Over (essay, 2019)

Leaving Finley (memoir, 2019)

Five Minutes More (reflection, 2019)

The Don (memoir, 2020)

A Certain Class of Men (memoir, 2020)

This mini-mag, *The Don*, is an excerpt from a memoir written in 2020. At least one further excerpt will be published in this format before the complete memoir *A tree at our front gate* is made available on the trojanpress website.

I am perhaps, possibly, two years old. Mother has me on her lap. We are in the front seat of our 1927 Chrysler, on our way to Finley. Father is closing the gate, so I can see, through the driver's window, the trunk of a tree, a river red gum, *Eucalyptus camaldulensis*. Its shadow falls on our car. I remember its imponderable presence. I am two; I am all awareness but I have no understanding. It is a tree.

I am three, at the front gate of our house yard. My fingers clutch the wires of the gate as I stare down what we call the avenue. A car is approaching, trailing clouds of dust. Who is driving at this speed? The car swings past me and through the gate of the big yard, and I see that Father is at the wheel. He stops where he normally stops the Chrysler, and Mother goes out to greet him. By the time I get there they are talking excitedly. Ray Hutchinson, Father's friend, has sold

him a car he no longer needs. It's almost new, a brown Ford, NSW174413. What will it mean for us? Everything feels changed.

I have a favourite spot, my back against the chimney of our dining room, my knee against the bricks of its wall, my bare feet in the dust that gathers in this corner. On windy days it's sheltered, still. Crows may cark overhead, or the pepper trees (Brazilian, *Schinus molle*) may thrash in the wind, yet I am withdrawn. These are precious moments: the world's alive, I am part of everything around me, but somehow separate: warm, comfortable, alert!

On summer nights, when it's too hot to be in the house, we lie on the lawn, talking idly, gazing at the stars. Sometimes we play I Spy. 'I spy, with my little eye, something beginning with J.'

'Jug!'

'Oh that was an easy one. '

'It's my turn! I spy, with my little eye, something beginning with S.'

'Soap?'

'No.'

'Sausages?'

‘No.’

Silence follows. ‘Any hints?’

‘Not yet. Try a bit harder.’

And so on, for minutes at a time. I like this game, and our prattle about the day’s doings, or what’s happening tomorrow, but often enough I go to sleep, Mother or Father will carry me inside and I wake up in my bed in the morning.

If there are clouds about, someone will ask, ‘Any rain out your way, Norm?’, and Father will say yes, no, or only a few points. We have a day when it rains steadily for hours on end, and heavily at night. As I set off for school next morning, Father comes out to see me off. The paddock to the north-east of our house, normally dry, if low-lying, is a wide lake. This is surprise enough but in the centre of it, serene, almost motionless, is a swan. It is as if a story, even a legend, is occurring on our farm, yet I know that when I get home that afternoon it will be gone, and it is.

I am six. Mother is dressing me by the fire. ‘We’re at war with Germany,’ she tells me. I don’t think she says ‘again’. She is solemn, so I am too. No bombs drop, but a couple of years later, after Japan enters the war,

Father digs an air raid shelter under the pepper trees to the west of our house. People are digging them all over the country. After Pearl Harbour, what else can they do? The shelter is a wonderful place to hide myself and fight some war I feel I'm engaged in on my own terms. We also have, not far away, a heap of sand Father has had delivered to use when he wants to mix cement. I have a certain number of lead soldiers - not nearly as many as I would like - and I place them in little dugouts on one side of the sand island, then I get an assortment of boards and planks from the wood heap and place them out to sea, as it were, from my island. I hurl bits of metal - old bolts, horse shoes, and things like that - from the island at the attacking ships, and from the ships at my soldiers. It's an ideal representation of warfare because I'm on the winning side whichever side wins.

The Japanese are easy to hate and hard to understand. Horrible tales reach us about their treatment of prisoners. Their soldiers adhere to some code that says death is better than dishonour; defeat is dishonour. They execute prisoners by hacking off their heads with swords. Father tells me that Germans are to some extent like us but the Japs are unspeakable.

There are concerts at the School of Arts. Most popular is one where people perform and the audience vote - one penny a vote, all money going to a local charity. Mother gives me sixpence. I use my votes on Wimpy Halligan the blacksmith who plays the violin. Father thinks it's ghastly screeching but Wimpy's aroused my sympathies and gets all six of my votes when I might have voted for Georgie Heterelzis of the Wattle Cafe, who sings in a way no anglo-saxon can. I remember also Keith Dawe, one of our neighbours, on the back of a truck in Murray Street with a microphone before his face:

On the road to Mandalay
Where the flying fishes play
And the dawn comes up like thunder
Out of China 'cross the bay!

We are not very discerning in Finley. Movies show American fighter planes shooting down Zeros, and there are plenty of battles between Red Indians and white Americans taking up land on the great inland advance, not to mention shoot-outs between sheriffs and cattle rustlers in the main streets of wild west towns. High Noon hasn't yet been made but its antecedents are there in plenty. So too are Negro songs and spirituals, sung by white men with make-up on their faces.

Ours is a double brick house. It's cool on hot days, but the bricks warm up eventually, and then the heat is palpable. Mother and Father are used to it. They sit in a draft if they can find one. Father comes home scornful of talk he's heard in Finley about it being too hot. 'They ought to get out in the paddock and do a day's work,' he says. 'They'd soon forget about the heat.' He does exactly this, with a hanky tied around his neck. Mother makes the best of anything. If we have visitors - Bert and Edna Morris, from their farm a mile or so to the west - they sit in the sunroom, as we call it, and drink tea or, possibly sip a little beer. Mother, detecting some faint movement of air, will say, 'There's a nice little breeze, now!' Mother would find a breeze in hell.

The Mulwala Canal is far from finished; it has to get as far as Deniliquin, thirty-something miles away, before it will stop, but the crowd has come to see the water arrive. This section of the canal is complete. There are no trees, only a broad ditch, with excavated earth piled to form banks. Someone speaks. Someone is always speaking when country crowds gather, then a trickle of water appears, as if knowing its time has come. Certainly our time has come. Water on demand! The days of dry farming are coming to an end. Most

of the water soaks into the earth, but the trickle crawls forward until it reaches the wall of boards that will block it under the bridge. A speaker announces that history has been made.

Across this bridge is a property that has been left to Johnny Hamilton. Johnny hasn't the necessary skill to run a farm, so he leases paddocks, sometimes to Father, who plants and then harvests wheat. Mother is courteous to Johnny when he works, as he sometimes does, at our farm and he responds by blowing his nose - a sound and sight to be experienced! - in the large machinery yard, not the smaller yard enclosing our house. He's related to the McGill family who run a shearing shed, and presumably take care of his interests. I take every chance to go with Father when he visits Johnny because he's got a garden of fruit trees, and Johnny, to scare away birds from pecking the fruit, has hung, suspended, dangled, heavy bits of rusty iron machinery from the branches. It's the most curious sight and I've never seen anything like it, before or since.

Riding to school is not without its perils. I am occasionally attacked by plovers nesting near the road at Hamilton's bridge. There are also hostile magpies in

a tree overlooking the avenue to our front gate. They swoop on me and I scream as I pedal through the danger area. Sometimes Father responds to my plea for protection but the magpies notice his shotgun and stay in the gaunt old red gum where they have their nest. Then there is the morning when the Finley-Deniliquin road is saturated close to our front gate. Mud clogs the fork of my bike's front wheel and I am forced to get off and push. It's hard work, and I'd love someone to give me a ride to school. Then I hear the sound of a vehicle approaching. Aha! I look back, and it's a utility; the driver could put my bike in its tray. But when he sees me, and my difficulties with the bike, he grins and keeps going. Bastard! But the gods, the fates, are watching, and his wheels spin in a patch of deep mud. He gets out, inspects, then sets his engine roaring. Mud flies everywhere but his ute is stuck. Bugged! I push my bike a few more yards, clean away the mud with a stick, and ride on to school, giving him no further thought.

We get Melbourne papers in Finley. It's closer than Sydney. If we drive to and from the southern city, we have to climb Pretty Sally Hill, a low spot in an already low dividing range. Father says it tests a car. Sitting in the back seat, I can see that it does. If we

go south by train, I look out the window to read signs telling travellers that it's 62, 37, or 21 miles to Griffith Brothers Tea. This whets my appetite for being in the city, but once there it never occurs to me to ask my parents to take me to, or show me, the warehouse the signs have told us about. Travelling north, the distances get greater, of course.

In Melbourne, Mother and I stay with her sister Gladys and Uncle Bert, an Englishman. I am in their kitchen one morning with their eldest daughter, Della, when she does something that shocks me. She puts some tomatos on the table, goes to the tap above the sink, and turns it on. Then, in leisurely fashion, she crosses to the table to pick up the tomatos and takes them back to the sink to wash them. The tap's running while she does this. Wasting water! Heavens above! We collect rainwater from our roof in a large corrugated iron tank on a stand near the back door. Father rarely passes this tank without rapping the corrugations with his knuckles; the sound, resonant or not, tells him the level of water in the tank. Wasting water is a crime. Things are different in the city, apparently. I find this waste unbelievable. City people don't have to collect water, it simply comes out of their taps!

My brother Travers completes year 9 at the local rural school. Mother wants him to go further. She chooses Kerang High School, in northern Victoria, because he can board from Monday to Friday with a local couple, and spend weekends in nearby Barham with Uncle Teddy and Aunt Queen. As she does for me a few years later, she leaves Father to fend for himself - it's called batching, from bachelor - and stays with Granma Eagle so she can see that all goes well. This lasts for one whole term. I go to Barham State School, a short stroll with cousins Alison and Bob. Short it may be, but we have to pass a house where a returned soldier lives. He's frequently on the lawn in front of the house, moving in mindless circles, and shouting in a most frightening way. Auntie Queen tells us not to be afraid, the man's shell-shocked from World War 1, and won't harm us. I understand that she's probably right, because she's that rarity in a country town, a woman with a Bachelor of Arts degree, but all the same, the veteran is plainly mad, and he's frightening. It's a relief if he's not outside when we pass the house. I have no idea who else lives in the house, or if anybody - somebody, surely? - is looking after him. Looking after him? What could you do with a man who growls and screams and swears as he does?

Farming is different with irrigation. Paddocks have to be re-graded, ditches dug, concrete stops built, and waterwheels installed, with meters attached wherever we take water from a government channel. Water is plentiful now, but mustn't be wasted because it has to be paid for. Father strides into the paddocks, shovel on shoulder, when he's watering a stretch of land, and I follow him, my bare feet muddy as his gumboots. He talks freely and I ask him anything that comes to mind. He tells me about the day when he watched Australia play South Africa at the MCG. Bradman was in blazing form and the crowd roared like a football crowd, Father says, at everything he did. It's only years later that I realise the desperate need of those men in the outer for something successful to grasp onto. My parents bought the farm that Father's now irrigating at the moment before depression struck the land, and I can see by Father's confidence as he strides about, watering, that we are entering more prosperous times.

The Don

There was a photo of the famous cricketer above the fireplace in our dining room. He was young, not exactly smiling, but confident. And why not? Father had a copy of the Victorian Cricket Association's 1930 report, and I used to lie on the sofa on hot days studying the scores of the Sheffield Shield matches of that year, and the games of Bradman's first tour of England, when he amazed his British opponents and his many supporters back home, making huge scores like 334 (Leeds) and 452 not out (NSW v Queensland). There had been nothing quite like it before, though comparisons were made with Victor Trumper, also of New South Wales, a batsman best remembered by a photo of him down the wicket, bat poised to drive: one of cricket's classic moments. New South Wales batsmen were regarded as more daring and stylish than batsmen from other states, while English batsmen, skilled as many of them were, had never captured imaginations in the way of Trumper, and now the Don.

When was he first known by that name? I cannot tell you, but our imaginations had been made ready by Sir Henry Newbolt's poem about Francis Drake:

And if the Dons sight Devon, I'll quit the port of Heaven,

And drum them up the Channel as I drummed them long ago.

Most of the writers studied by Australian boys and girls were English, because we were part of the British Empire and English thoughts flowed through our minds as easily as the blood in our veins. We were frequently reminded that ninety-eight per cent of Australians were of British descent, and schools held a ceremony on Empire Day before giving children the rest of the day off. Public gatherings normally began with a rendition of God Save the King. (Father's brother Teddy, an unmusical fellow, stood up only when everyone else did because he didn't recognise the tune.) It was not uncommon to end a concert or gathering with the anthem also. No shortage of loyalty there!

That same Teddy, eldest Eagle of his generation, and his brother Aston, a year or two younger, enlisted for the Great War with a willingness unthinkable today. Father, third in the family, thought of joining also, but his parents said that two from one family was enough. He never spoke of being given the white feather of cowardice, so his tiny township must have accepted his parents' reason for keeping him on the land. It's worth saying at this point that much of Australia's considerable rural production was

financed by British capital because the country's wool, grain and eventually beef was shipped to England; the empire was an economic network as well as a politico-military power. Our political system, derived from the English model, had a Governor (almost certainly appointed from Britain) at the top and, after the creation of the Commonwealth, a Governor-General of similar status. This is all by way of saying that the mother country and the colonies were not as separate as they are today. Australia's first cricket team to tour the home country - ('home' as a word for England was still in use, though fading, when I was a child) - was a group of aborigines sent, I imagine, to amuse those who loved cricket back in England. Early tours by white teams, although conducted in a spirit of friendly rivalry, were intended to maintain the ties of empire. This combination of rivalry and friendship can be seen in the story of the creation of the Ashes (see Wikipedia for this). Test (as they were called) matches resumed after World War 1, with Australia winning easily because England had been weakened (mortally, as it later turned out) by the war. The rivalry remained friendly for some years, and then came the tour of the 1930 Australians, a powerful team featuring - starring? - the exploits of the man

who was to dominate the game for years. He scored 254 at Lords, 334 at Leeds and 232 at the Oval, with a record 974 runs for the series. The Leeds innings included centuries before lunch, another before tea, and a third before the close of play. His dismissal the following day caused an English newspaper to put out a street billboard saying simply HE'S OUT.

Australia won the series but the manner of their victory caused a change in English tactics. Bodyline bowling was invented and used successfully in Australia in 1932-33. Bradman's average was reduced to the low fifties, but only by means that Australian players and crowds resented. Woodfull, the Australian captain and himself the recipient of an infamous blow over the heart, observed that 'There are two teams on the field out there but only one of them is playing cricket.' Larwood, the ex-coal miner and cricket professional was asked to apologise, refused to do so and never played for England again, while Douglas Jardine, the English captain - and amateur - played a little longer (though not against Australia) but was never called to account for the tactics which caused the Australian Board of Cricket Control to say that they wouldn't send a team to England in 1934 unless body-line bowling was not used.

The 1934 tour went ahead but the game, or perhaps we should say the relations between the two countries, had changed. The depression had hit the developed world by the time of this controversy and the resentment felt by Australians to the intimidatory bowling can be linked, in my view, with the resentment in the colony of imperial insistence on repayment, with interest of course, on loans made in more optimistic years. People were out of work but money that might have employed them was going back to England. Australia's wins in the 1934 and 1936-37 series were statements, made on the long-shared playing field of cricket, of Australia's increasing independence from the country which had settled it. The connection was still there, but the terms were changing. The hostilities of 1932-33 had left a permanent impression on the spirit of the game. Those crowds roaring for Bradman when he flailed the South African bowlers on the day that Father went to the MCG - something he never forgot - were desperate for some success which they, as Australians, could share in. Little else was positive in their lives.

By the time of the 1938 tour, English crowds were accepting of the Australian nemesis. As usual he began with a double century at Worcester but even Len Hutton's record-breaking 364 at the Oval

couldn't prevent Australia retaining the Ashes: then war intervened. How long would it last? Would the great man play again? Father told me that if he did, he'd take me to see him. The war ended - of which, more elsewhere - and Father took me to the MCG, wonderfully recovered from its use as a military camp during the war against Japan. He was soon chatting to people around us, while I waited for the Don to come in. I got a surprise when he did; the whole ground stood up, including Father whom I'd never suspected of hero worship. The huge, enveloping MCG applauded as he walked to the wicket, wearing the green cap of his country. This was the Don, the wars were over, peace - test cricket - had been resumed. He batted quietly, but I saw the pre-war Bradman when an English bowler tested him with three bouncers in one over. Bradman showed his earlier self in three slashing hook shots, two of them reaching the boundary. This was the man Australian crowds had revered - worshipped, practically. When he got to England the following year, crowds flocked to see him. England's war had cost it dearly. It would never rule its empire again. Churchill had summoned up the old, imperial England in his wartime speeches, the British people had responded in their heroic way, then a new government had been

elected to set off in less Elgarian fashion, and the crowds that came to watch the Australians saw in them, and particularly their leader, a reminder of the time before war with Germany had ended much that they believed had made them great. Great no more, but here was a man, a team from an ex-colony, that took them back to a period they wanted to resume. The 1948 team finished their tour unbeaten; England was ready to resume competitiveness but it would take time.

Joke. Two upper-class English voices, after the the Oval test when England were dismissed for 52, of which Len Hutton made thirty.

First Englishman Did you see the English innings?

Second Englishman No, I was having lunch at the time.

The English are good at laughing at themselves, and many of their remarks on the end of the 1948 tour were graciousness itself. In a way that had been unthinkable after their 1930 defeat, they sang the praises of Bradman and his team. The English might have been beaten but they had been given back their love and appreciation of cricket, that most British of games. That it had been restored by a team of Australians was in some way a justification of the imperial years that were over.

This was something Australian crowds took for granted. Bradman, as he approached retirement, was appreciated, even revered, but not by everybody. In a match against India at the MCG, Bradman batted his way to a comfortable half century, then play stopped for a minute or two while he rubbed his back. Fibrositis! We'd read about it in the papers. Could he continue? He did, but a voice from the outer - one of those voices that had roared for him when he was thrashing South Africa, back in Father's youth - a voice from the outer called 'Too old!' The crowd was shocked. 'Too old!' Heads turned to identify the man. 'Too old!' he called again. This was *lèse-majesté*. Voices called to silence him. Bradman played on for an over or two, then retired from the field, his days of domination behind him.

Looking back on the career of this figure, I see myself receiving an inheritance from Father, from the Don and all who looked up to him, that I would like to see carried on. Time runs out for us all, but we are fortunate if our time has been encapsulated, defined, in some way that we can decently propose to those who come after. Vale the Don!

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